

## Rural social enterprise – evidence to date, and a research agenda

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## **RURAL SOCIAL ENTERPRISE – EVIDENCE TO DATE, AND A RESEARCH AGENDA**

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### **Social enterprise in developed countries**

Discussion of social enterprise has increased in developed countries over recent decades, promoted in governments' social and business policies. Social enterprises are defined as businesses with primarily social objectives and an organisational format that uses trading (Dart, 2004). For example, a community shop could be operated by volunteers to provide goods in an area where there is low market demand due to poverty or sparsity of customers. The basis would be its social value and any profit would be deployed primarily to maintain the business rather than paying shareholders or owners. Social enterprises can have additional social, economic or environmental goals, for example employing low-skilled people to provide job experience and/or recycling products, thus addressing environmental issues (Teasdale, 2012). There has been ongoing preoccupation with technically defining social enterprise, aligned with the rise of the new policy concept (Alter, 2007). In this Special Issue, our definition is loose and our concern is with organisations that draw on business models, techniques and practices, and have a social mission (Farmer et al., 2008). For us, social enterprises could include enterprising voluntary organisations, charities, co-operatives and community collectives.

Social enterprises may be initiated by community members to address a community need or want (Muñoz et al., 2015); e.g. establish a community farm to nurture social cohesion or a community energy scheme to harness local resources, distribute energy at low-cost and generate resources for other community initiatives (Haugh, 2007). Sometimes they are established out of desperation in response to public service cuts or market failure (Farmer et al., 2012). Social entrepreneurship can be understood as the process of developing social enterprise, but some studies focus on individuals or collectives as social entrepreneurs – exploring what makes people distinctive and their skills (Steinerowski et al., 2008b). Social entrepreneurs are sometimes driven by a novel idea (for example, in Richter's paper in this Special Issue, two rural social entrepreneurs – respectively – instigated development of a rural tourism attraction and a technology training initiative); or emerge as key leaders driving collective responses. Zahra et al. (2009:527) have commented that social entrepreneurship's joining of enterprising drive and interest in social impact appears to be a "marriage between opposing values". However, it is precisely this combination that contemporary policymakers promote as the novelty of social enterprise. It could be said that social enterprises, as organisations, and social entrepreneurship, as process, serve to combine and connect social and economic imperatives to create unique societal contributions (Barraket et al., 2010).

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Social enterprise now features in post-welfare-state responses to un/under-employment, skills deficits, individual and place-based disadvantage, community capacity-building and wellbeing improvement (Roy et al., 2014). As Apostopoulos et al. note in this Special Issue – the idea of social enterprise aligns with the “contemporary fixation with business ideology, where social programmes and initiatives must harness the power of the market to appear as legitimate” (from Dart, 2004). As growing policy phenomena, social enterprise and social entrepreneurship have attracted considerable academic interest across multiple disciplines.

With respect to social enterprise and social entrepreneurship, our goals in this *Journal of Rural Studies* Special Issue are to: collate current knowledge about how these phenomena apply in rural areas of developed countries; identify distinctive rural drivers; and propose a future research agenda. Included papers analyse challenges addressed through different applications of rural social enterprise and examine success factors (De Haan et al.), resources and resourcefulness (Lang and Fink; Barraket et al.; Kelly et al.), their roles as intermediaries and the importance of social capital (Lang and Fink; Ramsey; Richter), their resilience and scalability (Apostopoulos et al.; Steiner and Teasdale), impact on social isolation and loneliness (Kelly et al.) and the potential for social innovations to emerge (Myers and Best).

From the collection of papers here, we see social enterprises emerging out of both necessity and opportunity, as with traditional entrepreneurship theory (Acs, 2006). A key difference here is that “necessity” can arise from the withdrawal of state-provided services as well as from individuals or communities facing hardship and poverty by virtue of other environmental or economic factors. The dispersed and often hidden nature of rural poverty (Milbourne, 2014) can make solutions highly challenging with networks being stretched and the critical mass of participants and human capital being lower. This Special Issue presents a number of stories from which social enterprise policy-makers and practitioners can learn.

