

Can social enterprise contribute to creating sustainable rural communities? Using the lens of structuration theory to analyse the emergence of rural social enterprise

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Abstract

Recent public policies increasingly emphasize the role of communities in service co-production. Collaboration between the state and the public is frequently associated with social enterprise activities. However, the assumption that social enterprises can be successfully built and developed in remote and rural areas might be faulty. Current policy does not recognize contextual factors relating to rural social enterprise development. Drawing on a qualitative study in the Highlands of Scotland the article questions the role of social enterprise in creating sustainable rural communities; it presents promoters and barriers to rural social enterprise development. Findings suggest that although rural communities do not control all the conditions that affect them, they have the ability to adapt to some structural features. This means that in spite of social and economic challenges, rural communities might benefit from rural social enterprise through practising 'adaptive capacity'.

Keywords

rural community, social enterprise, structuration, sustainability

Introduction

The UK Government highlights the role of social enterprises in providing services to

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communities (Cabinet Office, 2010a, b; Conservative Party, 2010a, b; DTI, 2002, 2006). Recent economic crises exhibit a need to introduce new approaches facilitating public sector service delivery and to create more sustainable economic and social systems. A paternalistic dependence on the welfare state has been criticized and alternative ways towards citizens' participation in the design and delivery of services started being promoted (Cabinet Office, 2010a, b; Conservative Party, 2010a, b; Scottish Executive, 2007; Scottish Government, 2010c). As the conventional model of service delivery does no longer address social and economic challenges and fails to recognize service users' strengths and assets, co-production could present a way of transforming public services helping to deal with current public spending cuts, an ageing society and rising public expectations for personalized high quality services (Boyle et al., 2010).

The delivery of services by non-state players (Reed and Stanley, 2005), including elements of social welfare (Milligan and Fyfe, 2004), is promoted and social enterprises are increasingly looked on to provide a proportion of social services. Recent policy advocates 'a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control' (Conservative Party, 2010a: 1). It is suggested that this will lead to the development of individual capacity, increased community confidence and social capital (Boyle et al., 2010; Leadbeater, 2007; Needham, 2007). Moreover, it is believed that social enterprises can contribute to the improved delivery of services, stronger and more resilient communities, and empowered people collaborating with the state in order to achieve social, economic and environmental benefits (DTI, 2002, 2006; Social Enterprise UK, 2011). Claims

are made indicating that through setting up and running social enterprises communities will engage in service co-production building sustainable communities (Conservative Party, 2010a, b). This suggests that people will take some responsibility for organizing services traditionally delivered by the state.

Expectations for communities are high. However, less attention is paid to implementing this idealistic approach indicating that communities will 'do things for themselves' (NCVO, 2011). For instance, the assumption that social enterprises can be successfully built and developed in remote and rural areas might be faulty. In spite of the fact that 'rural social enterprises are a particular feature in Scotland delivering important services in remote communities, with 35 per cent of Scottish social enterprises being rural based' (Scottish Executive, 2007: 11–12), there are no policies specifically addressing the issues of remote and rural social enterprises; thus implying that there is no difference between setting up social enterprises in urban and rural areas. Limited understanding of how remote and rural social enterprises function might, therefore, weaken those businesses and their rural communities. To avoid the latter, it is necessary to investigate what drives development of rural social enterprises and what are the promoters and barriers to their growth.

As there is high enthusiasm at a policy level presenting social enterprises as a panacea to current social and economic challenges and as there is little research evidence on how social enterprises emerge in rural locations, this article explores the question: Can social enterprise contribute to creating sustainable rural communities?

The article begins by providing information on social enterprises and the challenges of setting up and running such organizations in rural locations. Then, the research methodology is presented and underpinnings of structuration theory, which is

used as a theoretical lens enriching data analysis and findings, are explained. Following that, findings identifying the role of rural social enterprise in creating sustainable rural communities are described. The article presents implications of the study for politicians, practitioners and researchers and comments on whether rural social enterprises can contribute to rural development. Finally, the article concludes with the contribution of the study in generating understanding of rural social enterprise and processes associated with its creation.

