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Social Innovation Impacts and Their Assessment: An Exploratory Study of a Social Innovation Initiative from a Portuguese Rural Region

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Abstract: Over recent decades, various approaches to social innovation (SI) have been developed. At the same time, the question on how SI can contribute to and can impact the development of rural regions still remains only partially answered. One of the research gaps that remains addressed only to a certain extent is associated with the ways in which impacts produced by SI can be assessed. Such research, focusing on SI impacts in rural contexts is even more scarce. In the current paper, an attempt is made to investigate the impacts of an SI initiative operating in the field of integrated rural development. The study takes on a case study design focusing on ADC Moura, a local development association from Baixo Alentejo, Portugal. The results show that the impacts of said SI initiative have a multi-sectoral and multi-durational nature and transcend sectors and address multiple domains (social, economic, institutional, and environmental), with the SI initiative having the most impacts on the local level of the municipality. In addition to this, the paper provides some ideas for further research.

Keywords: social innovation; social innovation impacts; impact assessment; rural regions; local development initiatives; Baixo Alentejo; Portugal



Citation: Novikova, Marina. 2022. Social Innovation Impacts and Their Assessment: An Exploratory Study of a Social Innovation Initiative from a Portuguese Rural Region. *Social Sciences* 11: 122. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11030122>

Academic Editor: Stephen Webb

Received: 25 November 2021

Accepted: 5 February 2022

Published: 11 March 2022

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1. Introduction

Social innovation (SI) is growing in prominence in research, policy, and practice. As a consequence, SI has been widely discussed and debated within various disciplines and traditions, leading to myriad of understandings of the nature of SI, looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of urban studies and territorial development (Moulaert et al. 2005; MacCallum 2009), management (Dawson and Daniel 2010), and business research (Van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016). Such interest has been reflected in the policy, too, stressing the important role of SI in addressing societal challenges (European Commission 2013).

While SI has been on the rise as a scientific concept and a policy instrument, within the research domain SI has been mostly targeted in the context of urban areas, leaving other territories (e.g., rural areas) out of the scope of the research to a great extent (Vercher et al. 2021). In order to deal with such a disbalance, SI should receive a stronger focus in the domain of rural development since “social innovation of marginal rural areas is [. . .] not only a task for individual and disadvantaged rural areas but a common concern” (Bock 2016, p. 570). Thus, addressing SI through the lens of rural research becomes of utmost importance.

Within the research, some cautious remarks have been made with some scholars arguing that an ‘all-positive’ approach to SI, viewing it as a ‘panacea’ (Benneworth et al. 2015) or a ‘self-help’ tool (Bock 2016) for rural regions and its role in future policies of the new rural paradigm (Barlagne et al. 2021) puts the SI at risk of furthering the state withdrawal, putting rural regions at a greater risk, and leading to even less attention being granted to rural areas (idem). At the same time, the prominent space for SI in the

development of rural regions cannot be disregarded. As such, SI has been regarded as one of the driving forces behind the development of sustainable and just communities due to the strong self-reliance of actors and the strong bottom-up character of action involved in and facilitated by the SI processes (Nicholls and Murdock 2012). Indeed, empirical evidence supports the importance of SI as a driver of sustainable development of rural communities (Bosworth et al. 2020; Ravazzoli and Valero 2020; Baselice et al. 2021). At the same time, SI focuses on building resilient communities, placing a great emphasis on empowering the actors (Avelino et al. 2019), building the capacity of local actors (Novikova 2021c), as well as developing rural assets (Neumeier 2012). With this in mind, the role of SI in the development of rural areas and the impact of SI and its assessment, is necessary to be studied and addressed in a more holistic and systematic way. Again, despite the advancements on the impact assessment and evaluation in other fields (e.g., Glasson and Therivel 2013; Esteves et al. 2012), studies have only partially addressed the impacts of SI, specifically within the rural context. Nonetheless, considered as long-term changes that affect different dimensions of territorial capital (Ravazzoli et al. 2021), SI impacts are an important element of any SI project and/or action undertaken. However, little is known with regards to the impacts of SI in the context of rural areas, where both theoretically grounded tools and systematic empirical evidence of the impacts of SI remain scarce.

Having presented the above, the paper aims to fill the research gap by addressing the following question:

What are the types, domains, and scales of impacts produced by SI initiatives in rural regions?

In order to echo and build upon the recent elaborations addressing the SI impact measurement and assessment (Antadze and Westley 2012; Secco et al. 2019a; Cunha and Benneworth 2020; Mildenerger et al. 2020), with specific focus on rural areas (Ravazzoli et al. 2021; Barlagne et al. 2021), in the current paper an attempt is made to assess impacts of an SI initiative from a rural region of Baixo Alentejo, Portugal. Thus, in order to answer the proposed research question, the main aim of the paper is to carry out an SI impact assessment exercise through which the SI impacts (and their various types, scales, and domains) could be identified and analysed. The paper takes on a case study approach of ADC Moura (A Associação para o Desenvolvimento do Concelho de Moura), a local development initiative (in the text—LDI) from the Baixo Alentejo region, further presented and discussed in the paper. In this paper, ADC Moura is understood to be an SI initiative due to the innovative character of the interventions with regard to the context (namely, geographical location) and beneficiaries, through providing a more effective response in meeting needs of the community than previously established initiatives, as well as through their aiming at reconfiguration of social practices, and their focus on providing integrated long-term solutions in the context of the region's development. Therefore, the goal of the paper is to present the results of a study derived from an online survey of ADC Moura's case that provide some new insights into the types, scales, and domains of impacts of a said SI initiative that aim at addressing current challenges, including various axes of intervention (e.g., economic, social, institutional, and environmental).

To this end, the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a brief overview of different approaches to SI and explores key themes and considerations of SI research in rural studies. In the same section, state-of-the art research concerning SI impacts will be presented. Section 3 introduces the context of the study (Baixo Alentejo region and ADC Moura). Section 4 presents the methodology of the study, explaining in more detail the choice of method(s) and their application. Section 5 presents the results discussing the impacts of the SI initiative in question, highlighting the key findings. Finally, Section 6 provides some conclusions alongside the limitations of the research, offering some suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Considerations

2.1. Social Innovation: Brief Discussion and Rural Focus

SI has been widely discussed both in research and practice, as well as across many disciplines and research fields (Moulaert et al. 2007; Angelidou and Psaltoglou 2017; Pol and Ville 2009). This attention to the concept and its core principles results in a myriad of understandings that revolve around finding new solutions to the complex societal problems (Lee et al. 2021), triggering reconfiguration of social practices (Moulaert et al. 2005; Howaldt et al. 2016), and changing the attitudes of actors (Neumeier 2012, 2017). Despite the absence of a commonly agreed definition of SI, there is a consensus that SI represents both “*a process of the transformation of social practices (i.e., attitudes, behaviors, networks of collaboration) and the outcomes in terms of new products and services (i.e., novel ideas, models, services, and new organisational forms)*” (Ravazzoli et al. 2021, p. 2) (italics added by author). As such, SI should be discussed in a two-facet way that represents both the processes as well as the outcomes achieved by such a change in the process and practices. Thus, SI should not be solely focused on the outcomes, but be concerned with the way in which such outcomes are to be achieved (e.g., through enhancing the capacity of actors, building networks and empowering (disadvantaged) groups). It involves new forms of organisation at both an institutional and personal level, which are developed at the local level and result in social changes beneficial to the communities involved (Moulaert et al. 2005).

SI is said to have a transformative potential, with Avelino et al. (2019) conceptualising transformative social innovation (TSI) as SI that “challenges, alters and/or replaces existing social relations and practices, primarily by co-producing new social relations, involving new ways of doing, organising, framing and knowing” (Avelino et al. 2019, p. 198).

In the context of rural studies, SI is seen as an increasingly prominent agent of change in rural communities (Bosworth et al. 2020), with many studies on the SI’s role in rural development pointing out the potential of SI to improve the well-being of rural communities and societies (Bosworth et al. 2016; Bock 2012, 2016; Neumeier 2012, 2017; Ravazzoli et al. 2021), and its contribution to the transition towards sustainability (Repo and Matschoss 2020).