### **Rural social enterprise in developed countries**

Social enterprise is suggested as aligned with features of traditional rural life. The collective working associated with rurality, is significant to community-initiated and run social enterprises. As rural places tend to operate more relationally, compared with urban settings, there is the notion that rural people have and thus can deploy, social capital - making it easier to draw collective initiatives together (Jack and Anderson, 2002). There is also evidence from different fields of rural community life that rural dwellers are innovative and adaptive in responding to their distinctive community challenges (Farmer et al., 2008).

Other reasons proposed for why social enterprise is especially appropriate for rural areas arise from the service gaps experienced by rural residents. Within this rationale, commercial businesses cannot make sufficient profit and it is too expensive or just practically not feasible to provide public services. Given this situation, rural areas have to embrace social enterprise as a model that allows them to have local businesses or services, and thus also jobs and opportunities for work experience. Under this situation, social enterprise is perhaps the only model offered by the neoliberal state that can help rural communities that cannot support

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commercial ventures. While this sounds stark, the positive side is that bringing local people together to build and run social enterprises should build cohesion, capacity and leadership, giving future capacity to respond to change and be resilient (Muñoz et al., 2015).

Given this apparently fertile context for social enterprise development, with its pull (rich social capital) and push (challenges to sustain business) factors, we explored the current evidence base to understand the extent and nature of rural social enterprise in developed countries. Our literature scoping, revealed relatively few published articles. Some of these are considered below.

Skerratt (2012) highlights that local people's understanding of community needs, assets and 'what will work around here' helps rural leaders to adapt policy initiatives to local geography, history, resources and existing infrastructure. Skerratt (2012) suggests that rural social entrepreneurs need to skilfully navigate between the local and extra-local contexts. Although context is 'experienced' locally through exercising social relations, it also operates 'vertically' and involves understanding of the policy, legislative and social enterprise sectoral landscape. Skerratt (2012) suggests that rural social enterprise leaders require familiarity with local cultural norms so they can navigate the tensions between what local people believe should be provided by the state and what provided by citizens. Skerratt's paper relates to work of Steinerowski and Steinerowska-Streb (2012) who, using Giddens' structuration theory (1984), indicate the importance of structural forces in the emergence and development of rural social enterprise. The authors suggest that those developing rural social enterprises need local knowledge and understanding of micro-structural forces. They conclude that although rural communities do not control all the conditions that affect them, people adapt to some structural features and co-construct within the local environment. This means that in order to overcome adversities associated with running a business in rural locations (Steiner and Atterton, 2015), rural social entrepreneurs must draw on 'adaptive capacity', making social enterprises out of available models, funding and local human resources.

In this respect, social enterprises encounter many of the same problems as rural businesses. As well as the remote and sparsely populated character of locations making supply costly and markets small, there is likely poorer access to technology and infrastructure (see Malecki, 2003 for a discussion of the "rural penalty"). Indeed, some rural social enterprises were established to provide improved broadband connectivity (Salemink et al., 2017; Philip et al., 2017). Well qualified and adequate numbers of human resources are a significant challenge, often noted (Steinerowski et al., 2008a). Issues include inadequate education and training provision, small pools of leaders, an ageing population and rural outmigration. Some studies highlight the importance of key dedicated individuals in leading and running rural social enterprises (Williams, 2007) as well as partnerships between existing organisations and community leaders channelling community engagement (Clark et al., 2007). Sustaining the efforts of these key people and succession of others to fill their roles is problematical. Studies have also noted lack of interest in running these complex businesses among rural people and the stress induced from over-burdening rural volunteers (Muñoz and Steinerowski, 2012; Muñoz et al. 2015). Whitelaw (2012) discusses the complexity of supporting local leaders and communities to run social enterprises. He notes that: a culture of volunteering can be hesitant to incorporate risk-

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taking; service users might be suspicious towards social enterprises run by their neighbours; and social enterprises might be challenged to cope with demand fluctuations or quality imperatives, causing stress for staff. Clark et al. (2007) concur, suggesting the questionable sustainability of human (as well as financial) resources means a mismatch between policy expectations and the lived reality of many rural social enterprises. Some studies consider the value of particular rural human resources assets; for example, Smith and McColl (2016) suggest incomers to rural areas are a source of social entrepreneurialism.