Background

Notion of social enterprise

Social enterprises are businesses that provide services, goods and trade for a social purpose and operate independently of the state (DTI, 2002, 2006). The focus of social enterprises is on generating social, environmental and economic benefits through enterprising activity. Social enterprises trade like mainstream businesses. Earned income has two functions: first, it supports fulfilling social objectives and, second, it represents a drive towards financial self-sufficiency (Dees et al., 2001; Mair and Marti, 2006; Parkinson and Howorth, 2008; Peredo and McLean, 2006; Thompson, 2002). Thus, social enterprises possess a strong social mission that is characteristic of the third sector and the entrepreneurial skills of the private sector (Anderson and Dees, 2002; Dees, 1998; Shaw and Carter, 2007); they aim to create sustainable and healthy communities and this is a key aspect in promoting social enterprises (Nicholls, 2006, 2008; Nicholls and Cho, 2008). Here, to clarify, sustainability refers to the interconnections of social, economic and environmental factors in order to fulfil current and future needs (Milman and Short 2008). Hence,

sustainable communities attempt to maintain and improve their social, economic and environmental characteristics so that residents can continue to lead healthy, productive and enjoyable lives (Kenyon, 2002). In the current economic climate, when the UK Governments attempt to find more sufficient and sustainable ways of service delivery, social enterprises present a potential solution bringing together business and social action, and combining needs of communities and the state (Kerlin, 2010).

Social enterprises in remote and rural contexts

Despite the fact that a large proportion of social enterprises is located in rural areas (Harding 2006), rural social enterprise is under-researched (Munoz, 2011) and a limited extent of writings exist within this theme (Clark et al., 2007; Zografos, 2007). In relation to remote and rural communities, academic papers tend to focus on the wider third sector organizations including charities, voluntary organizations and local community initiatives (Fyfe, 2005; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Randle and Dolnicar, 2009); these often relate to, for example, rural governance, community empowerment, regeneration, difficulties with providing public services (Farmer et al., 2011; Liang, 2001; Thurston et al., 2005) and not directly to challenges associated with setting up and running social enterprises in the rural context. This is surprising because remote and rural areas face a number of social and economic challenges (Vias, 2009) and, as such, social enterprises could play an important role in enhancing sustainability of rural communities. While governments in the UK intermittently acknowledge that services are complex to provide in rural areas (Scottish Government, 2010a, b), they appear reluctant to write specific policy for rural social enterprises (DTI, 2006; Scottish Executive,

2007). However, the general environment and context in which social enterprises operate have an impact on the extent to which they are sustainable (Farmer et al., 2008).

There are factors which suggest that production of services by communities might be successful. For instance, rural citizens might draw upon traditional rural strengths—strong mutual knowledge, sense of community and social cohesion (Shucksmith et al., 1996). Social networks are denser in rural, as compared with urban, settings (Hofferth and Iceland, 1998), with resulting outcomes of high levels of trust and active civic participation (Dale and Onyx, 2005)—key components of the social capital associated with social enterprise development. The existence of co-dependence, reciprocity and collective activity would also imply that rural areas appear to represent a perfect nurturing ground for social enterprises (Granovetter, 2005; Kay, 2003; Shucksmith et al., 1996). Those living in remote areas display a greater propensity to engage in social rather than commercial entrepreneurship compared with those living in urban areas and this is because some marginalized groups often display a culture of entrepreneurship that is noticeably more socially orientated (Williams, 2007). Consequently, the role of social enterprise in rural service provision may be promising.

The benefits of social enterprises for rural areas described are that, by using a bottom-up approach, services provided will more appropriately meet local needs and, by doing this, satisfy the distinctive needs of local communities (Budd, 2003; DTI, 2006; Kay, 2003; OECD, 2008; Osborne et al., 2002). Working collectively creates social capital and builds confidence that can be applied to other community issues (Mandl et al., 2007). Rural social enterprises are able to build human capacity, i.e. 'cells of people' forming a lobby that

put pressure on council officers and members to find ways of continuing to support socially orientated projects (Clark et al., 2007).

