PRACTICE ABSTRACT

A new lens on Rural Social Economy: research and evaluation with intersectionality and systems thinking

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Challenge

Rural areas across Europe face a dense mix of structural challenges such as declining populations, economic precarity, limited services, environmental degradation, and uneven development. These conditions do not affect all people in the same way. Many individuals and groups (for instance women, migrants, older adults, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities) experience overlapping forms of exclusion that compound their **vulnerability**. These intersecting challenges are often invisible to conventional approaches, which tend to address problems in isolation or treat social categories as fixed and separate.

The **Social Economy (SE)** has emerged as a promising response to these challenges. Grounded in principles of **cooperation, democratic participation, and community care**, SE can support more **inclusive and sustainable rural development**. However, to unlock this potential, researchers and practitioners must be equipped with tools that can account for the complexity of social realities in rural contexts. These are, in essence, tools that recognise not just who is vulnerable, but why, and how that vulnerability is maintained or disrupted. For example, an SS may appear to be inclusive on the surface, yet still exclude migrant women because of unspoken norms, lack of childcare, or language barriers. Similarly, classical approaches to analysing SE governance may overlook the absence of marginalised groups in decision-making structures.

When certain voices -such as those of ethnic minorities, low-income residents, or people with disabilities- are not represented or meaningfully included, their specific needs risk being ignored. This not only **perpetuates exclusion** but also wastes the knowledge, lived experience, and innovative potential these groups bring to the table.
This why, within the SERIGO project, we developed the **Intersectional Critical Systems Thinking (ICST)** approach to explore and assess how SE functions in rural areas and how it can be made more inclusive.

Key concepts

The SERIGO project applies ICST as a core part of its research framework. This approach brings together two powerful traditions:

- **Critical systems thinking** focuses on the ways in which different parts of a system -such as governance, funding mechanisms, and social hierarchies- reinforce or disrupt each other over time. In this way, it uncovers interconnections among multiple causalities within social systems that determine social exclusion and vulnerabilities.
- **intersectionality** examines how the critical nexus of social conditions (e.g., gender, race, disability) create complex matrices of social inequalities that mutually reinforce existing and oppressive systems of powers (e.g., patriarchy, colonialism, ableism).

Combining these two perspectives brings into the evaluation of SE the consideration of how multiple structural features affect people differently, based on their position within social hierarchies.

Tools

In SERIGO, ICST is embedded in all parts of research or evaluation, from design to data collection and analysis. This is done with the aid of a number of tools that can be used in the different stages of the research/evaluation.

Research design

The **Social Identity Map (Tool 1a)**, researchers or evaluators carry out a self-assessment of their own positionality. This means reflecting on how their own identities and social positions -such as gender, education, class or ethnicity- may influence interactions with participants and the interpretation of data. This kind of reflection is not about self-centring but about ensuring that the research does not unintentionally reproduce forms of exclusion.

