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Socially innovative spatial planning: insights from within and beyond a LEADER framework

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to understand how socially innovative spatial planning is fostered or impeded within disadvantaged rural areas and to identify the isomorphic dynamics that perpetuate governance failures and curb innovative capacities. This article draws from sociological institutionalist accounts within spatial planning to develop an integrated epistemological tool that traces the institutional qualities that affect the capacity for innovation. Mixed methods research was conducted in the NUTS3 region of Baixo Alentejo; the innovative spatial planning capacities were investigated at both the level of broad governance and the micro-environment of Local Action Groups (LAGs). The findings revealed that despite the enhanced institutional resources possessed by some LAGs, the weak interconnections with the broader governance framework restrict socially innovative spatial planning. In other words, in the absence of a strong governance chain of innovation, even the most empowered links might prove trivial.

1. Introduction

The global financial crisis was an instrumental moment for regional planning (Ponzini 2016) in that it revealed multifaceted configurations of socio-economic decline (Leick and Lang 2018, 214) and exposed New Regionalism and orthodox planning for their market-based ontology (Hadjimichalis 2006; Moulaert and Mehmood 2010, 105). Inflamed by externally imposed neoliberal austerity policies, the orthodox planning objectives gradually moved out of reach (Haase, Athanasopoulou, and Rink 2016; Leick and Lang 2018, 214). At the same time, the relational theorisations of planning (Healey 2004; Shucksmith 2010) and associational conceptions of governance gained momentum (Smith and Teasdale 2012).

Against this backdrop, social innovation broke through orthodox spatial planning as an anchoring concept for building institutional capacity (Healey et al. 2003), overcoming rural marginalization (Bock 2016), promoting a radical planning agenda (Moulaert et al. 2007) and institutionalizing transformation and innovation (Christmann et al. 2020). Even though social innovation is highly relevant for spatial development, its potential

in rural areas is still under-researched. In response to this research gap, the present article investigates how socially innovative spatial planning is fostered or impeded within disadvantaged rural areas and identifies the isomorphic dynamics that perpetuate governance failures and curb innovative capacities.

The first section of the article describes the emergence of social innovation as an anchoring concept for alternative planning agendas. Consequently, by critically engaging with sociological institutionalist accounts within spatial planning (González and Healey 2005; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Healey 2004), the article introduces an integrated epistemological-methodological framework. The second section describes the design and methodology of the mixed methods research conducted in Baixo Alentejo. Finally, the last section presents the research results from Baixo Alentejo and offers next steps for future research.

2. Socially innovative spatial planning

2.1. A theoretical outline

Since the 1990s, the so-called New Regionalism movement (Amin and Thrift 1992; Cooke and Morgan 1998; Storper 1997) has been the favoured theoretical framework for the analysis of regional development and planning (Moulaert and Mehmood 2010, 108). New Regionalism emerged from the idea that 'thick' institutional arrangements could potentially foster regional development (Amin and Thrift 1995) – a shift in development theory that essentially brought institutions out of the shadows (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, and Tomaney 2017, 51). Despite normative objections to the effects of institutional agglomeration (Rodríguez-Pose 2013), many considered this 'institutional turn' to be a conceptual advance (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, and Tomaney 2017, 54); the neo-classical models that previously explored the links between institutions and economic performance (North 1990; Rodrik, Subramanian, and Trebbi 2004) had systematically under-appreciated the role of institutions in regional development (Gertler 2010).

In spite of their embrace of institutions, mainstream New Regionalism theories still rest on market-based ontological underpinnings (Hadjimichalis 2006). Specifically, New Regionalism praises market mechanisms, entrepreneurship, competitiveness and labour flexibilities while condemning local and spatial redistribution for impeding regional development (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014); thus, advocates of this theory focus primarily on accommodating and coordinating the preferences of the free market (Lord and Tewdwr-Jones 2015, 132). At the same time, they maintain a 'techno-logical view of development' (Moulaert and Mehmood 2010, 106). Critical-reflectivist New Regionalism approaches distinguish themselves from those underpinnings as they derive instead from the constructivist, critical and post-structuralist camps. Their common denominator is their dissatisfaction with rationalist theories and their disbelief in the objectified region (Jessop 2003; Neumann 2003).

As the global financial crisis precipitated various manifestations of socio-economic decline (Leick and Lang 2018, 214), both urban and regional planning faced a moment of reckoning (Ponzini 2016). In these circumstances, New Regionalist models systematically ignored the regulatory role of institutions in addressing the living conditions of people in places that had 'failed' economically (Hudson 2007). The negligence

was a natural consequence of the fundamental distinction between paradigmatic and failed regions (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014, 213) or, in other words, between core and peripheral areas (Leick and Lang 2018). Thus, most New Regionalist models praised endogenous regional factors that ostensibly led to economic success while underestimating the exogenous dynamics that severely affected remote regions (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2007).