Conversely, there are elements of culture, human capacity and the legal and financial context that might militate against the involvement of local rural residents in service provision through social enterprises. Given their already diminished experience of service provision, they may resent its further imposition on themselves. The community involvement is also questionable, i.e. rural community involvement depends on: physical geography and local environment; the extent and complexity of regeneration programmes and agencies in the area; the nature of human and social capital and social exclusion; the strength of the local voluntary and community infrastructure; and the nature of local political relationships (Osborne et al., 2004). Rural communities might demand professional help provided by the state—associating social enterprise provision with erosion of rural services. Those involved in informal reciprocal 'favour-giving' might be suspicious of receiving services from, and hesitant to contribute work to, organizations such as social enterprises which might be perceived to run formal entrepreneurial activity (Steinerowski et al., 2008). Rural places are comprised of contesting groups whose positions and conspicuousness are heightened by small populations living in proximity in isolation. Connections between community members may encourage differential experiences of support (Munro and Carlisle, 1998). In addition, there may be a limited number of people in rural communities with appropriate skills and willingness to participate (OECD, 2008).

It has been noted that only a small number of rural social enterprises are able to achieve financial stability from trading (Clark et al., 2007). Wariness that social enterprises substitute for unsuccessful state

or local authority provision of rural services has been noted (Zografos, 2007). There is a mismatch between policy expectations and the lived reality of community-based social entrepreneurship, as the majority of social enterprises—especially those engaged in community development and those located in areas of disadvantage—are not, and are unlikely ever to be, financially sustainable (Farmer et al., 2008). The financial stability of rural social enterprises is debatable; in order to survive the organizations frequently need matched funding (Farmer et al., 2008; Steinerowski et al., 2008). An ‘authentic’ civil society movement rather than rural social enterprises institutionally ‘manufactured’ by local development agencies is questioned (Hodgson, 2004; Steinerowski et al., 2010). The problematic historical and geographical context of some rural communities (e.g. lack of cooperation) might damage rural social enterprise creation (Clark et al., 2007). As such, the existence of rural social enterprises and their ability to build sustainable rural communities might be questioned.

Given these conducive and non-conductive factors affecting the development of social enterprise in rural service provision, the courses of development processes and the degree of success of rural social enterprise are hard to predict. The question of the feasibility of producing sustainable social enterprises in rural areas may also be pertinent and has not been addressed in policy. Research evidence exploring how social enterprises operate in remote and rural areas is limited. Assuming that social enterprise is ‘a good thing’, a question remains as to whether it can develop and contribute to creating sustainable rural communities.

Theoretical underpinnings: Applying Giddens’ structuration theory (1984)

Structuration theory works on the basis of attempting to resolve a basic (but

fundamentally irresolvable) debate relating to the relationship between structure and agency. An understanding of structuration theory is that there is a link between individual choices and structural, contextual social forces. A key feature of Giddens’ structuration theory (1984) is that structure is not static and definitive but forming and formative. It argues that agency is not only shaped by the structure but also that, over time, agency is able to reconstruct the structure; agents continue to possess a level of freedom within the structure which enables them to modify it (Giddens, 1984). As a result, changes occur. In other words, structures are produced, and then reproduced, through interaction with agents. Agents bring change and are implicated in creating other new structures and agents (Giddens, 1984; Jack and Anderson, 2002). This means that agents can be simultaneously enabled and constrained by the structure.

Now, it is arguable that the appearance of social enterprise is closely related to forces existing in ‘the structure’. Nicholls (2008) identifies ‘market failures’ and simultaneous ‘social challenges’ addressed by social entrepreneurs; one of them relates to the political context and the failure to provide sufficient public goods; this is an element of the context which is associated with the rise of social enterprise. The socially entrepreneurial reaction to market failure and perceived social failure has been expressed within and outside government. In one way, in many countries there has been a movement towards ‘reinventing’ government (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Weerawardena and Mort, 2006). This involves instilling more entrepreneurial ways of thinking into the public sector in order to enhance its efficiency and impact. On the other hand, as some governments have increasingly retreated from their traditional role as providers of public services, new ways of service provision have emerged. These, as noted by Nicholls

(2008), have frequently taken the form of organizations that mix public and private agendas. In the UK, for example, the movement has been characterized by the 'Third Way' and later by the 'Big Society' (Cabinet Office, 2010a, b; Conservative Party, 2010a, b; Giddens, 1998, 2000, 2002). So, this 'political failure' could be seen as a factor influencing the rise of social enterprise.