An additional rural challenge relates to the potential impact of a new social enterprise on the fragile ecosystem of existing rural business (Kilpatrick and Farmer, 2009). Frith et al. (2009) highlight that new rural enterprises need to fit with the community's values, culture and social mores. This can make it difficult to start disruptive ventures. They found that success requires efforts to gain buy-in from the wider community. Where proposed business operations are in a sensitive natural area or a very small community, the need to tread very carefully with change is heightened.

Zografos (2007) indicated that adaptive capacity has its limits and that rural social enterprises should find their own models of innovation - developing their own agendas and businesses that address rural needs and contexts rather than trying to substitute for unsuccessful state or commercial models. Farmer et al. (2012), for example, suggested that a franchising framework could be established for rural regions – perhaps by rural local authorities – and applied to undertake 'back-office' bureaucratic processes (such as registering volunteers), thus freeing community members to provide services needed locally. This would relieve community members of burdensome paperwork and allow them to concentrate on supporting their community through, for example, caring roles or providing transport.

Even in the short history of social enterprise with its current ideological flavour, there are inspiring examples of innovative, sustained, rural social enterprises; for example T4T (Transport for Tongue) in rural Scotland where community members have developed a range of community transport options (Wyper et al., 2016). While some rural social enterprises address the urgent needs caused by socio-economic and political changes (including ageing population, changing profile of rural economies, and public service withdrawal), others are proactive and forward-looking, skilfully drawing on unique rural resources to enhance local development and introduce innovation (Muñoz et al., 2011).

Our overall conclusion from review of existing published knowledge about rural social enterprise, though, is that the evidence is patchy.

### **Rural social enterprise in policy**

Contemporary policy tends to portray social enterprise as a “panacea to failure in market and state mechanisms” (Parkinson and Howorth, 2008:292). Discussion of social enterprise aligns with a wider agenda about engaging the community and individuals to take responsibility, do more for themselves and solve their own problems, incorporating discussion of co-production

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and community ownership of assets (e.g. Christie, 2011). Such movements demand significant human capacity, confidence, leadership, and experience of collective working. Some have commented that while policy tells people to do it for themselves, the practical supports needed are missing (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013). Internationally, there is little discussion specifically of rural social enterprise in policy. Scotland is recognised as having more mature social enterprise policy generally. The Social Enterprise Strategy 2016-2026 (Scottish Government, 2016) states that social enterprises contribute to place and regional cohesion through establishing viable businesses where markets are underserved and local economies are small and fragile. A third of all Scottish social enterprises are located in rural areas. Highland Social Enterprise Zone (HISEZ) is an internationally acknowledged agency providing business support to social enterprises in the rural Scottish Highlands and Islands, one of the most sparsely populated regions in Europe (HISEZ, 2018). While a comprehensive research study of HISEZ and its impact on business, population welfare and regional culture is missing, informal sources represent it as exemplifying leading practice in rural social enterprise support (Wyper et al., 2016). Recent social enterprise policy anticipates establishing a ‘rural collaborative’ to research the role of social enterprise in rural communities (Scottish Government, 2017).

Though developed countries with significant rurality, Australia, New Zealand and Canada appear to have less cohesive or consistent policy interest, compared with Scotland. The interest of the Australian Federal Government, in social enterprise, has waxed and waned and there has been little coverage of rural social enterprise (Barraket, 2016). At state level, Victoria recently released a new social enterprise strategy (2017) which acknowledges a role for rural social enterprise, explaining that: “social enterprise can deliver outcomes effectively in remote, rural and disadvantaged areas” (p.2). A social enterprise strategy for New Zealand was released (2016) that promoted social enterprise for bringing economic growth to disadvantaged areas, including rural areas (New Zealand Government Strategic Group on Social Enterprise and Social Finance, 2016:11). There is evidence of interest in social enterprise as a culturally-attuned economic and capacity-building strategy for Indigenous Maori communities (Grant, 2015). In Canada, interest in rural social enterprise increased through work of the Federal Rural Secretariat (1998-2013) which focused on including citizens in policy about rural sustainability. Some provincial governments supported rural social enterprises through capacity-building, mentoring, community and regional development programmes. Rural social enterprise can gain support from initiatives like the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2017), regional social enterprise networks and partnerships such as the Rural Social Enterprise Constellation in rural Ontario which connects practitioners with policymakers (Myers and McGrath, 2009).