There are several issues as to why SI is of importance in contemporary policy (Slee and Polman 2021). With the presence of the dominance of economic policies that has produced negative outcomes for both particular occupational groups and regions, as well as with the unravelling crisis associated with the alienation of many people from mainstream political processes due to the lack of capacity of contemporary institutions to address wicked problems, SI has been flagged “as a laboratory in which coping and adaptive strategies are constructed and tested through the unleashing of citizen power” (Slee and Polman 2021, p. 253). Within the rural SI research, it has been argued that rural SI “is distinctive in its dependence on civic self-reliance and self-organisation due to austerity measures and state withdrawal, and its cross-sectoral and translocal collaborations” (Bock 2016, p. 552). Thus, SI indeed can provide an alternative, sometimes more efficient and effective response to the needs that have not been addressed otherwise. On the one hand, it requires self-reliance and self-organisation on the part of the rural actors; on the other hand, this has been discussed in light of the potential further state withdrawal and the risk for the rural communities to be left ‘on their own’. At the same time, the research points out the high context-dependency of SI, with the society serving as the arena in which change should take place (Bock 2016). Thus, SI should be analysed acknowledging the complexity of social processes and taking into account complex constellations of actors and unpredictable dynamics, especially those of rural areas (Christmann 2020).

Often faced with challenges such as population loss, rural exodus, economic deprivation, and overall marginalisation (e.g., Bock 2016; Secco et al. 2019b), actors in rural areas strive to find new solutions to addressing said challenges. In rural communities, SI is said to “offer solutions that cultivate and implement new ideas that have the potential to deliver value and foster sustainability transformations” (Barlagne et al. 2021, p. 4). SI, seen as a response to societal challenges, aims at “reconfiguration of social practices which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil

society actors” (Polman et al. 2017, p. 4). As such, SI, by providing a novel response to unmet needs of the communities, and by reconfiguring social practices of actors within those communities, contributes to the sustainable transformation aiming at increased well-being and empowerment of the local actors.

Another contribution of SI in such transformation lies in supporting rural communities through the neo-endogenous development strategies (Neumeier 2012) that concentrate on mobilising and building upon the local resources and local assets. The interrelation between SI and neo-endogenous development, with a specific focus on how the neo-endogenous rural development can promote and support SI in rural areas, has been discussed in the previous research (e.g., Neumeier 2017; Bosworth et al. 2020; Novikova 2021b). Neo-endogenous rural development approach, focusing on promoting and harnessing local assets, resources, and potential, simultaneously places a great emphasis on extra-local (regional, national, and transnational) collaborations, which assumes the rural development that happens in balance of exogenous and endogenous actors and resources. Drawing parallels between social innovation and neo-endogenous development, Bosworth et al. (2020) conclude that a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches is required, and the most effective outcomes arise where local groups become more empowered to make decisions within a supportive, but not over-bureaucratic, framework. Ultimately, SI is both at the core of neo-endogenous rural development and an important prerequisite for its success, focusing on collaborative action supporting asset building and pooling of knowledge leading to new forms of collaborative action, new governance structures, and change of practices at an individual, community, and regional level. Through building upon the resources, assets, and knowledge that are locally available, SI works towards satisfying local public needs and creating economic value at the same time (Di Iacovo et al. 2014), as well as simultaneously creating social benefits and economic opportunities for the local communities (Cuntz et al. 2020). Acknowledging the need for resources to be shared in order to achieve more sustainable outcomes within rural settings, SI is focused on creating and sustaining networks among actors (Neumeier 2012; Gobattoni et al. 2015) and advancing more efficient collaboration between the actors involved (Grinberga-Zalite et al. 2015). Such collaboration requires the establishment of actors’ context-sensitive arrangements, in which SI acts both as a mechanism for establishing such arrangements as well as contributing to reducing social inequalities and disproportionate resource allocation (Živojinović et al. 2019). More generally and for rural areas specifically, SI is about the cooperation between actors coming together for achieving a shared goal (Osburg and Schmidpeter 2013), aiming at improvements in collective (rather than just individual) well-being. Within the process of such cooperation, through promoting a change in attitudes and practices (Neumeier 2012; Richter 2019), SI encourages local rural linkages and collective learning cultures (Navarro et al. 2018). As a result, SI contributes to rethinking social and spatial solidarity among actors involved (Bock 2016).

In order to address the main research question posed, in the current paper SI is understood to be a response to societal challenges that is (a) leading to the reconfiguration of social practices, (b) innovative with regard to the context or beneficiary, (c) more effective in meeting needs than previous actions/projects/initiatives, and (d) focusing on providing long-term solutions (elaborated based on Neumeier 2012; Barlagne et al. 2021).

2.2. Conceptualisation, Core Elements and Types of SI Impacts

The issue of impact is a cornerstone of the notion of SI, with some scholars arguing that having an impact is a central part of the SI process, with an implicit emphasis on the SI impacts on individuals and society (Baturina and Bežovan 2015). Simultaneously, scholars argue that core elements of successful SI are durability and broad impact (Westley and Antadze 2010). Yet, one of the main challenges SI initiatives face is to show the impact they have and how such impacts contribute to positively transforming society. Despite its relevance, the impact is an important issue addressed in the study of SI only to a certain extent (Portales 2019).

One of the key questions in this area is still concerned with the notion of impact itself. In general, impact can be understood as the value created as a consequence of someone's activity (Roberts Enterprise Development Fund 2001) and the value experienced by beneficiaries and all others affected (Kolodinsky et al. 2010). Therefore, the impact represents the "effect at the final level of the causal chain that connects the action to the eventual impact on society" (Maas and Grieco 2017, p. 114). According to Maas and Grieco (2017), such a causal chain, often referred to as *impact value chain*, makes a distinction between the initial resources used by the organisation to introduce an action (input); the action undertaken (project or activity); the immediate quantitative result of the action (output); the direct changes in the community, people, organisations, systems, and institutions (outcome) followed by the highest order effects of the initial action undertaken (impact) (Ebrahim and Rangan 2014; Liket et al. 2014; Maas and Grieco 2017).

In the field of SI research, some further elaborations have been made to distinguish along the *result-chain model* according to the Theory of Change (ToC) (see Figure 1). According to the ToC with relation to the SI research, outcomes derive from the use of the outputs by the direct beneficiaries of the action/intervention and represent "behavioural changes that produce new routines, decisions, rules and institutions" (Secco et al. 2019a, p. 60). The outcomes can be both intended and unintended, as well as positive and negative. Simultaneously, impacts derive from an accumulation of outcomes and usually have broader effects, including those effects on direct and indirect beneficiaries of an SI initiative. Impacts are changes, both intended and unintended, positive and negative, that produce "new routines, rules and institutions in the whole local community and society" (idem). It should be noted that impacts can also be absent.

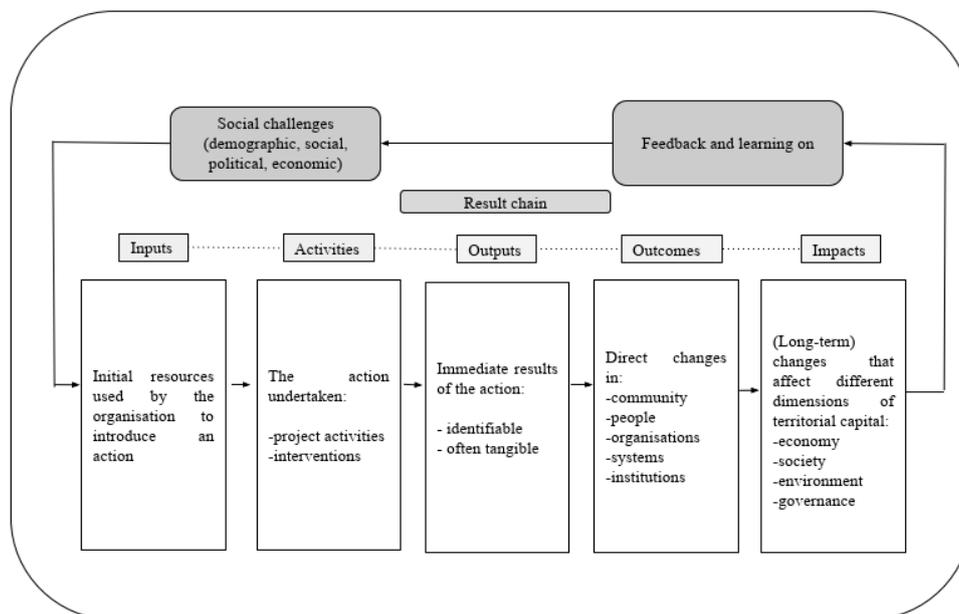


Figure 1. Result-chain based on the Theory of Change (ToC) key elements. Source: own elaboration based on Secco et al. (2019b).