Thus, the current policy climate nurtures and promotes the concept of social enterprise and there is an undeniable link between the development of policy and the emergence of social enterprises. Yet, standardized policy interventions are not effective; rather, 'success' is seen as a product of a range of place-specific factors (Amin et al., 2002). This would suggest that particular success factors are strictly associated with a particular place. Still, the policy encourages entrepreneurs; simultaneously, their emergence encourages others and shapes the structural conditions (for example, legal and financial) and societal conditions (for example, the extent to which people come to accept social enterprise as a legitimate form of service provision) for the development of further social enterprise. In other words, there is the potential for a duality, where the agent and the structure co-construct. Therefore, it is pertinent to look at what is there, within the context, that acts as a promoter and a barrier to the development of rural social enterprises.

Considering findings through the lens of structuration theory may help to predict whether social enterprise itself is a feasible concept, what needs to be done to help sustain it, or the extent to which social enterprise is a 'hothouse flower' bred by governments. Now, the study presented here accepts the concept of structuration theory, rather than testing it. Structuration theory is used to consider the role of structure and agency in the emergence, development and stability of rural social enterprise.

Methodology

Sample and research techniques

The research was carried out in the Highlands and Islands; the area has a population of 373,000, covers 39,050 square kilometres and is one of the most sparsely populated areas of the European Union (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2011). To explore the field under investigation, a qualitative approach to data collection was adopted. A range of views and perspectives from social enterprise stakeholders were obtained using snowball sampling. The use of snowball sampling is particularly appropriate when it is difficult to identify members of the desired population or when the population is inaccessible (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Saunders et al., 2003); such was the case with this study. Snowball sampling enabled identification of respondents who were hard to locate.

In the first stage of the study, 35 individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with social enterprise stakeholders including: (1) social entrepreneurs (this group was considered to be important as it is responsible for setting up and running social enterprises), (2) social enterprise employees and volunteers (this is a vital group which facilitates—voluntarily or through paid employment—social enterprise activities on a daily basis), (3) politicians (this group was included as it is significant in shaping social enterprise support and influencing future policy directions), and (4) service providers (perception of this group was of interest due to the potential of social enterprise to contribute to service delivery). This approach enabled the views of different groups of social enterprise stakeholders to be captured, allowing for broad exploration from different perspectives. In addition, including a range of social enterprise shareholders supported an analysis of structural

factors shaping social enterprise development.

The interviews provided initial findings which thereafter were verified, confirmed and extended in the second stage of the study using three heterogeneous focus group discussions. This approach led to cross-stakeholder group discussions, i.e. different stakeholders, possessing varying experiences and opinions, developed diverse lines of arguments, and exciting conversations and interactions amongst participants. This triangulation of the data (literature review, followed by interviews, followed by focus groups) increased the credibility and validity of the study results.

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed; all transcripts were initially read by a key investigator and samples were also, independently, read by two other researchers. Emerging themes were discussed and consensus reached on an initial coding schedule. This was used as a basis for systematic analysis of transcripts using N-Vivo qualitative data analysis software. Further iterations of analysis using N-Vivo occurred following feedback on initial coding.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study. Initially, empirical findings describing promoters and barriers to rural social enterprise development are considered. After this, structuration theory is used to take another perspective of rural social enterprise.

Promoters to rural social enterprises

The study findings identified the fact that remote and rural settings, usually perceived as antagonistic and harsh to business, offer some beneficial conditions on which social enterprises might draw. These include:

market context; a culture of self-help; support from rural communities; and the small size of a social enterprise.

