

Proceeding Paper

Social Innovation and Women's Agricultural Cooperatives: Applying Social Change Theory [†]

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[†] Presented at the 17th International Conference of the Hellenic Association of Agricultural Economists, Thessaloniki, Greece, 2–3 November 2023.

Abstract: In most investments, businesses, or even organizations, results and their value are calculated in terms of profit and economic terms. But what if you have to calculate the value and work of a social enterprise? What is that thin line that separates one business from another? The way to evaluate the efficiency of a business includes the social contribution and the social footprint of the business. Is it possible for a successful farmer cooperative that wants to increase its activity to remain as a social enterprise, or must it change its legal form? In an agricultural cooperative that shows remarkable success, how aligned are the opinions of the members with the vision of the cooperative and to what extent do the cooperative's vision and its reason to exist change? The above questions were the reasons behind why this study was carried out and the realization of the primary research presented in this article. The research presented herein is based on qualitative research tools, and this study involved carrying out a case study of a women's agricultural cooperative in Agios Antonios, a village in the prefecture of Thessaloniki, Northern Greece.

Keywords: women's cooperatives; social effect; economic benefit



Citation: Sotiriadis, I.; Sidiropoulos, G.; Partalidou, M. Social Innovation and Women's Agricultural Cooperatives: Applying Social Change Theory. *Proceedings* **2024**, *94*, 54. <https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings2024094054>

Academic Editor: Eleni Theodoropoulou

Published: 28 February 2024



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1. Introduction

When we talk about business, a single word automatically comes to mind: profit. Rarely when evaluating the course of a conventional business (individual company, joint stock company, etc.) do we consider its social footprint. However, even in the case of a social enterprise, things do not seem to differ sharply in practice, contrary to their definition. The value of a social business depends on and is measured in financial terms, and in some cases, without profits, a business can cease operating. Despite the minimal importance given to the social results, however, this is precisely what practically separates social businesses from other forms of businesses in modern economic and fully competitive environments. By definition, social enterprises are based on the concept of the social economy: "The totality of economic, business, productive and social activities, which are undertaken by legal persons or associations of persons, whose statutory purpose is the pursuit of the collective benefit and the service of general social interests" (Vairami, 2015) [1]. Agricultural enterprises are also included among social enterprise cooperatives. Their viability is judged almost exclusively by their financial benefits. Social contributions are not recorded as profit. When any agricultural cooperative attempts to find financial support, such as in the form of a loan from a financial institution (e.g., banks), the only evaluation criteria are financial and accounting situations, and the social footprint the cooperative might offer is not considered. In fact, evaluating and calculating the social impact of an enterprise is inversely proportional to the typical method used to evaluate and calculate the success of an enterprise or cooperative. The success of a cooperative and its economic growth create some conditions that affect the cooperative's vision, goals, and reason for existing.

Agricultural cooperatives, which have managed to create strong scale economies, have expanded significantly and exponentially in terms of their memberships, and in some cases, this has resulted in each member becoming disconnected from the decisions of the cooperative and its overall course. Previously, the benefits obtained by each member were only financial (improved selling price). Interpersonal relationships between members, due to the increase in the sizes of cooperatives, stopped existing, and the ultimate aim was world market dominance. The result was ultimately a change in law which led agricultural cooperatives to become public limited companies. Through our research in this particular field and carrying out a case study of a cooperative that promotes social innovation through the integration and empowerment of rural women, we set out to achieve some very specific goals, namely to capture the social significance of an agricultural cooperative, to emphasize the differences in social businesses from the trivial and speculative perspectives, and to evaluate, with the use of a research tool, whether the visions of both the cooperative as a whole and its individual members change over time.

2. Materials and Methods

Primary research was conducted on a women's agricultural cooperative in the nearby area of Thessaloniki, Northern Greece. Our research focused on Agios Antonios Women's Agricultural Cooperative of Traditional Products in the village of Agios Antonios. This particular choice it is not accidental. On the contrary, we specifically targeted and studied this cooperative. This specific women's cooperative is a fairly well known and successful one, despite the difficulties it has faced from time to time. It has specific terms of registration for new members (female farmers exclusively from their local community), is located at a very close distance from Thessaloniki (33 km), and its economic activity is constantly increasing. This women's cooperative has been in operation since 1999. It is active in the agri-food sector (produces locally traditional products). At the headquarters of the cooperative there, is an organized dining area that operates daily. It consists of 16 members, all of which are exclusively from the local community of Agios Antonios (which has a population of 647); all members are female farmers, and all ages are represented. The research that we carried out is purely qualitative and based on data obtained from holding in-depth discussions with a total of 7 women from the cooperative (with each member being interviewed individually), as well as through a collective discussion (a focus group discussion). Furthermore the qualitative research tool "Journey of Change" was utilized, through which we sought to measure the effects of the changes resulting from each activity the cooperative carried out to benefit interested parties and not for profit (Baker & Courtney, 2018) [2], and these activities contributed to the organization of our discussions and facilitated our qualitative research. At the same time, this tool helped to concentrate our research and organize the thoughts of the participants, and it is a primary tool for quantifying qualitative data. Our application of Journey of Change was structured in three time phases (short term, medium term, and long term) which were defined by the members of the cooperative themselves. At the same time, our research raises concerns about the cooperative's auxiliary accelerators and the obstacles that it currently faces or will face in the future. Our research process was organized into two stages. In the first, the participants were asked to complete the Journey of Change form, which concerned the individual characteristics of each participant and her individual opinion about her participation in the cooperative. They were asked to define the benefits they have obtained from participating in the cooperative as well as the goals they have set individually for the cooperative in the future. In the second phase, the participants collectively filled out the Journey of Change form. In both phases, a total of 7 women (of which 3 belonged to the board of the cooperative) participated in the research process. The implementation of the first phase was preceded by the research team providing information and guidance to the cooperative members.