According to Ravazzoli et al. (2021), SI impacts represent "(long-term) changes that affect different dimensions of territorial capital (i.e., economy, society, environment, and institutions) for the territory in which SI occurs" (Ravazzoli et al. 2021, p. 1). As proposed by Camagni and Capello (2013), territorial capital may be seen as "a set of localised assets—natural, human, artificial, organisational, relational and cognitive—that constitute the competitive potential of a given territory" (Camagni and Capello 2013, p. 1387). According to Van Dyck and Van den Broeck (2013), territorial capital as a concept suggests that there are crucial factors in the process of socio-economic area development, encompassing "a set of resources, a spatial dimension, a social frame and a capacity to create added

value through institutional and organisational arrangements” (Van Dyck and Van den Broeck 2013, p. 5). In the current paper, the notion of territorial capital is applied as a guiding concept, allowing for the different dimensions of such capital (environmental, social, economic, and institutional) to be applied as analytical dimension for further SI impact assessment.

In their study, Ravazzoli et al. (2021) suggest discussing the SI impacts alongside the types, domains, and scales of such impacts (see Figure 2). In the first category—types of impacts—the first distinction is made between the tangible (e.g., provision of services in rural areas) and the intangible forms (e.g., changes in attitudes of local communities). The second distinction points out the positive, negative, or neutral character of SI impacts. Overall, the impacts of SI are expected to be positive, contributing to the empowerment of the communities, changing the attitudes of actors involved in SI and beneficiaries, leading to the overall positive change in communities’ well-being. However, SI also might trigger some negative impacts, e.g., empowering some groups while disempowering the others, with SI not being beneficial for all the stakeholders. Negative impacts of SI have been discussed in the literature (e.g., Fougère and Meriläinen 2021) and might include disempowerment, uneven allocation of resources, power disbalance within and beyond the SI initiatives, etc. As such, both positive and negative impacts (as well as the absence of such) have to be considered as a potential by-product of the SI projects.

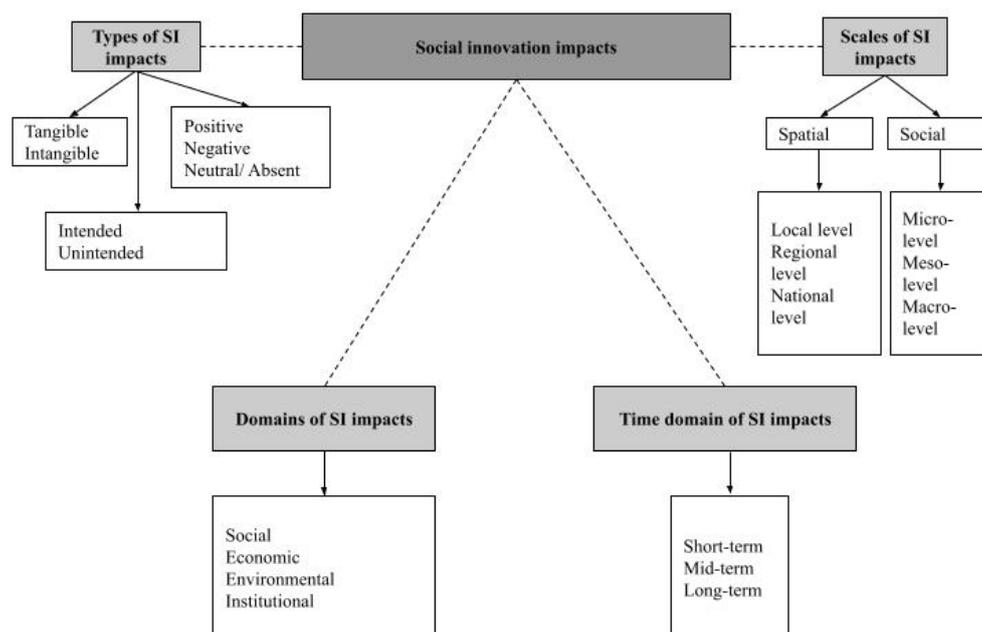


Figure 2. Analytical framework for social innovation impacts. Source: author’s own elaboration, based on (Nicholls et al. 2015; Ravazzoli et al. 2021; Cunha and Benneworth 2020).

Concerning the domains, the SI impacts correspond to the social, economic, environmental, and institutional domains (idem). Within the *social* domain, impacts are described through the social changes related to the living conditions, health, and overall well-being of communities. Additionally, the creation and establishment of networks through SI projects, changes in attitudes, etc., fall under this domain (e.g., Esteves et al. 2012). Under the *economic* domain, impacts refer to any change in the economy resulting from activities related to the SI initiative contributing to entrepreneurial activities within the communities, use of local resources, etc. (e.g., Ziegler et al. 2017). The SI impacts falling under the *environmental* domain refer to effects that the SI initiative has on the surroundings in which SI operates, and addressing issues of “climate change, air pollution, energy efficiency, resource efficiency and sustainable consumption and production, and biodiversity relationships” (Schartinger 2018, p. 176). Last but not least, the *institutional* domain of

SI impacts refers to any change in the governance process, including the changes in the decision-making processes among stakeholders from various sectors (private, public) and scales (local, regional, national), with such changes triggered by the SI initiative (Bureau of European Policy (BEPA) (2014)). Such institutional impacts have been further discussed, pointing out the role of SI initiatives in triggering the bottom-linked governance in rural areas, understood as a “multi-level middle ground where actors from various political levels, geographical scales and industry sectors come together to share decision-making” (Castro-Arce and Vanclay 2020, p. 45). Simultaneously, bottom-linked governance can be seen as both an outcome of social innovation and as a socially innovative space of action.

Concerning the scale of impacts, SI impacts can be discussed along the spatial and social scales (Ravazzoli et al. 2021). According to the dimension of the spatial scale, SI initiatives can have impacts inside the territory where the initiatives’ intervention takes place, e.g., a municipality, a sub-region, or a region, with the spatial scale depending on the challenge that the SI initiative is aiming at addressing. At the same time, SI initiatives can produce impacts outside of their main intervention territory, i.e., at regional, national, European, or wider levels. The literature argues for both points of view: some scholars suggest that, due to the local embeddedness of most SI (Terstriep and Rehfeld 2020), the wider spatial scale of impacts is difficult to achieve (Moulaert et al. 2005; Brandsen et al. 2016); others claim that SI might have achieved impacts at a wider spatial scale (Farmer et al. 2018; Baptista et al. 2019).

The social scale of SI impacts refers to the impacts that take place at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Ravazzoli et al. 2021) where SI initiatives can impact the community (e.g., by providing social services), the whole society (e.g., fighting challenges of climate change) or the actors at the individual level (e.g., empowerment of vulnerable groups such as women). At the same time, SI can also be defined in terms of the level of its impact from the individual to the systems level, divided into micro, meso, and macro levels (Nicholls et al. 2015; Cunha and Benneworth 2020).

Last but not least, the research into the SI impacts also distinguishes the impacts according to the time domain. While Ravazzoli et al. (2021) propose the definition of impacts as long-term changes, some other scholars (e.g., Lombardi et al. 2020) explore the possibility for SI evaluation that takes into account a more mid- and short-term perspective. Thus, in order to make a further discovery into the time domain of SI impacts, the current paper suggest distinguishing the SI impacts along the short-term, mid-term, and long-term impacts axis.

As such, the SI impacts might manifest across different scales, types, and domains. In order to address the research question outlined earlier and to provide the context of the study, the following section gives a brief outlook on the study area and the SI initiative in question.

3. Context of the Study

3.1. Study Area: Baixo Alentejo Region

The current study, with its focus on the SI impacts in the development of rural regions, is built upon the data collected in the rural region of Baixo Alentejo in Portugal, with the specific focus on the Association for the Development of the Municipality of Moura (ADC Moura). In order to provide the background information, the current section introduces some data concerning the development of the correspondent NUTS III¹ region (Figure 3).