As with research, we conclude that policy reference to rural social enterprise is sparse. In addition, policy shows little reference to the research base.

### **Considering a research agenda**

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Given the emergence of social enterprise as a model for rural business and services, and that research and policy neglect rural social enterprise, it is time to propose a research agenda - though this is not exactly the first foray into this terrain. Although not specifically naming rural social enterprise, Muñoz (2010) urged research that took cognisance of social enterprises' special relationship with different places and spaces. Muñoz (2010) surveyed the field of spatially-referenced social enterprise study and found significant gaps. She proposed a 'geographical research agenda' for social enterprise, including the themes: spatial distribution, patterning and clustering of social enterprises in relation to locational characteristics; relationships between community identity and belonging and social enterprise numbers; place-specific influences on social enterprise generation and maintenance; interactions between business forms and socio-spatial characteristics; and the spatiality of social enterprise impacts. Some of these topics imply quantitative and comparative approaches and it is notable that our (non-exhaustive) scoping of contemporary literature, summarised above, showed there remains a gap in spatially-referenced studies involving rural social enterprise.

### **New evidence**

So – what do the new papers - presented here in this Special Issue - tell us that is new about rural social enterprise and rural social entrepreneurship? And what issues do they leave untouched?

Quite fine-grained analysis of what is needed by rural social entrepreneurs to muster the needed resources, from different social enterprise ecosystem levels (community (micro), institution (meso) and regime (system)), is provided by three papers that complement and verify each other (Lang and Fink; Richter; Ramsey). Taken together, these add considerable evidence about the role of networks and social capital in social enterprise development. Interestingly, the collective findings about how and from where resources are drawn to make rural social enterprises, are usefully borne out by Barraket et al.'s rural-urban comparison paper. It explores resources drawn upon for social enterprise development, by location. The paper suggests that rural and urban social enterprises draw on different financial and knowledge resources. Exploring these aforementioned four papers in more depth - Lang and Fink conducted in-depth case studies of rural social enterprises in Greece and Ireland, informed by social capital theory. They suggest the key role of rural social entrepreneurs. Social enterprise development is "inherently linked to place", with success in development contingent on the extent to which social entrepreneurs draw on their bonding (i.e. horizontal) social capital links within community; and link this to external resources of granting bodies and government agencies (i.e. deploying vertical bridging social capital). In their depiction, social entrepreneurs are the intermediaries between capital resources and system levels.

Drawing on six case studies in Scotland and Ireland, Ramsey focuses on development of community energy enterprises and the role of rural social entrepreneurs. Again, her paper uses networks and social capital as framing. Verifying Lang and Fink, she found evidence that social entrepreneurs drew on bonding networks at community level for volunteer human resources

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and bridging and linking social capital for knowledge and access to policy initiatives. Ramsey was surprised by the aims of social entrepreneurs being very locally focused on development of social, symbolic and economic capital to meet community's needs, but found this was associated with desire for local involvement and did serve to motivate local participation.

Considering case studies of social entrepreneurs in Austria and Poland, Richter deploys social network analysis. He provides a rich picture of how successful rural social entrepreneurs are both firmly embedded in their 'home' rural communities (for example they grew up there and have locally based family, friendship and business networks), and also connected with a range of distantly located meso and macro level stakeholders, including in government, public bodies and businesses. Visually, through social network diagrams, Richter depicts the social enterprises and social entrepreneurs as "embedded intermediaries" and concludes that social entrepreneurs and social enterprises have a key role in rural communities as boundary-spanners; "rural social enterprises systematically bridge the social, spatial and cultural gap between rural in-groups and otherwise less connected outgroups".

