

Todora Rogelja		
Affiliation	University of Padova - TESAF Department	
Session Chair		
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Abstract Session 5.2 – Changing role of public actors in the forest-based social innovation - The case of the Charcoal Land Initiative in Slovenia.

Despite the importance of public actors for social innovation (SI), most research focuses on the roles and engagement of civil society. Yet, public actors have a role in SI initiatives, particularly in creating the enabling or hindering environment. This study explores the roles of public actors in a forest-based SI initiative. Drawing upon sociological role theories, we analyze the engagement of public actors in the development of the Charcoal Land Initiative (Slovenia). The Charcoal Land Initiative revives the nearly extinct traditional charcoal burning practices to reinvigorate isolated local villages with few economic opportunities. The success of this initiative sparks the creation of the Charcoal Path with events and educational activities attracting people of all ages to the region. We identify 5 organizations and 10 individual public actors engaged in the preparatory phase of the initiative. Our findings indicate that on the individual level, public actors in forestry could transform their organizational roles to create new SI roles. The district foresters, unit leaders, and State Forest Service (SFS) director were able to adapt their organizational roles to simultaneously take up the roles of innovators and followers in SI. This change of organizational roles was not in contradiction with their traditionally prescribed duties and rights but went beyond what is usually expected. Nonetheless, the role of SFS did not change – support private forest owners. It is how their relationships with charcoal burners and private forest owners grew into a collaborative effort to reinvigorate the local community and its economy as a means to meeting their mission. Through social innovation new relationships led to new ways to support private forest owners and local communities dependent upon forest resources.

Co-authors: Gerhard Weiss, Margaret Shannon, Joze Prah, Alice Ludvig, Laura Secco