Baixo Alentejo, a Portuguese region and a part of the larger Alentejo region (NUTS II), is bordered to the north by the district of Évora, to the east by Spain, and to the south by the district of Faro. The NUTS III region consists of 13 municipalities: Aljustrel, Almodôvar, Alvito, Barrancos, Beja, Castro Verde, Cuba, Ferreira do Alentejo, Mértola, Moura, Ourique, Serpa, and Vidigueira (see Figure 4).



Figure 3. Map of the NUTS III region Baixo Alentejo. Sources: author's own elaboration based on Eurostat (2019).



Figure 4. Map of the municipalities of NUTS II region of Alentejo, highlighting municipalities of Baixo Alentejo. Sources: author's own elaboration based on INE (2021).

The region covers an area of 8544.6 km², corresponding to 10.8% of the national territory. At the same time, the total population of Baixo Alentejo is 114,887 inhabitants (Censos; INE 2021), with the numbers continuously declining, previously registered at 126,692 (Censos; INE 2011) (−9.3% negative dynamic). The region is one of the most sparsely populated Portuguese regions with a population density of 14.2 inhabitants/km² in 2016, 14.1 inhabitants/km² in 2017, lowering further to 13.9 inhabitants/km² in 2018 (Eurostat), and 13.8 inhabitants/km² in 2019, respectively (Eurostat 2021). Over the past decades, the region has undergone an average negative population growth due to rural exodus, which especially concerns the younger population, and ageing of the population. As such, the demographic data show some signs of negative population development and the overall loss of population.

The economic outlook of Baixo Alentejo indicates that the Baixo Alentejo region has a lower Gross Value Added (GVA) at current prices compared to the national and NUTS II accounts, indicating the lower productivity in the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors (Table 1). At the same time, the proportion of the GVA at current prices is recorded higher

for Baixo Alentejo compared to national and NUTS II accounts in primary and secondary sectors.

Table 1. Economic outlook by geographic localization (NUTS 2013) and activity branch. Source: [INE \(2021\)](#).

Sectors of Activity Territory	Agriculture, Animal Production, Hunting, Forestry and Fishing	Industry, Construction, Energy and Water	Services
Gross value added at current prices (Base 2016—€) by Geographic localization (NUTS—2013) and Activity branch (A3), million euros, 2019			
Portugal	4383.943	40,313.715	139,833.343
Alentejo (NUTS II)	1314.382	2743.974	7539.279
Baixo Alentejo (NUTS III)	248.02	621.211	1142.464
Proportion of gross value added at current prices (Base 2016—%) by Geographic localization (NUTS—2013) and Activity branch (A3), 2019			
Portugal	2.4	21.8	75.8
Alentejo (NUTS II)	11.4	23.7	64.9
Baixo Alentejo (NUTS III)	13.0	29.4	57.6

The employment structure of Baixo Alentejo region, based on the National Institute of Statistics's data (INE), suggests that the biggest share of people in employment in 2019 were employed in services (tertiary sector), followed by the secondary and primary sectors (see Table 2). As such, the employment structure of the NUTS III regions reflects the Alentejo and Portugal's trends, providing the evidence for the tertiary sector representing the highest share of employment across the national, regional, and sub-regional scales.

In summary, the combination of the economic outlook, the employment structure (as well as unemployment rates registered at 4.8% for 2020 ([INE 2021](#)), low population density, population decline, and high levels of age dependency might have a strong influence on business development, outmigration, and ageing population, potentially leading to a deepening of the disparities between regions and furthering the 'littoralisation' process understood as disparities between the coastal and the more in-land regions of Portugal where wealth is concentrated in coastal regions "while the inland regions have remained neglected and underdeveloped" ([Hennebry and Stryjakiewicz 2020](#), p. 6). As claimed in the research, the countryside in Portugal is often confronted with "few jobs opportunities and distance from markets and services" ([Pato 2020](#), p. 213), with outmigration of young, more highly educated people, as well as declining and ageing population, which is rather a common trend for the remote and peripheral rural areas of Portugal. Such trends can be also observed in Baixo Alentejo.

As such, the brief introduction of the region suggests that Baixo Alentejo, a NUTS III region, follows a trend that can be also observed at the level of the NUTS II region of Alentejo, where the regions experience the changes in the economic, demographic, and social domains, faced with the challenges of economic diversification, weakened infrastructures, and demographic challenges such as a shrinking and aging population. In order to address said challenges, various initiatives have been actively engaging in the development of their respective localities. As such, a significant number of LDIs pioneer in and contribute to regional and local development and the promotion of SI within the rural contexts ([Novikova 2021b](#)), with the abundance of innovative initiatives to be seen in the countryside ([Olmedo et al. 2019](#)). In the current paper, LDIs are understood to play an important role in developing, implementing, and promoting SI taking place in rural areas.

As such, the paper focuses on the experience of ADC Moura, a local development initiative implementing SI projects in the domains of sustainable agriculture, circular economy, community engagement, and capacity building, with the main aim of contributing to the development of rural regions.

Table 2. Outlook on the employment by geographic localization (NUTS 2013) and activity branch. Source: [INE \(2021\)](#).

Sectors of Activity Territory	Agriculture, Animal Production, Hunting, Forestry and Fishing	Industry, Construction, Energy and Water	Services
Population employed (No.°) by Geographic localization (NUTS—2013), Economic sector (CAE Rev. 3), 2019			
Portugal	2,321,620	46,646	705,658
Alentejo (NUTS II)	131,861	17,290	36,629
Baixo Alentejo (NUTS III)	19,773	3432	5353
Employment—total persons (Annual growth rate—Base 2016—%) by Geographic localization (NUTS—2013) and Activity branch (A3), 2019			
Portugal	−8.2	0.9	1.9
Alentejo (NUTS II)	−6.5	0.4	1.4
Baixo Alentejo (NUTS III)	−3.4	−0.3	0.9

3.2. ADC Moura as a Pioneer in Rural Development

ADC Moura (The Association for the Development of the Municipality of Moura) is a non-governmental local development association based in the rural region of Baixo Alentejo in Portugal, with the main objective of supporting and promoting the sustainable development of the municipality of Moura and other areas of the region. Created in 1993, ADC Moura has been involved, as a promoter, an interlocutor, and a partner, in various projects in areas related to (i) education for entrepreneurship, (ii) participation in territory's projects, and (iii) support for the creation of companies in multi-institutional networks. Established through the initiative of a group of citizens from the municipality of Moura, ADC Moura's work has been inspired by the principles of local development, social and solidarity economy, and equal opportunities. Throughout the years of work, ADC Moura has developed a wide range of initiatives that have greatly contributed to the strengthening of the local economic and social fabric, namely through professional training, support for business initiative and job creation, and the strengthening of associations in the municipality, especially in rural parishes, always guided by a perspective of empowerment of the people and organisations involved.

With the staff constituted by 10 permanent employees and 11 non-permanent employees, ADC Moura has been actively involved in a myriad of projects and provision of services related to the various axes of intervention (see Supplementary Materials). Those axes focus on: (1) institutional and organisational development; (2) social and community development; (3) rural and environmental development; (4) education and formation; (5) support for the initiative. Over more than 27 years of its intervention, ADC Moura has also taken on the bridging roles in the development of middle ground collaborative space for regional development ([Novikova 2021c](#)). By combining various axes of intervention and by implementing projects not limited to specific sectors and scales, ADC Moura has worked towards establishing and enabling networks, knowledge exchange, resource acquisition,

creating the common space for public and private actors to come together and collaborate, contributing towards the sustainable development of the region.

Referring back to the working definition of SI applied in the current paper, SI is understood to be an action that leads to the reconfiguration of social practises, is innovative to the context or beneficiary in which it is applied, is more effective in meeting needs than previous interventions, while focusing on providing long-term solutions. Through being a partner in the projects addressing the capacity building and competence development (e.g., CCPAM—Centre of Competence on Aromatic, Medicinal and Culinary Herbs), addressing the issues of sustainable and innovative agriculture practises (e.g., COOP4PAM—Cooperation for Growth in the Aromatic and Medicinal Plant Sector), as well as through being a service provider for the municipal projects for democratisation (e.g., Participatory Budget) and capacity building (e.g., Qualification/ support for training and courses), ADC Moura has been actively engaged in SI implementation, as well as being an outstanding example of SI initiative itself.