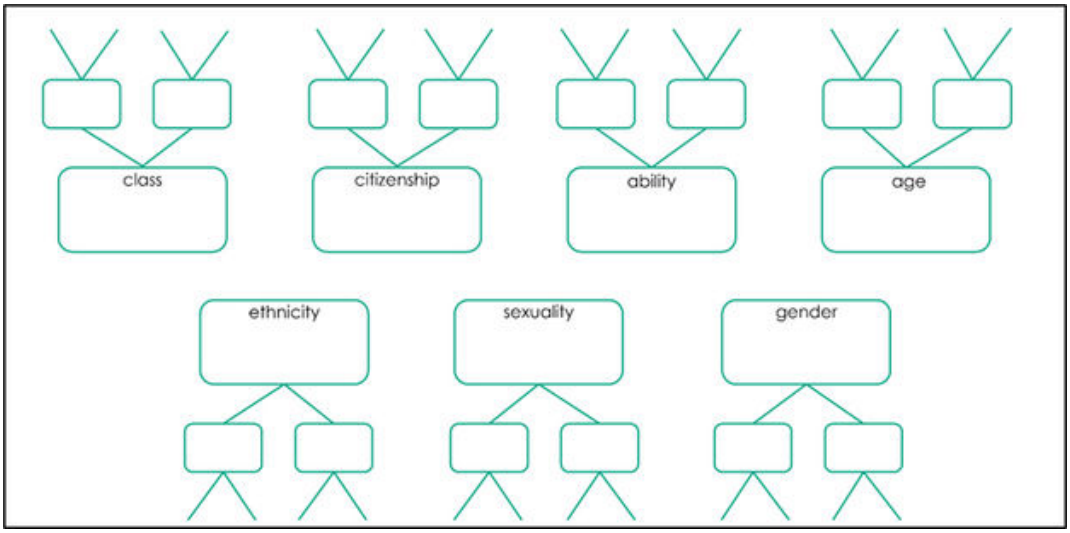


Figure 1. Social Identity Map, Tool 1a

The **Case Study Boundary-Setting Tool (Tool 1b)** prompts researchers or evaluators to explicitly define the boundaries of what is analysed or evaluated, going beyond just the SSE initiative itself, and considering the wider social and institutional context in which it operates. Who is part of the system? Who decides? Who is left out? Who benefits? These questions shape the stakeholder identification and mapping, ensuring that hidden or informal actors are not overlooked.

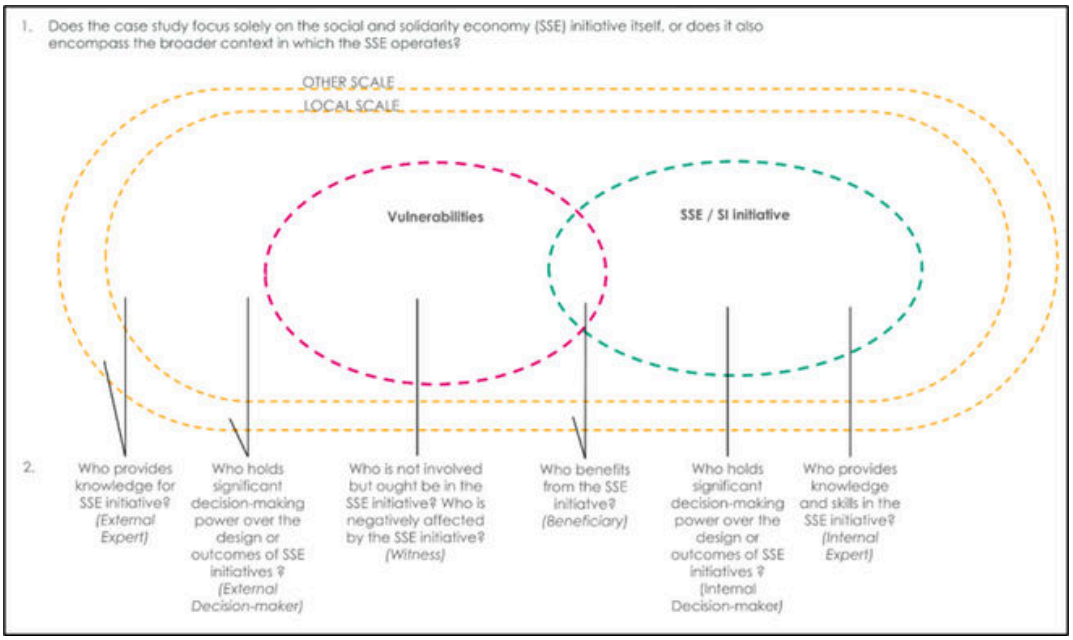


Figure 2. Case Study Boundary-setting, Tool 1b

With the **Intersectionality wheel (Tool 1c)**, teams identify key social factors relevant to the case -drawing from a framework that includes gender, migration status, class, age, disability, and others- and explore how these factors intersect in the local context.