The externally imposed neoliberal austerity policies impeded and eventually prompted the failure of the orthodox targets of economic growth which sought to improve local employment opportunities (Haase, Athanasopoulou, and Rink 2016; Leick and Lang 2018, 213). The traditional boundaries between and within public and private sectors came under dispute (Stoker 1996) while more associational conceptions of governance gained momentum (Smith and Teasdale 2012). The state was reimagined as 'co-ordinator, manager or enabler, rather than as provider and director' (Shucksmith 2010, 4). Radical, relational theorisations of planning approached space as socially constructed (Graham and Healey 1999; Thrift 1996), perennially co-produced and contested (Healey 2004). This movement viewed local actors as key agents for fostering collective, neo-endogenous action (Ward and Ray 2004) and reimagining both institutions (Reimer 2004) and place-scale relations (Healey 2004). Within this context, the social innovation field gained momentum among scholars.

Since its conception and initial implementation in the early 1990s, the LEADER experiment has been particularly significant within the political and cultural contexts of neo-endogenous rural development (Shucksmith 2010, 7). LEADER has been the main expression of rural development policy within the EU, with the aim of encouraging marginalized rural areas to overcome their challenges (Esparcia and Abbasi 2020, 35). Innovation in general was a 'guiding principle for LEADER I and II' (Dargan and Shucksmith 2008, 279), while social innovation remains widely recognized as of central importance to the aims of the current 2014–2020 LEADER period (Dax et al. 2016, 31). Nevertheless, scholars argue that LEADER lost a lot of its capacity because of the 'mainstreaming' procedure (Dargan and Shucksmith 2008), which integrated LEADER into the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs). 'Mainstreaming' ostensibly was designed to elevate the profile and significance of LEADER, but the reduction of the programme to a horizontal, area-based activity within the RDPs undermined its vertical integration (Shucksmith 2010) and decreased its capacity for fostering innovation and enabling neo-endogenous development (Lukesch et al. 2004). In this regard, LEADER is a fruitful example through which to investigate social innovation processes and the isomorphic pressures that act against them.

The theoretical stream that analyses novelty in spatial planning as instances of social innovation (Christmann et al. 2020; Moulaert et al. 2013; Mulgan 2006) draws on two elements of communicative planning theory (Healey et al. 2003): the focus on institutional capacity building (Shucksmith 2010) and the idea that the purpose of planning is 'to release potentialities and to innovate, and perhaps even to generate new struggles and a different level of politics' (Healey 2004, 160). The communicative planning and the social innovation literature do not agree on everything, however; while communicative planning identifies the significance of power struggles, scholars of social innovation often criticize the idealism of its implicit faith in deliberative democracy and communicative values (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998).

Antithetically, by realizing social innovation along the lines of the Schumpeterian notion of 'creative destruction', the relevant literature primarily dwells on 'constellations of conflicts in processes of disruptive change' (Christmann et al. 2020, 497). In this respect, social innovation broke through orthodox spatial planning by establishing itself as an anchoring concept for challenging governance relations and promoting a radical alternative planning agenda (Moulaert et al. 2007) and as a social process for institutionalizing transformation and innovation (Christmann et al. 2020), overcoming rural marginalization (Bock 2016) and even facilitating the social networking that emerges from the mediation of embedded social enterprises (Richter 2019).

In an attempt to retheorise the social dynamics and power struggles, social innovation theory seems in some cases to put extra weight on exogenous parameters – such as the regulative mechanisms of capitalism (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014) and the rapid progression of neoliberal discourse, perceptions and practices (Moulaert et al. 2007) – that seem to underpin mainstream planning (Leick and Lang 2018). Although social innovation depends on the broader structure of opportunities, it is important to remember that the scale of social innovation is primarily local and regional (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005). In this regard, it is critical to develop a link between the exogenous dynamics and the region's endogenous capacities. This link is consistently considered by institutionalist models (Amin and Thrift 2002; Swyngedouw 2005).

Sociological institutionalist studies critically evaluate the emergence of social innovation by exploring governance dynamics in the field of policy analysis and planning (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Healey 2004). Sociological institutionalism introduces macro-sociological parameters to explore the institutional effects of a world polity of rationalization (Hasse 2005). Regulation theory focuses on the dynamics that drive local regulation and accumulation, and in the 1990s, regulation theory became the main macro-analytical stronghold of the radical spatial development movement (Moulaert et al. 2007, 197). At that time, models of institutionalism were still largely underpinned by an assumption of rational economic decision-making and an instrumentalist perspective (Lambooy and Moulaert 1996, 233–34). Since the 1990s, regulation theory has been criticized for its lack of interest in cultural dynamics, particularly with regard to the formation of identities and discourses (Jessop and Sum 2006). By contrast, sociological institutionalism has developed a strong cultural-cognitive pillar that integrates the regulatory and normative dimensions (Scott 2014) and reconsiders the rational, economic underpinnings.