4. Materials and Methods

In order to understand complex issues in their full potential, while taking into account the contextual factors, a methodology allowing in-depth analysis of a phenomenon is needed. Thus, this paper presents the results of an explorative study rooted in a case study approach. Allowing the researcher to collect and analyse rich data providing the context, the connection between the actors in the field, deeper understanding of it and how SI produces the impacts, through multiple data sources (described below) and through the placement at the SI initiative, case study methodology allowed to gain an understanding of the phenomenon in question. According to Yin (2003), the choice in favour of a case study approach is usually based on several reasons, when (a) the study focuses on answering “how” and “why” questions; (b) the behaviour of the actors involved in the study cannot be manipulated; (c) an attempt is made to cover the context and contextual factors based on their relevance for the phenomenon under study; or (d) there are no clear boundaries between the phenomenon and context. Thus, the case study was chosen as a methodology to allow carrying out the impact assessment of ADC Moura’s work, a case of SI, embedded in the context of Baixo Alentejo region. Due to the initial unfamiliarity with the selected case study, the background data collection was carried out through the means of document analysis as well as expert interviews. The background data were collected within the framework of a secondment at ADC Moura between March and June 2019, followed by the data collection between August and October 2021. The first corpus of data was collected through the analysis of the publicly available sources (e.g., webpages of the organisations, Local Development Strategies), followed by the analysis of the ADC Moura’s internal reports acquired upon request. The analysis of such data allowed for the in-depth overview of the projects and interventions by ADC Moura, providing more detailed information concerning the objectives and targets set out and achieved in particular. Additionally, in order to get a deeper perspective on the work of ADC Moura, as well as to get familiar with the field of SI and rural development in the region, expert interviews were conducted between March and May 2019. For the purposes of this study, however, the interviews were used to provide some background information on the initiative as well as on its work, projects, and extended networks rather than being the main focus of analysis in the current paper.

The main data collection phase that allowed for the assessment of the impacts produced by ADC Moura was carried out by the means of online survey between August and October 2021. The main purpose was to collect the data concerning the perception of the respondents regarding the impacts of ADC Moura’s work, according to the analytical framework presented in Section 2.2. The decision to employ the online survey as a main research method for the current study is twofold. First, in order to fulfil the main aim of the study of the SI impact assessment, the development of a questionnaire allowed to address the dimensions of the impacts that can be numerically evaluated, which was one of the

attempts in the study. Second, other factors had to be considered since the data collection was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required certain adaptation on part of the researcher. Therefore, an online survey was the method that was an appropriate research tool in terms of scientific and organisational matters.

The questionnaire was developed to have both closed and open-ended questions to allow the respondents some flexibility to reflect on the types, domains, and geographical scales of SI impacts, as well as to gauge their perspective on the interconnections between ADC Moura's work and the development in the Baixo Alentejo region. For the purposes of the current research, the questions were elaborated to include the territorial dimension, inquiring the effects of SI on the development of the territory in question (Baixo Alentejo region). The questionnaire was structured in five blocks addressing (i) the innovative character of ADC Moura's work, (ii) the effects and impacts of ADC Moura, focusing on the character (positive and negative), domains (social, economic, environmental, and institutional), time domain (short-term, mid-term, long-term), and (territorial) scale of impacts, as well as (iii) the interconnection between ADC Moura's intervention and the development of Baixo Alentejo. The diversity of domains, types, and scales of SI impacts (as identified through the analytical framework in Section 2.2), as well as the fact that such an assessment is exercised through the subjective perceptions of the experts, dictated the questions to be both closed-ended and open-ended. While attempting at extracting the results in the numerical expression, the design of the survey allowed open-ended questions to be included to provide space for the respondents to potentially reflect on more intangible (both positive and negative) SI impacts. At the same time, the closed-ended questions were designed to include both multiple choice questions (e.g., identifying the group an expert belongs to) and a block of questions based on Likert scales (e.g., identifying the perceptions on the SI impacts).

The questionnaire addresses the extended network of ADC Moura who represent actors directly or indirectly associated with ADC Moura, therefore, having a perspective on the potential impacts of SI initiative from a broader perspective. As a result, the online questionnaire was distributed to several groups of actors (see Table 3). The groups of experts were identified through the interviews that served as a source of the background information about ADC Moura's projects, partners, and activities. Thus, the respondents were asked to choose among six groups, with an option for adding other answers. As such, some respondents identified as participant in developed activities, members of social bodies, and partners in some projects. The respondents were offered to choose a group they identify most with, resulting in a wide range of participants, while simultaneously creating a disbalance in participation (e.g., majority of ADC Moura's current employees), which can be considered an important bias of the methodology, which potentially influences the way the experts perceive the SI impacts.

Due to the extensive network of actors who are closely connected to ADC Moura's work—and, therefore, have a perspective on potential impacts of its work—the three-page questionnaire (requiring approximately 10 min for filling out) was distributed among the ADC Moura networks.

Described in more detail further on (see Section 6), the methodology has some important limitations. While being a cost-effective tool that provides a wider reach among the actors and experts, the online survey limited the possibilities to implement face-to-face data collection techniques (e.g., questionnaires completed by an interviewer), which might be required due to the need for more detailed elaboration and explanation of the questions to the participants by a researcher. At the same time, the main focus on experts as main respondents in the survey process limited the possibility to include the beneficiaries of SI initiative's work as the main group. Thus, the few limitations outlined here (and discussed further) are important to take into consideration when approaching the results of the study.

Table 3. Number of responses by group. Source: author's own elaboration.

Groups of Experts	Number of Questionnaires Returned
ADC Moura's members (current)	10
ADC Moura's members (past)	5
Policy Makers	1
External Experts	2
Projects Partners	6
Extended Network	2
Other	5
Total	31

Based on the analysis of the data collected, the further section presents the results of the study, focusing on the domains, types, and scales of impacts achieved by ADC Moura.

5. Results

5.1. Overview: Positive, Negative and Neutral Impacts of SI

In the current study, the analytical framework distinguishes among positive, negative, or neutral SI impacts. In the academic literature, the impacts of SI are expected to be positive, contributing to the development of the communities, contributing to the change of attitudes of actors involved in SI and beneficiaries, leading to the overall positive change. Such a perspective was confirmed in the current study. Of respondents, 93.5% see impacts of ADC Moura's work as having a positive impact, where the SI initiative is considered to have positively impacted the environmental, social, institutional, and economic development of the territory. SI also might trigger some negative impacts, e.g., empowering some groups while disempowering others, with SI not being beneficial for all the stakeholders. As such, both positive and negative have to be considered as a potential by-product of the SI projects. Regarding the negative impacts, 58.1% of respondents do not perceive ADC Moura to have any negative impacts, 38.7% do not know, with 3.3% of respondents claiming there are negative impacts resulting from ADC Moura's work. The question of neutral and/or absent impacts was not addressed in the questionnaire. Therefore, further research is needed to address the question of absent and/or neutral SI impacts.

The questionnaire design accounted for the flexibility and some openness while answering the questions, thus, having open ended questions concerning the positive and negative impacts of ADC Moura's work. The analysis of the data revealed that the respondents are more aware of the positive impacts in four domains rather than negative ones. This can be due to several factors, ranging from the biases of the methodology of this particular study in particular, e.g., the inclusion of only experts and not the direct beneficiaries of the SI initiative, to the more general considerations in (social innovation research such as pro-innovation bias (where the impacts of any innovation are considered as positive with little regard given to the potential negative impacts).

5.2. Positive Impacts in Four Domains: Some Insights

Concerning the domains, the SI impacts can be assumed under the environmental, social, economic, and institutional domains. For all four domains of intervention, ADC Moura is perceived to have achieved positive impacts (Figure 5).

In the first domain of environmental impacts, the average for the positive impacts is 8.03, on a 10-point scale ("not at all"—"to a large extent"). Considered to represent any changes to the environment resulting from promoting sustainable agricultural practices, addressing climate change, preserving biodiversity, and promoting environmental awareness, the SI impacts in this domain refer to effects that the SI initiative has on the surroundings in which SI operates, and addressing issues of climate change, air pollution,

energy efficiency, resource efficiency and sustainable consumption and production, and biodiversity relationships. As such, the respondents' perception of positive environmental impacts of ADC Moura's work is relatively high.

