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## Social Innovation Initiatives in Agro-food Systems of the Tropics and Moderate Regions

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### Abstract

In agriculture, innovation used to be mainly understood as new products, methods of production or processes that are more efficient than previous, thus having a strong technical and economic orientation. However, technical innovation alone are increasingly found to be insufficient to address the complex sustainability challenges that also the current agro-food system faces. Rather, society itself, its norms, values, and paradigms, needs to change. Such changes can be induced by social innovation (SI) which are conceptualised as innovation that are generated through the collaboration of societal actors, serve social needs through a change in social relationships or structures. It is hypothesised that needs for SI differ in agro-food systems under tropical and moderate conditions and consequently, different new relationships are developed. This study systematically reviews of 38 peer-reviewed articles and two book chapters analysing socially innovative cases in the agro-food system. Much more studies are conducted in countries with a moderate climate (n=28) than in tropical. Results show, that in both regions, more than a third of cases address the social need of overcoming corporate control and regain food sovereignty. In tropical countries, another quarter of the initiatives aim to overcome institutional voids, whereas the second most addressed need by initiatives in moderate countries is to reconnect consumers to land, farming and food. Different are also the mechanisms by which the initiatives address the above need. In tropical countries, two thirds of the initiatives establish new relationships between producers, e.g., through self-help groups or farmer cooperatives. In non-tropical countries, six different types of relationship changes between value chain actors are identified, each occurring in quite equal shares. As the needs for SI are rather comparable in both world regions, but cases as well as variety of mechanisms (types of relationship changes) are smaller in tropical countries, it is concluded that currently the potential for SI is underexploited in tropical countries, which offers opportunity for exchange between academic and activist actors in both world regions for increasing knowledge and experience with this new type of innovation for the transformation of agro-food systems.

**Keywords:** Agro-food system transformation, food sovereignty, social innovation, social learning