With its roots in organizational theory, sociological institutionalism explores endogenous institutional dynamics (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Sociological institutionalists have refined the idea of 'institutional isomorphism' to emphasise that as successful institutional arrangements are adopted by more and more members, the institutional setting becomes more homogenous (Dimaggio and Powell 1983). The idea of institutional isomorphism resonates with Max Weber's prediction that societies would ultimately converge around one rational-legal form of governance (Weber 1968). Against this backdrop, sociological institutionalists perceive that any divergences between institutions are merely residuals, and in most cases, change should move those institutions towards homogeny, not away from it (Hasse 2005).

The bottom line is that sociological institutionalist studies within spatial planning can inform theories about the links between structural forces and the phenomenology of

micro-practices (Gualini 2001), otherwise framed as the links between the exogenous and endogenous environments (González and Healey 2005). The following sub-section draws from sociological institutionalism to identify specific institutional qualities that may trigger deviation and innovation. The sub-section also introduces an integrated analytical framework.

2.2. A sociological institutionalism framework

In the present study, the generic concept of 'institutional embeddedness and mobility' embodies the quality of mobilization within government – that is, the potential for deviation and innovation. In support of collaborative planning, empirical data show that extroverted organizations openly debate policies and propose extroverted, innovative initiatives (Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos 2020; Montpetit 2005). Along the same lines, in spatial development analysis and planning, sociological institutionalists explore the dialectic interplay between identity and place (Healey 2002). When locals and members of the institutions share a strong regional and cultural identity, the common sense of belonging is 'a powerful mobilizing force which could lead to social innovation initiatives with transformative potentials' (González and Healey 2005, 2059). The resources for mobilization also include the organizational environment and, more specifically, the pedagogical and capacity building processes of the institutions (Olsen and Peters 1996), which constitute threats to the established patterns of behaviour.

Antithetically, one theoretical stream of institutionalism suggests that people demand change when institutions are discredited or delegitimised in some way (Blyth 2001). This conception is in line with the idea that innovative political initiatives are fostered within the 'institutional voids' (Hajer 2003) that are triggered by institutional cracks and collisions (Amin and Thrift 2002). In this respect, high institutional embeddedness and mobility preserve the status quo by mitigating struggles and collisions that otherwise might generate change. Consequently, institutional embeddedness and mobility must be explored both in isolation and in respect to other institutional qualities.

Even when the institution is sufficiently animated to follow an innovative trajectory, the practices and cultures of different planning segments will always try to defend and maintain 'business as usual' (Moulaert et al. 2005, 1985). Sociological institutionalism explains this tendency with the 'logic of appropriateness', (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972), one of the most prominent ideas of institutionalism that has been popularized in sociological circles. According to the logic of appropriateness, members tend to act according to the appropriate, internalized institutional logic for the sake of organizational efficiency. Thus, members occupy specific bundles of roles, leading to 'role crystallisation' (Eisenstadt 1965) and routinized judgments that belong to the 'garbage can' of decision-making (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972).

The effects of appropriateness are captured in the generic term of 'institutional cohesion': the degree of homogeneity with which the institution's members make sense of their collective worlds and engage cognitively in their day-to-day routines (Hajer 1995). On the one hand, high institutional cohesion might increase the amount of relational resources, such as status, esteem, respect, honour and social approval between members (Lindenberg 1992), which in turn increases the members' autonomy and

broadens the spectrum of feasible options (Offe 1999). Members in this circumstance are more likely to experiment and innovate because they are emboldened by this greater trust, believing that poor performance will be ignored, forgiven or at least sanctioned less severely (Offe 1999).

On the other hand, higher cohesion and a stronger sense of membership often deepen the logic of appropriateness and, by extension, limit and condition the choices of the institution's members (Clemens and Cook 1999). The consequences of appropriateness might be clarified by investigating both the agency that actors attribute to their environment (González and Healey 2005, 2058) and the deeper frames of reference and cultural practices of their everyday actions (Moulaert et al. 2005, 1984). On a micro-level, the essential question is why actors would ever seek change given the benefits of 'staying the course.' This micro-phenomenology, generically termed 'receptiveness to innovation', is explored in the present analysis.

By enriching the 'regulative' and 'normative' dimensions of institutionalism with a 'cultural-cognitive' pillar, sociological institutionalism provides an integrated resource pool (Scott 2014) with which to examine the micro-dynamics of change (González and Healey 2005). Sociological institutionalism often uses a bounded rationality criterion: actors seek change when the benefits of the alternative exceed the costs of moving away from the status quo. When self-interest is juxtaposed with the alternative agenda, however, knowledge might alternatively lead to strategic actions that undermine innovative initiatives and maintain the present position. Following the critique that motivations are informed by self-interest (Phillips 1993), the bounded rationality criterion might seem problematic when analysing the institutional dynamics of social innovation. Nonetheless, the criterion offers the valuable realization that the dynamics between institutions and actors' preferences are more nuanced and complicated than is often assumed (Pierson and Skocpol 2002). Therefore, the present research dwells on the actors' motivations and preferences (Powell and DiMaggio 1991).