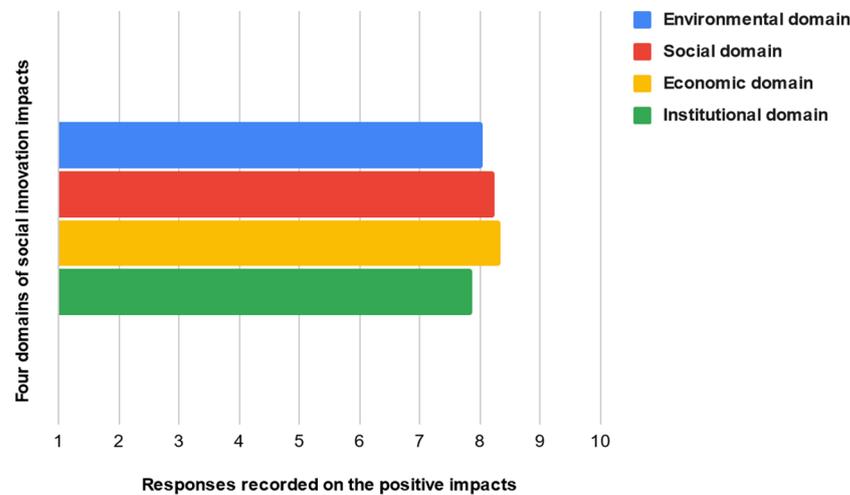


Figure 5. The averages for positive impacts of SI in four domains. Source: author's own elaboration.

The impacts in the social domain, identified as any social change related to the living conditions, health and general well-being of the communities, and described through the social changes related to the change in communities' conditions, including the creation and establishment of networks through SI projects, changes in attitudes, and re-configuration of (social) practices, have been registered with a relatively high average. For the social domain of SI impacts, the average among the responses is recorded at 8.24 (10-point scale), thus, confirming the perception of the social impacts in this domain as positive as well.

Under the third domain of SI impacts in economic development, impacts are understood as any change in the economy resulting from activities related to the SI initiative that contributes to entrepreneurial activities within the communities, promoting the use of local resources, supporting the local entrepreneurial initiative, etc. In this domain, the average is 8.34 (10-point scale), reflecting the respondents' perspective on ADC Moura's positive impacts.

Within the institutional domain of SI, impacts refer to any change in the governance process, including the changes in the decision-making processes among stakeholders from various sectors (private, public) and scales (local, regional, national), with such changes triggered by the SI initiative. Such institutional SI impacts, including, but not limited to, any change in the governance process resulting from promoting cooperation among stakeholders across sectors and scales, improving decision-making processes, supporting bottom-up initiatives, have been regarded relatively high, with the average of 7.35. At the same time, among the four domains, the results for the institutional domain are the lowest, thus, indicating ADC Moura's work having impacted the institutional development to a lesser extent. However, here it is important to point out that the results obtained are potentially correlated with the (uneven) distribution of experts that took part in the survey (e.g., only one response for the "policy maker" group and sixteen recorded responses for the "ADC Moura staff" group) and, respectively, their varying perceptions on the potential impacts ADC Moura's work had on the institutional development.

The respondents were also asked to elaborate on the potential impacts of SI in open-ended questions and to list some of the examples of SI impacts in the four domains (environmental, economic, social, and institutional), if any (see Table 4).

Table 4. SI impacts in four domains according to the respondents. Source: author's own elaboration.

SI Impacts Domains	Impacts According to the Respondents
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - promotion of knowledge on sustainable use and enhancement of the territory's natural and cultural heritage within a framework of responsible use of current and future socio-economic development opportunities - adoption of sustainable and regenerative agricultural practices - creation of circuits/short chains of distribution and proximity trade with promotion of sustainable consumption practices - valuation and protection of the landscape - promotion of environmental citizenship (activities with schools, vegetable gardens, hiking)
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - promotion of community development initiatives - reduction of digital exclusion - empowerment of the most vulnerable communities (e.g., social valuation of the Roma ethnic minority) - strengthening citizen participation in local processes - training and inclusion of disadvantaged groups - integration of minorities and their education - promotion of a collaborative approach based on the territory and close to the community, community involvement in activities - empowerment and inclusion of disadvantaged groups of the population through projects in the area of digital literacy
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - promotion of the diversification of local economic activities - the generation of added value through the creative and sustainable use of endogenous resources - stimulation and support to the creation and development of entrepreneurial employment - implementing income generating initiatives for the local communities - support to companies and encouragement of entrepreneurship in schools - creation of networks of producers - promotion of tailored training to enhance employability - help in the preparation and development of entrepreneurship projects, which contributed to the financial autonomy of citizens - support for the creation of businesses/activities by the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improvement to institutional communication and collaboration - support the creation and consolidation of national and international research networks and political proposals associated with rural development - participation in networks and policy influencers (e.g., creation of the Moura Participatory Budget) - participation in local, national, and international consortia/networks - political lobby at the local and regional level - participation in international projects and partnerships - integration of various consortia and forums at local/national/international scale in the areas of rural development and innovation

An interesting observation that stems from the data obtained through the open-ended question on the potential impacts in four domains is twofold. Firstly, some of the responses

registered could be assigned into the categories of outputs and outcomes, according to the result-chain framework (Section 2.2). Secondly, some of the perceived impacts that were associated with one of the four domains could be assigned into another SI impact domain as well. Thus, the results also indicate a fluid, cross-sectoral and multi-dimensional nature of SI impacts (see Moulart 2013).

5.3. Time Dimension of the Positive Impacts

The time domain of the SI impacts is briefly presented, illustrating the time character of impacts distinguishing between short-, mid-, and long-term impacts (see Figure 6). In the academic literature, impacts in general—and impacts in the field of SI in particular (e.g., Secco et al. 2019a)—are traditionally understood to be long-term changes happening in society, which implies that the impacts are assumed to have a long-term character (both in terms of achieving such impacts and sustaining those). However, in the framework of the current paper, the analytical framework has been constructed to account for the potential short-term, mid-term, and long-term impacts (based on the respondents' perception).

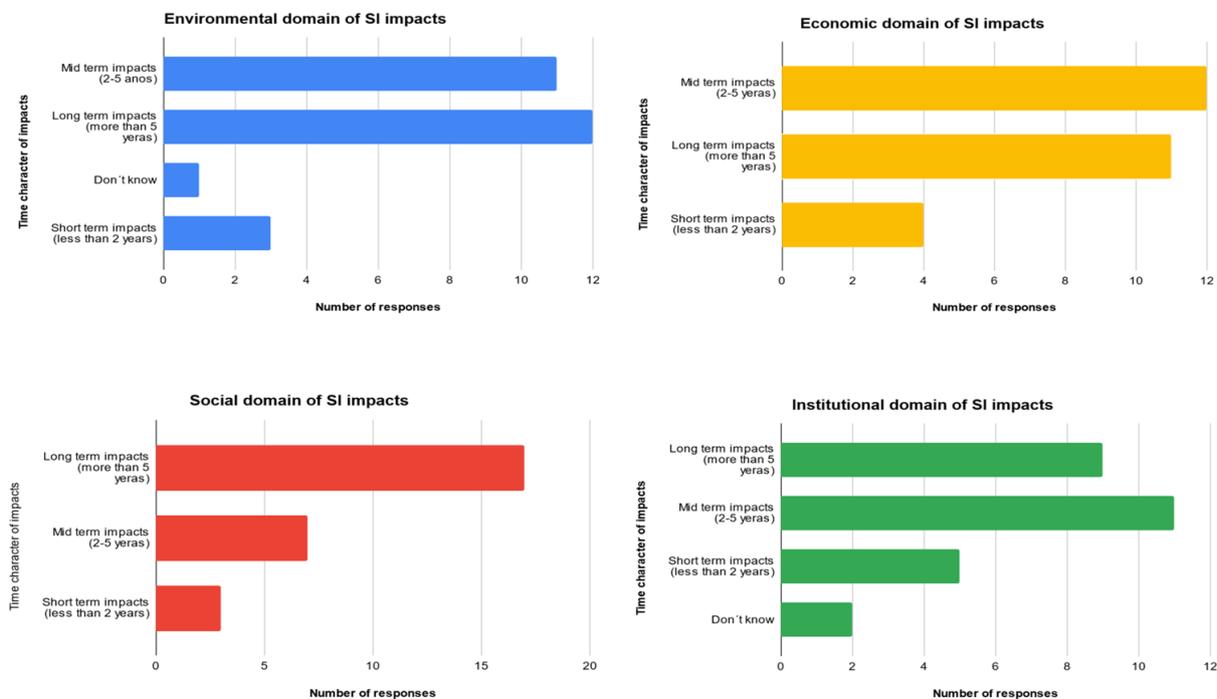


Figure 6. Time domains (short-, mid-, and long- term) of SI impacts. Source: author's own elaboration.