Market context

Small numbers of clients sparsely located deter commercial enterprise and present difficulties for public sector providers, leaving market gaps for needed services; these can be provided by social enterprises which do not have to face strong competitors. This might create opportunities for delivering new services through social enterprises which may not have been previously available. It was argued that by creating new products/services, a social enterprise can gain support from both the community and local authorities:

You can easily find things that are missing (...) People are grateful for having a new shop or something else open that is a service for them. Whereas in the city they have more choice (volunteer 25)

A culture of self-help

Social enterprise resonates with rural people's tendency to problem solving and willingness to help each other out. Service availability in remote areas tends to be less adequate than in urban areas. Although this is not itself positive, it engenders rural attitudes of independence and willingness to respond to a challenge. Respondents claimed that in remote and rural areas people look after themselves and that 'there's a real feeling of community' (social enterprise manager 7). It was stressed that 'rural ethos' and self-help gathers people together, and this is advantageous as it is in the spirit of social enterprise:

In rural areas, people have got more interest in working together to solve things collectively whereas in cities someone else can always do it, because there's enough people around. In rural communities, people have to solve more of their own problems. (social entrepreneur 11)

Respondents also argued that in rural areas people are more used to the idea of providing their own services because they have much more of a tradition of fending for themselves. Thus, according to some interviewees, it is not difficult to persuade rural communities that social enterprise is a good model. They highlighted that, because of the small scale and low population density, people tend to know each other and, if generally supported, the model can be more quickly accepted than it would be in an urban area.

Support from local communities

Rural communities quickly recognize the establishment of a new organization and appreciate a new service/product provider (this relates to lack of, or an insufficient level of, services that social enterprises target):

People understand that you can't separate out your social needs and the economy and the services. Everything has to come together because the communities are so small. (social enterprise employee 2)

Respondents noted that some social enterprises have been initiated by local people who wanted to support their neighbours. It was suggested that rural people are more capable of identifying their local needs than people from outside the area. Having an appropriate business idea was seen to be important. Interviewees claimed that rural social enterprises, owing to the small scale of the market, can more easily build up their business through good reputation and be widely recognized in the community in which they operate.

Small size of a social enterprise

The small size of an organization (which frequently stays small due to a low number of customers) means that a social enterprise remains flexible and is capable of adapting quickly to the changing environment. The small market might make it easier to

introduce an innovative product or service which gains the acceptance of a particular community. According to respondents, rural communities are receptive to innovation (which may be more difficult to introduce in an urban setting); this is because, in rural areas, there is a real need to make changes and/or deliver a service or product that is currently unavailable:

This village is a rural area where transport is a real issue. They [community members] set up a transport scheme where volunteer drivers would take people shopping, doctors, that sort of stuff. (volunteer 19)

As noted by respondents, in rural areas, businesses need to remain flexible and open to delivering a range of needed products and services. In addition it was noted that those with saleable products can use alternative ways of selling (through using the Internet, for example) to access a wider market.

Barriers for rural social enterprises

While there are advantages associated with rural settings that social enterprises can utilize and benefit from, respondents also highlighted a number of barriers to developing social enterprises in remote areas including geographical conditions, workforce issues, small size of the market (and, as such, small size of social enterprises) and, finally, inadequate support for rural social enterprises. It was emphasized that there are different challenges between rural and urban areas. Barriers to rural social enterprise include: challenges of geography; access to workforce; market size; and insufficient support in rural areas.

Challenges of geography

The geography of rural areas makes it difficult to create financially viable social enterprises. Delivering products and

services and working with isolated communities is highly challenging:

The geographic distances are immense. Highland represents two thirds of the land mass of Scotland so actually trying to get people to or take things to people in the rural areas is much more difficult in terms of social enterprise. (social enterprise employee 23)

Sparsely populated areas with large distances between communities impose high costs of running a business; for example, costs of transport are higher than in urban areas.

Access to workforce

A lack of skilled people leaves businesses without expertise that may be essential for development of rural social enterprises. Respondents claimed that a capable workforce is essential to social enterprise success:

That's the most obvious difficulty that they don't primarily have in the central belt or in big cities: is that you don't have a variety of people living in an area that actually could provide or could join a social enterprise. (service provider 20)

Finding skilled employees willing to travel long distances to work is difficult; according to the respondents, the more remote a place, the harder it is to find numbers of capable employees. Due to limited workforce capacity, rural social enterprises are not able to take on big projects and develop.