In sum, the present article identifies three categories of institutional qualities that may contribute to socially innovative spatial planning: institutional embeddedness and mobility, institutional cohesion and receptiveness to innovation. The categories remain unequivocally intertwined and are not clearly distinguishable; the categorization was designed for methodological reasons.

3. Research design and methodology

Due to conceptual controversies within the social innovation field (Neumeier 2012), comparative studies of social innovation often have questionable internal validity (Lyon and Sepulveda 2009). Despite this limitation, the openness of the term should be considered an opportunity to reimagine innovation from various social perspectives (Mehmood 2016). A comparison of different configurations of social innovation across regions might illuminate different spatial confines that must be explored before they can be displaced (Moulaert and Mehmood 2011). In this spirit, the LEADER framework was developed to promote replicable innovative ideas as models for rural development (Dargan and Shucksmith 2008, 279).

A quantitative methodological tool provides numerical data that is easy to compare and can inform future comparative research. This approach may also avoid the

aforementioned conceptual controversies by providing quantitative evaluations of phenomena that otherwise are evaluated with vague intuitions. Nevertheless, since the present research is interested in the social dynamics and institutional qualities that underpin social innovation processes, an in-depth qualitative investigation also seems appropriate. Therefore, this study deployed a mixed-methods research approach in the NUTS3 region of Baixo Alentejo.

The research began with a qualitative investigation, which outlined the institutional arena of Baixo Alentejo – the networks and their interactions, power struggles and institutional collisions – in order to identify the exogenous pressures that act on the regional institutions. From this baseline review, Local Action Groups (LAGs) were identified as the main institutional stakeholders that facilitate socially innovative spatial planning. The qualitative stage was followed by a quantitative investigation of the isomorphic dynamics and potential for social innovation within the LAG environment, measured via a questionnaire that was distributed to all the staff members of the Baixo Alentejo LAGs. The final integrative stage investigated the socially innovative spatial planning capacities of the Baixo Alentejo institutional framework, with an explicit focus on the specialized LAG stakeholders (Table 1).

In analytical terms, the qualitative stage triangulated the data through fourteen semi-structured interviews with institutional stakeholders, field observations and analyses of documents. The term 'institutional stakeholder' embodies the notion that the capacity for innovative governance exceeds the formal laws and procedures – rather, the capacity lies in the broader governance relations (Moulaert et al. 2005, 1984), so 'institutional stakeholders' comprise all institutional agents who are actively involved in those relations. The role of active individuals is of major interest but remains outside the scope of the present research.

In this regard, institutional stakeholders could not be identified based on their typical roles or even from a theoretical distance; instead, a 'snowball sampling' method identified the main stakeholders in the field. A total of fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with high-ranking institution staff members from five different LAGs (Terras Dentro, Rota Do Guadiana (RDG), ESDIME, Alentejo XXI and Terras Do

Table 1. Research design.

Research stage	1. Qualitative	2. Quantitative	3. Integration
Primary method	Triangulation of data	Survey	Joint display (Qual and Quant)
Research tools	(1) Field observations (2) Documents (3) Semi-structured interviews	Close-ended questionnaires	
Target group	Institutional stakeholders	LAG staff members	Institutional stakeholders
Objective (s)	(1) Outline the institutional arena (2) Examine the importance of LAGs for socially innovative planning	Trace the socially innovative planning capacities of LAGs	Illustrate the socially innovative planning capacities in Baixo Alentejo with an explicit focus on LAGs as the main stakeholders

Baixo Guadiana (TDBG)); ADC Moura, a regional development association; ADRAL, a project facilitator enterprise; CCDR, a political entity that facilitates rural and social development in the region; CIMBAL, a municipalities association; DRAPAL, a national institution for agriculture; Fundação Eugénio de Almeida, a private foundation that promotes social innovation; MINHA TERRA, a LEADER network and ELARD representative; NERBE, an association for small enterprises; and Social Innovation Incubator, a private association that facilitates social innovation. All interviews were anonymised for political reasons.

The interviews covered three main themes: (a) planning and development challenges, as well as strategies to address the main problems of the region; (b) governance relations, as well as the network of interactions, mismatches and collisions with other political institutions; and (c) regional and cultural identities familiarity with key terms and concepts in social innovation, perceptions of social innovation, cultural and cognitive features of everyday routines and practices, and personal agendas and preferences. Data collection included participatory observations of the members' everyday routines, organizational features, work environment and interactions with colleagues.