Barraket et al.'s Australian study presents a rural-urban comparison involving 11 social enterprises. It complements and extends the other papers as it includes urban settings, allowing us to see what is 'special' about rural social enterprise resourcing. Barraket et al. find that rural social enterprises are more locally socially embedded; influenced by, and influencing, their communities and the resources within their communities (this is also seen in Kelly et al.'s paper). In contrast, the urban social enterprises studied tend to draw on more resources at the organisation and regime level of systems, including corporates and philanthropics. While rural social enterprises made greater use of government funding, community finances, public sector buildings and relied more on volunteers; in contrast, urban social enterprises drew on programmatic public funding and in-kind from corporates.

Taken together, this cluster of four papers presents an in-depth analysis of rural social entrepreneurship and resourcing of rural social enterprises. The consistency of findings and comparison with urban social enterprises provides triangulation and suggests a degree of reliability in evidence, now, about how successful rural social enterprises form. Findings of these papers could perhaps be taken together as a foundation to derive an overall checklist or evaluative frame for rural social enterprise development.

A second cluster of studies in this Special Issue considers how rural social enterprises address public sector retrenchment (Myers and Best; de Haan et al.; Apostolopoulos et al.). These papers cover country contexts of Wales, the Netherlands, Greece and Scotland, where social enterprises develop rural services, through providing policy structures and funds. All papers highlight the challenges and question the longer-term sustainability of these enterprises, while Apostolopoulos et al. go so far as to suggest there could be negative impacts on community resilience from the social enterprise apparatus and Kelly et al. indicating that service coproduction by rural social enterprises can have negative impacts on health and wellbeing of the social enterprise staff and volunteers. Below we expand on each of these four papers.

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Myers and Best explore the success of 20 projects funded by the Rural Health Innovation Fund in Wales, UK. Here, government sought to stimulate social innovation to provide rural health and social services. Myers and Best write of tensions between the public and community sector institutions involved. The social innovation projects were often the first time existing institutions had partnered, despite operating in the same region. Projects were challenged, by funding rules and timelines, to provide a quick-fix and to quickly prove beneficial outcomes. Ideas that worked successfully in urban places often did not translate to rural places, due to contextual and compositional features of rural places. The authors suggest that – though perceived as lacking innovation, the pre-existing rural services and organisations had often been highly innovative as over many years, they had to adapt handed-down ‘one size fits all’ urban solutions to diverse rural settings.

Considering rurality as an important factor influencing health and wellbeing of rural citizens, Kelly et al. investigate the role of social enterprise in addressing social isolation and loneliness in rural communities. They show that, through generating opportunities to gain social support and form social relationships, rural social enterprises provide services that are directly or indirectly impacting on factors that contribute to social isolation and loneliness. Based on a sample of seven rural social enterprises and interviews with 35 social enterprise participants experiencing social isolation and loneliness, the authors identify pathways in which social enterprise activities can act positively upon service users’ health and wellbeing as a result of decreasing social isolation and loneliness. Interestingly, however, the paper also suggests that, due to limited resources, pressure to sustain existing services and workers’ ‘burn out’, health and wellbeing of the social enterprise staff and volunteers can be negatively affected.

DeHaan et al. consider rural ‘citizens initiatives’ or ‘burgerinitiatieven’ in the Netherlands. These involve situations where citizens are activated to takeover and operate services that public services no longer run – for example, swimming pools and green spaces. Researchers surveyed 585 such initiatives and explore four issues found previously to influence outcomes and sustainability – initiative characteristics, functional success, social relations and input. They found that developing skills of community members and collective action were important; at organisational level developing social capital and initiating actors who lead and took control were key; at network level, involving people from the wider region and also visibility of initiatives outside the local area were significant to assessments of success. They conclude the citizens’ initiatives are burdensome for local people to run and question their ongoing viability.

