



Reforming the Knowledge Support System

Policy Brief

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Reforming the Knowledge Support System to Foster Innovation in Rural Areas

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Swedish knowledge support systems prioritize economic growth, neglecting social, cultural, and environmental innovations, leaving many rural women innovators out of the support system.

Executive Summary

The Swedish knowledge support systems favour economic growth focused organizations, often neglecting social, cultural, and environmental innovations. Consequently, businesses in these sectors need alternative advice sources. These sources are currently neglected in policy and budgeting. A reformed knowledge system serving women innovators in rural areas must thus account for different kind of businesses, the importance of family support for rural women entrepreneurs, and the significance of local community support for women entrepreneurs.

The Challenge

Current Swedish knowledge support systems and criteria for obtaining knowledge support are predominantly designed to benefit organizations with significant economic growth potential. These systems, including funding, incubators, and rural development advice, often overlook small businesses, non-tech business, social, cultural, and environmental innovations that do not prioritize economic growth, cooperatives, or civil society organizations. The systems consequently strike differently at women and men and in rural and urban areas.

Businesses in these sectors must seek advice and knowledge from alternative sources, financed by municipal and regional culture budgets or private foundations, which are significantly smaller than national innovation support budgets. As such, informal relationships have become essential for inspiration and cooperation.




Alternatives in the Current System

For example, cooperative solutions, frequently sought for sustainable development in rural areas, are ill-aligned with the existing system, which generally lacks the necessary knowledge. Coompanion, the Swedish support function for cooperatives, addresses this gap by offering advisory services, but its funding (SEK 85 million state funding and some local funding) is meagre compared to Vinnova's annual budget of SEK 3.5 billion for primarily STEM companies. Cooperatives are not included in the 2025 budget bill, despite several other investments in entrepreneurship and sustainability.

Also overlooked is the role of civil society, particularly in rural areas where non-profit involvement is higher than in urban areas. Sweden hosts around 250,000 associations and the non-profit sector contributes approximately 3.32 percent to GDP, which is about twice the contribution of agriculture, forestry, and fishing. Sweden has a tradition of nationalizing innovations from these associations and making them publicly accessible. Despite their huge importance, however, the knowledge system has limited knowledge and understanding of non-profit organizations. These organizations must often seek knowledge as if they were for-profit companies, where the understanding of non-financial goals is limited.

Policy Solutions

We propose a reformed knowledge system serving women innovators in rural areas that account for:

-  Different kind of businesses such as micro-businesses, businesses that do not have economic profit and growth as goals, businesses that are not technology-based, businesses that are seasonally based and non-profit organizations.
-  The importance of family support for rural women entrepreneurs. Family involvement, whether from a spouse, parents, or access to family resources, plays a crucial role in the success and confidence of rural women in managing their enterprises. Since support extends beyond financial assistance to also include logistical help and emotional backing, the knowledge support system needs to take this opportunity (or lack of it) into account when giving advice.
-  The significance of local community support for women entrepreneurs. Being well-known and trusted within the community can be crucial for business success in rural areas. The knowledge support system needs to take the local context into account when advising these innovators so that “urbanized” ideas about market, customers and value creation is not forced on innovators in rural areas.

Supporting Evidence

The knowledge system needs enhancement because many women entrepreneurs interviewed in FLIARA were reluctant to scale their businesses, preferring to expand their knowledge rather than their finances. They provided two main reasons: financial risk and the potential loss of core values. Instead, they sought personal development, such as learning new skills.

In the FLIARA interviews and Community of Practice (CoP) events, female entrepreneurs from the farming and rural sectors emphasized that women often run micro-businesses that are relatively small-scale and do not fit the typical farming operations recognized in regulations. Examples include food cooperatives, knowledge initiatives, and voluntary associations.



These unique small-scale rural and farming activities often fall between different knowledge schemes and regulations, which are designed for larger traditional operations. Additionally, these businesses are often seasonal and dependent on natural harvest periods or varying weather conditions, making it difficult to anticipate their need for additional or seasonal workforce.

While some FLIARA participants benefit from technical and business expertise from universities and business incubators, most are self-sufficient and see no potential in the current knowledge support system.

Additionally, the above suggested policy is included as one of the visions in FLIARA Work Package 2. Named as “An inclusive innovation system” the vision focused on the bias of growth and/or urban in the sustainability discourses and solutions. One fifth of the sustainability problems identified by a diverse set of rural stakeholders was related to inadequate biased public policy, that does not resolve the problem and can even exacerbate the issue. It is built up on the rational that diverse innovative projects and persons reform rural areas toward sustainability. The financial support system needs mentors, sounding boards, alumni and coaches that support local actors. The focus is to take a long-term approach in development and policies.

Best Practice and Call for Action from Slovenia

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Farmers in Slovenia receive support from the Public Agricultural Advisory Service, part of the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia. Each regional office has at least one advisor specializing in young farmers, farm families, women in rural areas, and supplementary activities on the farm. The support is given in five different areas: 1) Advisory services for farm transferors and successors, 2) Employment and farm economic efficiency consulting, 3) Legal assistance, 4) Psychosocial support, and 5) Social security for farmers and farmers family members. Recent progress includes targeted programs for young farmers under the Slovenian CAP intervention, offering training in farm management and financial skills, with optional education in areas like digitization, entrepreneurship, climate change adaptation, health, biodiversity, and intergenerational cooperation.

However, advisory support for rural women remains inadequate, often failing to address their unique challenges. These services are typically part of educational programs on supplementary farm activities, crucial for farm diversification. However, women's innovation is broader than farm diversification and thus also needs to be treated as such within the support system.

Source:




Slovenije, K. gozdarska zbornica. “Celostna podpora kmetom | KGZ Slovenije”, KGZS, available at: <https://www.kgzs.si/celostna-podpora-kmetom> (accessed 3 April 2025).



Conclusion & Call to Action

We see clear evidence that the Swedish knowledge support systems for businesses prioritize economic growth, neglect social, cultural, and environmental innovations, leaving many rural women innovators out of the support systems.

As such, our Call to Action for a reformed knowledge system serving women innovators in rural areas is to enhance the offer on business knowledge about:

-  Different kind of businesses.
-  The importance of family support.
-  The significance of local community support.

Further Reading

Information on Coompanion: “Coompanion in English”. *Coompanion*, available at: <https://coompanion.se/coompanion/coompanion-in-english/> (accessed 3 April 2025).

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Sivini, S., Roos, A. and Leonardelli, I. (2024), “D.3.3: Women-led Innovations in Agriculture and Rural Areas, Lessons Learned Report and Fact Sheets on Female Innovations”, 6 November, available at: <https://zenodo.org/records/14045390> (accessed 3 April 2025).

Slovenia best practice: Slovenije, K. gozdarska zbornica. “Celostna podpora kmetom | KGZ Slovenije”, KGZS, available at: <https://www.kgzs.si/celostna-podpora-kmetom> (accessed 3 April 2025).

About FLIARA

The project is on a mission to create a more sustainable future by highlighting the role of women in agriculture and rural areas. FLIARA will boost understanding of the needs and challenges facing women leading innovative environmental and rural development practices in EU farming and rural areas.

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Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas

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