Collectively, these interviews mapped the multidimensional institutional arena and examined the importance attributed to the LAGs. In the quantitative stage that followed, a questionnaire was developed in accordance with the principles of sociological institutionalism. The aim of the quantitative research was to explore in-depth the transformative and innovative capacities of the LAGs of Baixo Alentejo. The questionnaire comprised twenty-six questions (i.e. a close-ended, linear survey metric)[1] through which LAG staff members assessed the qualities of their institutions on 10-point scales, as conceptualized previously. Thirty-five questionnaires were distributed in person, and twenty-one were completed (i.e. a response rate of 60%) (Table 2).

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the quantitative data, and the average score (expressed as a per cent instead of a score from 1 to 10) given by the all LAG members of Baixo Alentejo will be mentioned whenever relevant in the sequel of this article. The per cent scale gives a more tangible picture and enables comparisons with the previous extensive survey administered by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), which explored LAG attitudes and capacities.[2] One difference is noteworthy, however: the ENRD survey approached the LAGs as homogeneous groups of people, with each manager's replies presumably representing the whole, while the present survey collected responses from staff members at all levels of the institution to generate a more nuanced understanding of the organizational environments.

4. Mapping the governance arena

The Baixo Alentejo NUTS3 region is relatively poor and rural, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (adjusted for current market prices) of 18.600 euros, only 62% of the EU average (EU 28; latest available data from 2017). Additionally, Baixo Alentejo has recorded a low growth rate of 10% since 2007. Statistical data reveal one of the region's main problems: a falling population density, down to 14.1 inhabitants per square kilometre in 2017. The consequences of the low population density are exacerbated by the disproportionate number of elderly people (defined as 65 years or older): 188.2 per 100 young people, significantly higher than the Portuguese average of 153.2.[3] Despite

Table 2. Survey questions and results (average scores across respondents).

Institutional Embeddedness		Institutional Cohesion		Receptiveness to Social Innovation	
1	How much do you identify yourself with the region that you work on? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	9,1	For how long have your served in your institution? (1=very short, 10=very long)	8,1	How innovative is your institution? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	7,1
2	How would you assess the connection of your institution with civil society? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	7,5	To what extent do you share the ethical code and values of your institution? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	8,9	How familiar are you with the term 'social economy'? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	8,1
3	How would you assess the level of cooperation between the institution and its local partners? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	7,8	How would you assess your cooperation with the other staff members of the organization? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	8,3	How familiar are you with the term 'social innovation'? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	7,9
4	How would you assess the level of cooperation with the federal institutions? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	7,1	How trusted do you feel by the institution's other staff members? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	8,6	How would you assess the endeavour of the social economy in general? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	7,5
5	How would you assess the application of European programmes at the regional level? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	6,1	How concrete and well specified are your responsibilities? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	8,2	How would you assess the social economy of your region? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	6
6	How extroverted would you say the institution is? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	7,3	How often do you change roles and responsibilities within the institution? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	4,5	How would you assess the social-economic potential of your region? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	7,7
7	How would you assess the institution's internal training process for its staff members? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	6,1	How often do you change practices in your job? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	5,8	How would you assess your region's policies that pertain to the social economy? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	5,7
8	How would you assess the institution's internal evaluation of its staff members? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	5	How creative do you feel in your job? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	6,1	How would you assess your region's capacity building initiatives for the social economy? (1=not good at all, 10=very good)	5,4
9	To what extent do you think regional policies should follow public opinion? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	6,7	How routinized do you consider your job? (1=not at all, 10=very much)	5,8		

the relatively small working population, the unemployment rate in Baixo Alentejo is the Portuguese average of 7.9% (as of 2017).

Regarding the region's political structure, Portugal established Regional Coordination and Development Commissions (CCDRs) instead of elected regional authorities. This limits the institutional resources of Baixo Alentejo because CCDRs lack political authority – they are merely regional agents with financial and administrative autonomy. The lack of regional authorities is indicative of the highly centralized nature of national governance; Portugal is the sixth-most centralized country in the Organisation for

Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), with subnational governments bearing responsibility for only 11.8% of public expenditures (OECD 2016).

The centralized political structure requires an efficient government apparatus to implement top-down planning and policy at national, regional and local levels. Although CCDRs are considered regional mediators and facilitators of national public policies, they are not immune to high-intensity power struggles, and any collisions with national institutions are noticeable. In the interview, the CCDR staff member described this relationship as alienating since CCDRs end up funding 'the actions of (national) institutions … thus supporting public policies with EU funds.' The implicit reason for this struggle is the 'mentality of who rules in Lisbon, centralising the decisions.' The power conflict between the CCDRs and the national authorities sometimes escalates to the point of requiring juridical measures.