3. Results

Based on the qualitative processing of the data collected during the first stage (individual) of the research process, important elements emerged. In all three-time phases, almost all of the participants (five out of seven) noted exclusively the social benefits instead of the economic ones as the primary reason behind their participation in the cooperative. As a collective, the members reported networking and cooperation as the main reason for participation in the cooperative, and this aspect was also listed as a benefit derived from their participation. Our results also included answers related to self-improvement, and some members sought employment in the cooperative as way for them to escape from everyday life. Answers related to financial benefits were more or less absent, and financial benefits were mentioned the least out of all the benefits (mentioned by two out of seven participants, and the two who did mention financial benefits held a relatively high position in the cooperative). Individual future financial benefits were also scarcely mentioned by the respondents. Regarding the second stage, no answers regarding the economic development of the cooperative and increasing its income were recorded. On the contrary, many of the members' answers pertained to social future desires and goals. Specifically, at the stage wherein the group collectively completed the Journey of Change form (Figure 1), the participants stated that their future and main goal was to increase cooperation with the municipality to promote their area. Alongside responses pertaining to the fear of a reduced number of membership renewals from women in the cooperative, the respondents mentioned the need to add new members to the cooperative and boost its development in the field of agro-tourism and the home industry to increase the amount of job opportunities for the local community.

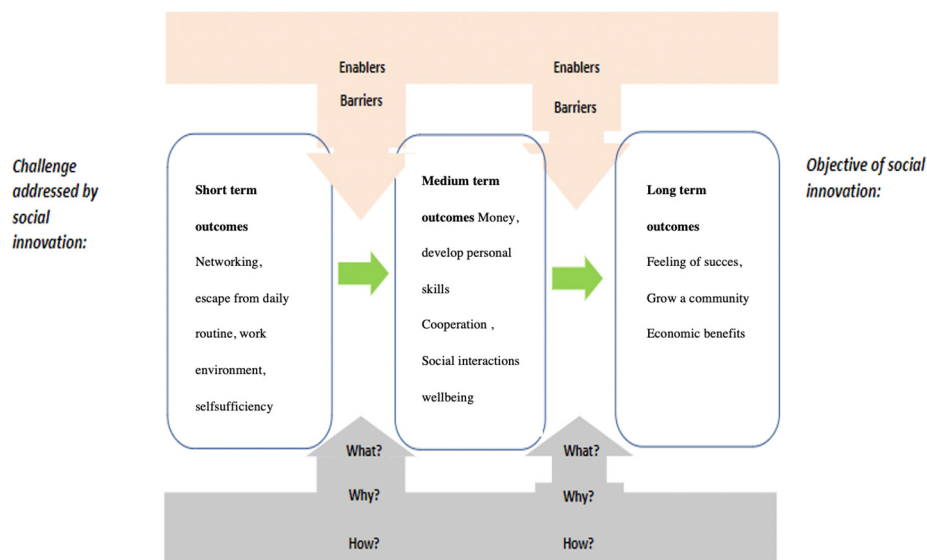


Figure 1. Journey of change for social innovation solutions. **Source:** field research, 2023. Adapted with the permission from “Social Return on Investment (SROI) Guide”, 2023, P. Courtney, J. Powell, K. Kubinakova and C. Baker.

4. Discussion

Based on the above results, it appears that the participants have enjoyed personal benefits from their participation in the cooperative which have mainly affected the social aspects of their lives. After a comparison between the individual and group responses, it became clear that topics such as the economic reasons for participation and increasing the financial capacity of the cooperative in the future, which were recorded in the individual forms, were not mentioned at all in the Journey of Change form that was completed collectively. This fact reflects that due to the majority of the participants' emphasis on an open and collective discussion and dialogue in the second stage and the social impacts

that participation in the cooperative have had on their daily lives, economic-centered answers were not considered important and were limited and/or not provided at all by any participant. At the same time, despite the success of the cooperative, none of the participants stated that there was a need for any significant changes (operational, tax or legal). They all said that the future plans of the cooperative will simply revolve around ensuring that it still exists and remains as it is.

5. Conclusions

In summary, this specific cooperative (as a case study example of social innovation and integration among female farmers) demonstrates the social value that a cooperative has. It was shown that the social benefits derived from participation in the cooperative are quite important, as they were mentioned in, on average, about 80% of the individual answers and prioritized in most of the answers given (85% exclusively social responses, 75% hierarchically higher social responses). The success of an agricultural business, as it turns out, is not only related to profit. Measuring the value and importance of a cooperative should not be carried out using only monetary criteria and values; on the contrary, it should be carried out by considering other benefits and social factors. The above research process proved the social importance of a cooperative, highlighted the fact that social benefits can be of greater value to social enterprises than financial ones, and captured the challenges between personal views and collective ones and how these influence discussions within the cooperative. However, our research focused on a case study and the perspectives of the cooperative's members. Future research efforts should concern measuring the perceptions of local communities, consumers, and visitors on the social impact of a cooperative in rural areas.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.P. and I.S.; methodology, I.S., I.S. and G.S.; writing—original draft preparation, I.S., G.S. and M.P.; writing—review and editing, all; visualization, I.S.; supervision, M.P.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

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

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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