For the environmental domain, the positive impacts of SI are perceived to have a long-term character (over five years) by the majority of the respondents, followed by the mid-term (two to five years) and short-term impacts (less than two years). The results indicate that the perception of the respondents confirms the assumption that the environmental sustainability, transformative environmental change—and, as such, the impacts SI initiatives have to strive for in this domain—are of a long-term nature that requires a longer period of time to be achieved and sustained (e.g., Olsson et al. 2017; Segarra-Oña et al. 2017).

Within the social domain of SI impacts, the results echo those from the environmental domain, with positive impacts perceived by more respondents as to have a long-term character (over five years), followed by the mid-term and short-term impacts. Here, the respondents' perceptions are corresponding to the previous elaborations, where SI is understood to bring about the long-term changes that are social at their core, with SI being social both in its ends and means (European Commission 2013).

In contrast, within the economic domain, the results indicate that the respondents perceive the SI impacts to be more mid-term (impacts occurring within two to five years), indicating that the impacts achieved by ADC Moura in terms of economic development fall within two to five years' time dimension. This is followed by the perception of the SI impacts to be of a long-term character (over five years), with only a fraction of respondents believing ADC Moura to have the impacts in economic domain that are present for less than two years (short-term impacts).

Last but not least, for the institutional domain, as for the economic domain, the majority of the respondents perceive the impacts to be of a mid-term nature (between two and five years), followed by the perception that ADC Moura has impacted the governance process, including the decision-making processes among stakeholders, both over the span of a longer period of time over five years (long-term impact) as well as much shorter time frame (less than two years for short-term impacts). These results might potentially indicate two critical issues that have to be pointed out, namely (1) a certain level of abstraction when describing and understanding the SI impacts in this domain, and (2) a much longer period of time that is required in order for the institutional change to take place (e.g., [Pel et al. 2017](#)), where the impacts of ADC Moura's work can be quite difficult to both observe and comprehend over short time.

At the same time, the results point out that some respondents perceive the impacts to be of a rather long-term nature; still, there is some presence of the responses reflecting on the short-term nature within all four domains (which might potentially be related to a project-based nature of ADC Moura's work). Simultaneously, since there was an assumption that some respondents might not be aware of specific impacts and/or might not have an informed opinion and/or perception regarding that, the multiple-choice question design had a "don't know" option integrated. As such, some responses point out the unawareness and/or difficulty to answer the question concerning the time span of ADC Moura's impacts (e.g., for the environmental and institutional domains), with the respondents choosing the option "don't know".

5.4. Scale Dimension of the Positive Impacts

The spread, diffusion, and impacts of SI have been discussed in the literature, pointing out the importance of such a spread and the potential for SI initiatives to have impacts outside their immediate area of intervention. [Loorbach et al. \(2020\)](#) highlight that, transformative innovations are translocal, i.e., TSI is being locally rooted while globally connected. As such, the research suggests that more and more SI initiatives have a chance to be impactful beyond their local area. At the same time, there is research claiming that it can be quite challenging for the SI initiatives to reach a broad impact outside their locale (e.g., [Brandson et al. 2016](#)).

With this in mind, the idea was to identify the geographical areas and territorial scales where ADC Moura had the most impacts, according to the respondents. The scale dimension, as identified in the analytical framework, distinguishes between spatial and social scales. The current paper focuses on identifying the spatial scale at which SI initiative had the most impacts as perceived by the respondents.

Concerning the question of ADC Moura's work and its impacts within the spatial scale, the level of municipality of Moura (local level) is perceived as the territory that ADC Moura's intervention affects the most, followed by the sub-regional level of Baixo Alentejo (NUTS III) and the regional level of Alentejo (NUTS II) (see [Figure 7](#)). The local geographical focus of impacts is reinforced as the main area of ADC Moura's intervention, according to the association's mission, is the development of the municipality of Moura.

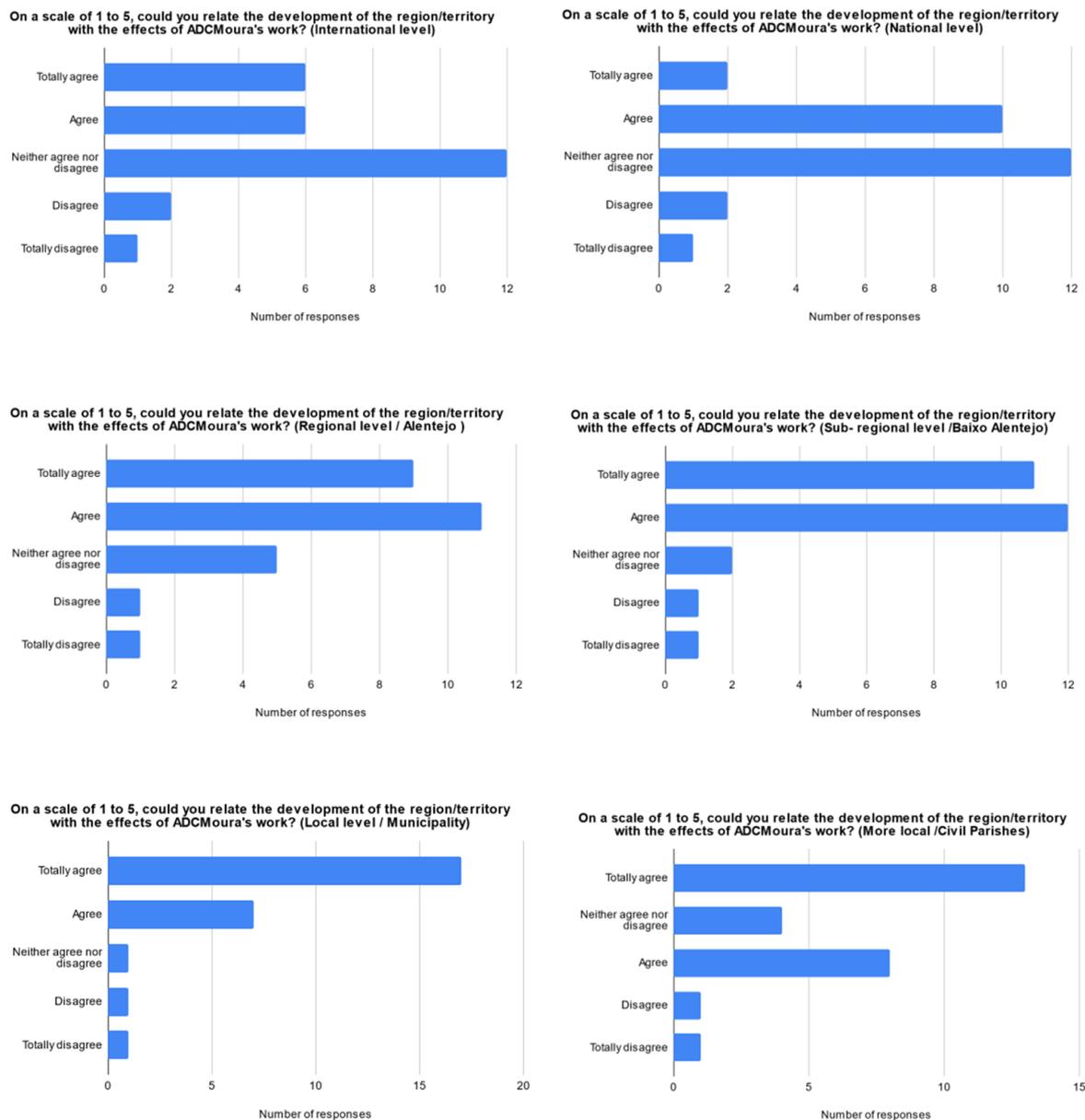


Figure 7. Spatial scale of SI impacts. Source: author’s own elaboration.