The power struggles and collisions within higher levels of governance trickle down to the LAGs and local initiatives of Baixo Alentejo via the controversial role of the CCDRs and their often vague responsibilities and authority. According to the MINHA TERRA staff member, the late engagement of CCDRs with the work of the LAGs brought a huge increase in bureaucracy:

> Initially they [LAGs] had to fight with the Regional Development Policy. Now [there] is double [the work] because each LAG has to work also with the management authorities of the regional operational program [CCDRs].

In this centralized system, top-down procedures simply disseminate the deficiencies of the national institutions to the regional level, leading to an unwieldy bureaucracy and institutional fragmentation. Later in the same interview, the MINHA TERRA staff member described the terms of this fragmentation:

> There is no coherence between the top and the bottom … we had this very difficult experience with this programming period, with dealing with several authorities, [with] all the mess that LAGs are living.

LAGs develop area-based partnerships with associations such as DRAPAL, NERBE and CIMBAL in order to – as the ESDIME staff member claimed – 'solve problems that are created by CCDRs.' Still, the implications of centralization and fragmentation are problematic even for those area-based partnerships. The DRAPAL staff member stressed that 'the power is there, it's in several places, but it's the same power, there is no decentralisation of power.' Along the same lines, the NERBE member highlighted that organizations have to adjust to this structure by working 'only with European funds … [so as] not to depend on the relationship with politicians.'

Local initiatives that try to participate in the governance arena face similar problems. This was illustrated by the staff member of ADC Moura, who underlined that being an independent, regional development organization 'has a high cost', reflecting the severe hostility that the organization faces from political parties. Along the same lines, the Social Innovation Incubator staff member stressed that 'when another foreign entity enters in the municipality, some municipalities, some presidents, or entities do not like it.' Thus, local initiatives try to remain away from the local pathogenies by developing national and international networks. This persistent state of fragmentation was captured succinctly by the ADRAL staff member:

'Normally, it is not easy to have all the institutions working together, to have a network that works as a network.'

The centralized Portuguese government structure promotes top-down planning and policy-making. In this context, innovation itself is considered a top-down approach that should be led and supported by the Portuguese state or 'outside' interventions (Dargan and Shucksmith 2008). Nevertheless, research on the multistage governance arena found that frequent mismatches and collisions severely affect the efficiency of the top-down procedures and the dissemination of the orthodox planning targets. This manifests in poor economic performance, reflected in the low GDP growth rate of 10% and the declining population density. It remains to be seen whether the existing institutional cracks and collisions generate voids and opportunities for social innovation to emerge (Hajer 2003), or whether social innovation is limited by the absence of higher-level support for innovation (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005). This question is the crux of the remainder of this article's investigation. The next subsections will attempt to answer this question through an in-depth exploration of the socially innovative capacities of the Baixo Alentejo LAGs and their materialization in the regional framework.

4.1. Institutional embeddedness and mobility

As mentioned previously, five LAGs work within the Baixo Alentejo region: Terras Dentro, RDG, ESDIME, Alentejo XXI and TDBG. Although the LAGs ostensibly enjoy collaboration within a well-connected network, they often work against each other in reality. The RDG staff member stressed that this rift was created by an ontological dichotomy between the LAGs that are linked with the municipalities and those that are generated by the people. In this regard, the non-municipal LAGs have a higher level of respect and trust from local citizens since they consider themselves to have arisen from civil society. The ESDIME staff member agreed with this distinction:

> ESDIME, RDG and Terras Dentro didn't appear because of a problem. … the organisations were born from the society, from the people.

In Baixo Alentejo, only Alentejo XXI is linked with the municipality and thus is often isolated from the other LAGs, while TDBG is very remote and on the network's outskirts. The other three LAGs arose from civil society, and their bottom-up origin explains their high degree of embeddedness in it. Several interviewees raised concerns about recognition and credibility. Additionally, quantitative data indicate that institutional staff members of all five LAGs identify strongly with the region (average score of 91%); thus, it is plausible that these staff would be eager to satisfy the local people who, as the Terras Dentro staff member claimed, are 'strongly attached to their traditions.' The reality may be more complex, though – the data revealed only a moderate connection between the LAGs and civil society (75%) and moderate cooperation with local partners (78%), warranting further investigation.

Later in the interview, the Terras Dentro staff member stressed that most of the LAG's interventions are related to the local population's lack of qualifications and skills for gainful employment. Although jobs are available, locals do not have the necessary skills; the mismatch between labour demand and supply leads to unemployment.

Consequently, in order to tackle unemployment, LAGs concur that it is essential to build the capacity of the locals. These capacity-building interventions have enhanced the embeddedness of the LAGs and the intimacy between the LAGs and civil society, but this level of embeddedness does not necessarily foster bottom-up planning since LAG staff members are highly reluctant to base political initiatives on the opinions of the low-skilled public. This is reflected in the LAG staff members' relatively low rating (67%) for the question about whether policies and measures should follow with public opinion.