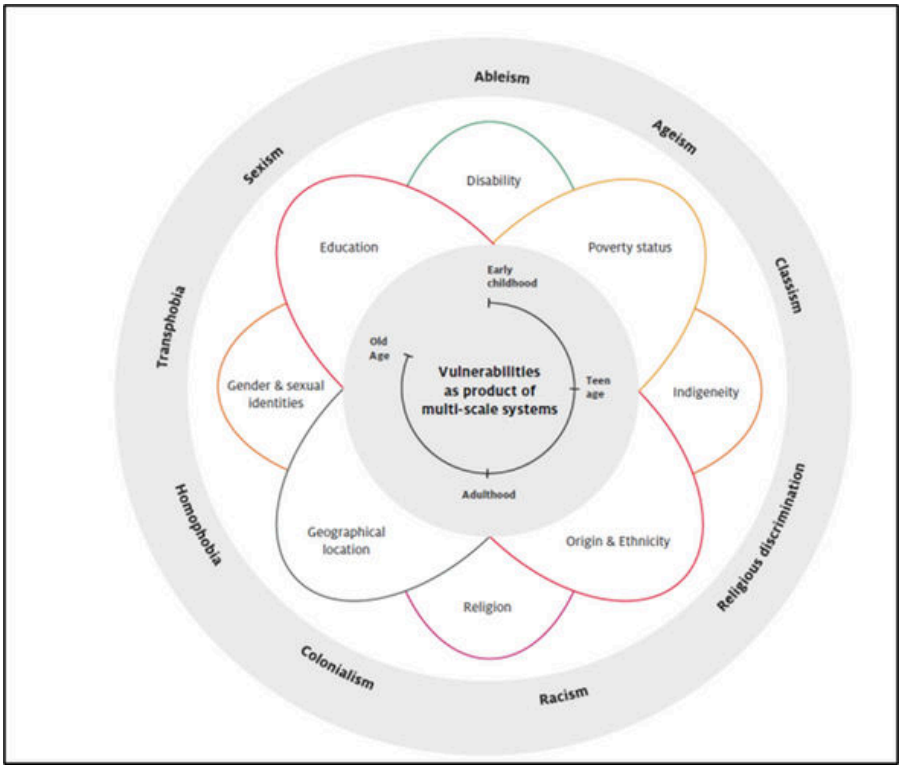


Figure 3. Intersectionality wheel, Tool 1c

Data collection

During fieldwork, researchers adapt standard methods -such as interviews and focus groups- to reflect these intersectional insights. Section 3 of the Case Study Guidelines produced by WP3 (D3.1.) outlines how data collection should account for not just individual characteristics, but how those characteristics interact with systemic barriers. These layers of exclusion become visible only when we ask the right questions. Enabling methods, such as photovoice, participatory mapping, and walking interviews, for collecting data and eliciting perspectives are also recommended. These methods allow participants to express their perspectives in creative and accessible ways, particularly for those who may be less comfortable in formal interview settings.

Additionally, the **Intersectional Checklist for SE (Tool 2)** provides further guidance on how to consider diversity in both the user base and governance structures of the initiative.

Data Analysis

After each encounter, researchers are encouraged to reflect using a reflection form (Tool 3), a post-interview form that captures emerging insights and potential power dynamics. These reflections are then used to inform the analysis phase, which is likewise shaped by ICST. Instead of treating data as neutral input, researchers analyse how power and exclusion operate within the system. They consider not only what patterns emerge, but also why they emerge, and what systems sustain them.

Conclusions

ICST offers a practical and thoughtful way to design **more inclusive and responsive initiatives**. It does so by helping practitioners see beyond surface-level indicators to the **deeper patterns** that shape participation, representation, and impact. Rather than asking only whether an initiative "reaches women," ICST encourages us to ask: which women? What barriers do they face? How do other aspects of their identity -such as age, ethnicity, or caregiving roles- affect their inclusion or exclusion?

ICST also reframes how we think about **rigor and effectiveness**. Instead of focusing solely on methodological consistency, it emphasises whether the right people were engaged, whether multiple perspectives were heard, and whether findings reflect lived experiences. This doesn't lower standards, it raises them, by demanding that research and practice do justice to the complexity of rural realities.

Ultimately, ICST is not just a methodology. It is a **commitment to better understanding** and transforming the systems that reproduce exclusion. By embedding ICST throughout research design, data collection, and analysis, SERIGO offers a model for how SE initiatives can become more reflective, inclusive, and impactful. In contexts where resources are limited and needs are diverse, this kind of clarity and sensitivity is a necessity.

View here the full report

Enhancing Resilience, Social Inclusion, and Well-being in rural areas through Social Innovation

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