While analysing ADC Moura’s role in contributing to the development of Baixo Alentejo, only 12.9% of respondents perceive ADC Moura’s intervention as a sole intervention that could satisfy the specific needs of the territory. At the same time, the results show that positive impacts created in the territory through ADC Moura’s work could have been obtained without ADC Moura’s intervention (1), but it would have taken more time (32.2% of responses); (2) where other similar initiatives only partially satisfied the needs of the territory (32.3% of responses).

The results indicate that ADC Moura has triggered certain intangible changes while promoting cooperation, community engagement, and network’s creation among the actors across local (Moura Council) and regional (Alentejo) scales. The results derived from data collection with the project partners and extended network reflect such changes and reinforce them through further need for promoting the changes in capacity building, integrated territorial development, preservation of resources, and shared decision-making.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In order to carry out the impact assessment exercise, the current paper addressed the types, domains, and scales of impacts produced by ADC Moura, a local development association located in rural Portugal. The research suggests that, in order to have a truly transformative potential, any SI initiative has to have a broader transformative impact, thus, having an effect on the development of a given locality (e.g., rural regions). The results of the current study indicate that the question of SI impacts and impact assessment represents both a promising pathway for further research and a complex, still underexplored field of study. Responding to this, the results of the current study indicate that there is a rather high awareness regarding the positive impacts of ADC Moura's work, with the recognition and awareness on the negative impacts falling behind. Majority of respondents perceive ADC Moura's work as having positive impacts, while the perception of negative impacts is rather absent. Simultaneously, for the four domains of impacts—environmental, economic, social, and institutional—ADC Moura is perceived to have achieved positive impacts, with the responses, however, suggesting that the positive impacts are rather ambiguous in the environmental and institutional domains.

Concerning the geographical scale, the results show that ADC Moura has the positive impact on the local level of the municipality of Moura, with the sub-regional NUTS III (Baixo Alentejo) and regional NUTS II (Alentejo) levels perceived to be positively impacted the second and third most. According to the results, the positive effects created in the territory through ADC Moura's work could have been obtained without ADC Moura's intervention (1), but it would have taken more time; (2) with other similar initiatives only partially satisfying the needs of the territory. Thus, it can be concluded that the respondents perceive ADC Moura as an important actor of transformative change in the rural area of Baixo Alentejo but not as the sole actor of change.

The results of the current study echo previous studies addressing the issues of SI impacts and their assessment in the field of social innovation (e.g., [Antadze and Westley 2012](#); [Milley et al. 2018](#); [Secco et al. 2019b](#); [Ravazzoli et al. 2021](#)), suggesting and developing new tools and ways for such an assessment. Among commonalities, the results confirmed that there is a certain trend in the discussion around positive and negative SI impacts. The results suggest that the actors of SI are not fully aware of the (potential) negative SI impacts. While echoing previous research, the current study also provides some new insights regarding various dimensions and types of the SI impacts. The results for the spatial scales of the SI impacts indicate that the SI initiative in question has been perceived to have the most positive impacts at the local level, however, immediately followed by both the level of parishes and the sub-regional (Baixo Alentejo) level. Thus, the SI initiative is perceived to be impactful at many spatial scales simultaneously: while being locally rooted, ADC Moura has a significant impact at the sub-regional scale. Finally, the study indicates that the SI impacts in four domains can be differentiated along the short-, mid-, and long-term dimensions. Compared to the previous research, the current study made an attempt to fine grain the SI impacts' perception of the impacts' time dimensions. The results show that the impact in social and environmental domains are perceived as long-term, while the perception of the impacts in the economic and institutional domains is of more mid-term nature. This can potentially be interpreted in light of the change that is more visible to the participants of the study, namely, based on the project portfolio of ADC Moura that is focusing more on the interventions that fall under the social and environmental domains.

Having presented the results of the exploratory study of SI impacts and the SI impacts assessment of ADC Moura from Baixo Alentejo, the paper goes on to discuss some limitations of the current study. The first limitation is based on the choice of methodology, where the online survey was chosen as a means of data collection. Despite online surveys being cost-effective and providing a wider reach, the study of SI impacts and their assessment could have benefited more from face-to-face data collection techniques (e.g., questionnaires completed by an interviewer), since the theme itself, as well as the formulation of some

questions, might require additional elaboration and explanation to the participants by a researcher. At the same time, some expressions of the SI impacts are difficult to translate into the research methodology and methods solely focusing on the numerical expressions (Novikova 2021a), thus, requiring SI researchers to consider designing the research based on the mixed method approach, with scholars strongly advocating for such an approach (e.g., Nicholls et al. 2019). Thus, further research requires a more integrated and detailed attention paid to the methodological approaches that allow for meaningful integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods in studying SI impacts.

Further limitation is based on the need for putting the primary focus on other groups of stakeholders, primarily the beneficiaries of SI initiative's work. Since the current paper focused on ADC Moura as an SI initiative, as well as its extended network, the study is lacking beneficiaries' perspective on the SI impacts, which presents a rather limited (and potentially one-sided) perspective. Including beneficiaries could be beneficial for capturing the opinions of 'ultimate' SI users regarding the experience on positive and negative SI impacts, as well as the types, scales, and overall perception of SI initiative as an actor of change in rural European regions.

While the main focus of the current study was on assessing the SI impacts of a particular SI initiative, an additional limitation lies in an unequal distribution of the respondents across the groups. The distribution of the responses across the groups of actors that took part in the online survey is rather unequal, with 16 responses recorded from the ADC Moura's members and staff, while only very few responses were recorded for the policy makers and extended network (one and two responses, respectively). As such, participation and partaking of different groups of actors (as well as their balanced representation) in further research is of crucial importance in order to mitigate such limitations.

Additionally, the paper is limited as far as the coverage of the issue of the negative SI impacts. Despite the questionnaire addressing the negative SI impacts, its dimensions and character, the results indicate low awareness and lack of knowledge on the part of the respondents concerning the negative impacts of ADC Moura's work. The issue of negative impacts of SI, as well as the overall potential 'dark sides' of SI have to be further discussed and taken into account due to the need to critically engage with the 'all positive' understanding of SI, accounting for the potential negative impacts, such as disempowerment (Avelino et al. 2019), worsening vulnerabilities of already vulnerable groups (Fougère and Meriläinen 2021), to name a few.

Having discussed challenges of the SI impact assessment, the paper suggests some direction for the future research. The analytical dimensions suggested in the paper could benefit from further elaboration and explanation, namely, by further exploring and adding upon already presented domains of SI impacts, e.g., through adding the domain of SI impacts in culture. Thus, additional domains of SI impacts should be explored. Simultaneously, further research could build upon the results by providing a more detailed explanation and categorisation of SI impacts.

Another potential future contribution lies in analysing the SI impacts in connection to the various levels of SI, such as incremental, institutional, and disruptive SI (Lee et al. 2021). The assumption here might be that, depending on such levels, SI initiatives might have achieved (or not) different impacts. Further research could also benefit from a deeper elaboration of a more critical reflection concerning the power distribution in relation to the SI initiative: depending on the actor's position—and access to power—the perceptions of the achieved impacts by an SI initiative might vary greatly. At the same time, the issue of power goes hand in hand with the potential disempowerment of some actors through the SI. This issue has been previously addressed in the research (e.g., Avelino 2021), however, it has not been addressed in connection with the perception of SI impacts. Thus, further research could explore this avenue.

In summary, it becomes evident that the questions surrounding the SI impacts and their assessment (with a particular focus on rural areas) are continuously gaining momentum,

still providing a myriad of possibilities to contribute to the research exploring the concepts, frameworks, tools, and approaches for assessment of the SI impacts.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci11030122/s1>, Table S1: Title: Summary of ADC Moura's activities. Source: author's own elaboration based on ADC Moura's Report of Activities and Accounts (2019).

Funding: This research has been partially carried out in the framework of the RurAction project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 721999.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained through the RurAction project under the EU's Horizon 2020 framework. The consortium was explicitly committed to national legal and ethics requirements in their research (e.g., Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000/C 364/01).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank members of ADC Moura for their ongoing support and collaboration, as well as respondents of the study for their participation. The author would like to thank the reviewers for their valuable and insightful feedback that helped to improve the manuscript. The author expresses her gratitude to the The Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development (IOER) for the support in developing the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. The founding sponsors had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, and in the decision to publish the results.

Notes

- ¹ The NUTS classification (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) is a hierarchical system for dividing up the economic territory of the EU and the UK. For more info, please see: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/background> (accessed on 15 March 2021).

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