The embeddedness of the LAGs is further delimited by their insufficient mobility, which seems to be a direct consequence of the fragmented institutional arena. LAG initiatives are often paternalised by national institutions; the RDG staff member reported 'a duplication of political action since they [national institutions] give you the money that the LAGs already have and have already conceptualised.' This national paternalisation of European programmes and funds is also reflected in the LAG staff members' low assessment (61%) of the application of European programmes. The TDBG staff member offered a dramatic claim about the hostile national environment within which LAGs have to function:

> If it depended on the Portuguese government, LEADER would totally be out … it only exists because it is an EU program.

A broad critique against the centralized structure and a quest for further decentralization are at stake. Nevertheless, LAGs have little autonomy. They are attached to the national authorities for bureaucratic and administrative reasons, so LAGs are plagued by perpetual tension between the need to function within a hostile national environment and their inevitable dependency on this environment. This is reflected in the staff members' moderate evaluation of the cooperation of LAGs with national institutions (71%). The bureaucracy leaves little time for internal transformation and experimentation; staff members gave low evaluations of training processes (61%) and internal evaluations of institutional staff (50%), both relational resources that theoretically could foster an innovative planning procedure. The bottom line is that despite the LAGs' strong identification with the region, their embeddedness and mobility are restrained by a centralized and fragmented institutional structure.

4.2. Institutional cohesion

Each LAG has high cohesion among its staff members. Because most have served their institution for a long time (81%), they generally share the ethical codes and values of the institution (89%) and have strong cooperation with (83%) and trust from other staff (86%). Additionally, most staff members have well-specified responsibilities (82%). The robust institutional cohesion also was apparent in the field observations during the semi-structured interviews; many colleagues offered to assist the interviewees by providing translations or knowledge. These observations reveal strong social bonds and high levels of trust within the LAGs.

Nonetheless, these strong social bonds do not translate into a creative and innovative spirit within the organizations. The feeling of creativity among the staff members was rather low (61%). They felt stagnant in their everyday work, reporting infrequent

changes in both their roles and responsibilities (45%) and working practices (58%). This is partly explained by the effects of bureaucracy. In the ENRD survey, 92% of Portuguese LAGs (vs. the EU average of 69%) agreed or strongly agreed that the administrative and reporting requirements limit the LAGs' capacity for mobilization and local development.

At the same time, in order for LAGs to experiment and pursue innovative planning, they must find social trust and understanding within the local community. A poor performance that could be ignored easily within an institution of high cohesion might be condemned by civil society. Consequently, the LAGs' potential for innovative spatial planning is inextricably related to the social trust and collaborative spirit they find in the local community. Many LAG staff members mentioned that Baixo Alentejo's spatial-historical characteristics, such as the historical circulation and accumulation of land, severely detract from collaborative resources. For instance, the Fundação Eugénio de Almeida staff member explained that 'land distribution has been a very round process' in Baixo Alentejo. This implies that land changed hands often between the locals, eroding the potential for cooperation to the point that today, 'it is difficult to get some persons in the same room.' According to the ADRAL staff member, cooperative experiences in the Baixo Alentejo region seem destined to fail since 'everyone [members of civil society] wants to be a leader in his field' and force his perception upon others.

This spatial-historical background has slowly weakened the collaborative resources of the local community with direct consequences for the community's relations with the institutions. The MINHA TERRA staff member stated, 'there is a very fragile local fabric, the density of relations between organisations and people is much higher in the North.' The Fundação Eugénio de Almeida staff member conceptualized this low density as a manifestation of a deep chasm between the institutions and the local fabric. From the other side of the chasm, the local community often fails to appreciate LAG initiatives, making it even harder to pursue social innovation. In this local framework of enhanced bureaucracy and reduced collaborative resources, LAGs are less inclined to experiment and innovate in the open; LAG staff members assessed their institutions as only moderately extroverted (73%).

4.3. Receptiveness to social innovation

The dissemination of an emergent discourse is a crucial precondition for challenging the dominant relations of governance (Jensen and Richardson 2000). Thus, the present research investigated the LAG members' familiarity with and perceptions of social innovation. The members had high familiarity with the term (81%), and they collectively offered a robust conceptualization:

an innovative way to approach the problem (ESDIME)

a way of doing something different (Alentejo XXI)

not to bring the fish but teach the people how to fish (Terras Dentro)

giving new solutions (RDG)

upgrading the living standards of the people (TDBG)

With the exception of the TDBG staff member, most LAG staff members perceived social innovation as a means rather than an end, i.e. a differentiated process that creates new solutions for pre-existing problems. When asked about socially innovative projects that were developed by the LAGs, most staff members offered interventions associated with integration and capacity building. This was exemplified by the Terras Dentro staff member's recollection of two projects that used alternative pedagogical tools: a board game to integrate gipsy kids and an ambassador role to include young mediators in youth projects. Both planning initiatives were designed to tap into the locals' potential and reimagine the governance relations between institutions and locals; hence, it is reasonable to characterize the initiatives as socially innovative.