Considering 30 rural Greek social enterprises established to provide local services in the wake of public sector collapse following the Global Financial Crisis, Apostolopoulos et al. found local communities were suspicious of the social enterprises established and the social entrepreneurs. The government gave confused and inconsistent messages – encouraging social enterprises to form, but not fulfilling on promised tax breaks and then being unclear as to whether they supported the social enterprises or public services to fill gaps, causing confusion and unhelpful competition in the sector. Apostolopoulos et al. suggest the responses of community members to filling service gaps aligned more with desperation rather than with exciting and disruptive entrepreneurialism. The researchers suggest different ways that

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government could support social enterprises and propose that the current situation actually erodes trust and rural community resilience.

Finally, in this issue, Teasdale and Steiner present new evidence from a Scottish community, and suggest rural social enterprise needs new thinking. They pick up on ideas of Zografos (2007) in calling for new models of rural social enterprise that link with the opportunities and challenges of rural life and invent new social enterprise operations that are peculiarly rural appropriate. Steiner and Teasdale boldly state that rural social enterprise does have unlocked potential and they provide a conceptual framework for starting to build this. The authors suggest rural social enterprise needs to focus on the combined rural challenges of sustainable economic development, withdrawal of public services and promoting community cohesion. These areas currently tend to be dealt with by different Government departments and so social enterprise could act as a catalyst for bringing economic, social, health and business policy together to promote integrated services. The authors suggest such joined-up thinking is apparent at Scottish Government level, but that national policy-making frameworks have not been translated into practice on the ground in rural regions and communities. Steiner and Teasdale suggest for rural areas, there is a need to move beyond the obsession with ‘scaling-up’ social enterprise and to understand that for areas with multiple needs, but at low levels of demand, the idea of ‘economies of scope’ is more appropriate. In rural areas, they conclude, it is much more sensible for services and stakeholders to work together to provide the range of services and outcomes needed by a rural community.

### **Filling the gaps: towards a new research agenda for rural social enterprise**

The distinctively rural features confirmed in this Special Issue’s articles align with the challenges seen in general rural entrepreneurship literature. These include population sparsity, poorer infrastructure, uneven human and social capital. However, rural social enterprises find innovative ways of coping with those challenges. In this Special Issue we provide new evidence about how successful rural social entrepreneurs and social enterprises draw on resources across networks. We also show that rural social enterprise is a widespread response to public sector retrenchment, but it is problematic in its current formats, likely (economically and socially) unsustainable and requires better evidence and policy to make it work. We were urged to think rural and not just to adapt one size fits all or successful urban (i.e. scalable) models. Barraket et al. provide a glimpse of the value of comparative study across locations that helps us to verify that rural social enterprise is different and some information about how. But – there are still considerable research gaps. Below, we conclude by drawing attention to some of those, suggesting a need for action.

Picking up on Munoz’s (2010) research agenda, we still know little about the relationship between patterns of social enterprise development and sustainability and location characteristics, including notions of community identity and capacity. This is true on both a micro scale (in-depth study of small numbers of community cases) and larger scale in which seeking to map rural social enterprise development across regions, would be useful.

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We still know little about business models in relation to location or rural outcomes and impacts. We do not know if rural social enterprises are integrated into diverse local economies and social systems, or operate in a parallel ‘more social, less commercial’ system. We know little about the impact of social enterprise as a model on the development and sustainability of mainstream rural business and entrepreneurship. Could the culture of social enterprise crowd out the idea of mainstream commercialism, making it seem that low or no profit is really the only viable rural option? What happens to those that train or gain skills in rural social enterprises – do they move to other work; and if so, what, where and how? There is considerable scope to work more quantitatively and spatially to understand what types of rural social enterprises survive and thrive, their industry sectors and the extent to which their leaders network and learn from each other. While researchers point to a future where we might more boldly build social enterprises that are attuned to rural peculiarities, what working models are ‘out-there’ for rural social enterprise scaling-up or if indeed, that is not feasible, for scoping-out? This kind of research could usefully include different regions and countries, also reflecting on how countries’ rural social enterprise development and sustainability is affected by national or sub-national area general social enterprise policy.

These are just some suggested questions. So we can have a more systematic evidence base and get more evidence-informed discussion of rural social enterprise into policy, we need to more systematically address the gaps in knowledge about rural social enterprise.

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