Their sporadically successful initiatives notwithstanding, LAGs often face significant resistance from the local fabric. The CCDR staff member explained, 'We don't have the actors prepared for change … they want not to be prepared … they struggle to maintain their way of doing.' The spatial-historical background is central to this resistance; as the ESDIME manager stressed, 'For many years it [Baixo Alentejo] was a place where everybody worked for the lord of the land … So this remains, this mentality that someone has to give me the job.' Along the same lines, the Alentejo XXI staff member made a straightforward connection between this state of dependence and the scarcity of innovative capacities:

> People don't have the instruments to create autonomy themselves. They live depending on the others all the time. And this is a state of mind. And this is critical to innovation … The distribution of the region, of the land, influences the capacity for innovation.

Once more, there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between the LAGs and local community, and this gap affects how LAG staff members perceive and interact with the pillar of social innovation that is locally embedded and manifests in the social economy (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005).

In their survey responses, LAG staff members evaluated the current state of the social economy as poor (60%) but rated the region's social-economic potential as moderate (77%) and believed that the region would benefit greatly from the development of this sector (86%). Unfortunately, the staff members gave poor assessments of the current capacity-building initiatives for the social economy (54%). It is also worth noting that some LAG staff members were sceptical about the basic premise of social economy ventures; as explained by the ESDIME staff member, '[the ventures] are called socially innovative and are financed by the social innovation programme, but are all doing the same things.' The same individual strongly argued that so-called social enterprises, such as the Social Innovation Incubator, are 'not social innovation', reflecting the chasm between the perception that LAGs can promote social innovation and the local manifestations of that innovation.

In sum, the LAGs in Baixo Alentejo appear quite familiar with the discourse around and practices of social innovation, and they occasionally develop socially innovative initiatives. Nevertheless, a cultural background of reduced collaboration and path dependency perpetuates a prominent gap between the institutions and the local fabric. In this respect, the prominent institutional resources of cohesion and receptiveness to innovation have not found a fruitful civil field in which to flourish. This impediment to

social innovation is evident in the LAG staff members' moderately low evaluation of the innovative character of their institutions (70%).

5. Discussion

Since the global economic crisis, the objectives of mainstream New Regionalism theories have gradually moved out of reach, and alternative configurations of spatial planning have gained momentum. In this context, social innovation emerged as an anchoring concept for radical planning agendas, and the present article examined part of the literature that frames changes in spatial planning as instances of social innovation.

The literature on the emergence of socially innovative spatial planning revolves around the conflicting nature of the governance arenas, with power struggles at the core of the analysis. Unfortunately, by placing extra weight on the exogenous pressures of the capitalist, neoliberal structure, most of the literature does not explicitly link the exogenous and endogenous parameters of transformation and novelty. Sociological institutionalist accounts within spatial planning theorize such links; the exogenous forces are explored in the dissemination of the principles of rationalization (Hasse 2005), while the endogenous forces are investigated in the isomorphic dynamics within the institutions. The present study used an integrated sociological institutionalism framework as an epistemological backdrop to conduct mixed-methods research in the NUTS3 region of Baixo Alentejo. The study explored the socially innovative spatial planning capacities of Baixo Alentejo in both the broader governance arena and the focused environment of the LAGs.

The mapping of the Portuguese governance arena revealed a centralized governance structure, which generates top-down planning and policy-making that ostensibly follow the principles of orthodox planning. This centralized structure is often disrupted, however, by the power contests and struggles of a fragmented institutional framework, which compromise the efficiency of the top-down procedures and prevent the actualisation of rational planning objectives on a regional scale. Furthermore, far from creating opportunities for social innovation, these institutional cracks and collisions erect barriers that prevent the LAGs from leveraging their resources of embeddedness and mobility. These barriers are heightened by a cultural background of reduced collaboration and path-dependency, which perpetuates a prominent gap between the LAGs and the local fabric. As a result, LAGs cannot inspire the locals by exporting their experimentation and innovation to the local community, and the institutional resources do not foster social innovation in the context of civil society.

In the end, in spite of the LAGs' enhanced institutional resources, a fragmented governance arena and a dominant cultural background of reduced collaborative resources restrict the LAGs' capacity for socially innovative planning. In other words, weak interconnections within the broader governance framework – from the highest political scales to the local community – impede socially innovative dynamics. Within this context, innovation in local governance can occur only in concordance with innovation in the broader governance arena (Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005, 61). Thus, social innovation must permeate the governance chain, starting at the local level and extending up to the national level. In the absence of a strong, governance chain of innovation, even the most empowered links might prove trivial.

Notes

1. The full list of survey questions is displayed in Table 2.
2. For more, see https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-lag-implementation-survey-2017_en
3. All data came from https://www.pordata.pt/en/Portugal

Data availability statement

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

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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