Market size

A number of respondents were concerned about market size and long-term financial stability of rural social enterprises. Respondents said that in the remote and rural areas there are a limited number of potential customers and, consequently, limited opportunities for ongoing development:

There is a problem in rural areas. Social enterprises behave like any enterprise in

that they have to grow...let's say, for instance, in the Fort William area you have a social enterprise that's set up to help blind people. Well there may only be 80 blind people in Fort William, so you set your social enterprise and you're very good at it and you set up a service that caters well for 80 blind people. So what do you do once you're catering for all the 80 blind people, you're banging against your ceiling? (politician 33)

Due to low demand and small customer base, it is difficult to develop a viable business—even a social enterprise.

Also, setting up an enterprise in a rural area is difficult as entrepreneurs have to be careful to avoid affecting neighbouring businesses; new social enterprises need to provide something unique. They need to deliver a service or product that does not exist yet in a community. 'Copying' the services provided by an existing business could threaten it and such a move would not be supported by local people. Thus, there are ethical rules that need to be considered when developing a new social enterprise:

If you're choosing a business it's particularly difficult because you don't want to step on any local competitor, it's such a small place. So whatever business you undertake either you have to go into local partnership with someone or you look at the business which doesn't substitute anybody else's business (...) we don't want to step on other people's toes. Whereas in Edinburgh or Glasgow, I would have no second thoughts about opening a café or opening a clothes shop or something. (social entrepreneur 15)

As it is difficult to grow and develop, rural social enterprises remain small. Consequently, business opportunities are also limited (e.g. it is difficult for a small organization to tender for public contracts).

Insufficient support in rural areas

Long distances make it difficult for rural social enterprises to access help, build

collaborations and networks. Lack of a tailored support was noted. Also, a shortage of financial support (which should be enhanced due to contextual factors, i.e. high cost of running a social enterprise and the importance of rural social enterprises providing lacking services) was identified. It was argued that ongoing funding is required to ensure that social businesses survive and develop. A need for local support agencies was expressed by respondents who claimed that, because of local characteristics, tailored support should be delivered to rural social enterprises:

People are different up here, everything is a lot different. (social entrepreneur 28)

Some interviewees expressed their concern about the applicability of national social enterprise policy to the local rural context.

Structural factors associated with rural social enterprise development

This section picks out the structural characteristics associated with running rural social enterprise. Giddens (1984) suggests that structure consists of rules (i.e. patterns people follow in social life; these include procedural and moral rules) and resources (i.e. things created by human action; they are not given by nature; these include human and non-human resources) organized as properties of social systems (the rules, resources and social relationships are produced and reproduced in social interaction; social systems include legitimation and domination). Here, based on collected data, promoters and barriers identified earlier are presented alongside those structural elements, i.e. social systems, rules and resources. Table 1 indicates conducive and non-conductive elements of structure relating to remote and rural social enterprise.

Table 1 considers elements of structure influencing social enterprise activities in

remote and rural areas. As shown, structure is enacted by practices that are informed by: procedural rules (i.e. rules about how the practice is performed), moral rules (i.e. rules about appropriate forms of enactment of social action), non-human resources (allocation of resources among activities and members of society), and human resources (i.e. formal organizations, legitimacy and authority) (Giddens 1984; Sewell, 1992). All structures are formed and informed by practices and enacted human conduct which maintains and reproduces these structures.

As indicated, there are different types/elements of structures in social systems including: legitimation that produces a moral order via naturalization in societal norms, values and standards; and domination that produces (and is an exercise of) power, originating from the control of resources. The components of structure could be compared to the outcomes of structured practices; the structures can sign (telling/showing people what to do); for instance, they can indicate what is considered to be legitimate behaviour and practice. These concepts were explored in relation to the study findings (Table 1).

Data analysis revealed that a specific context of structure imposes a number of specific rules, resources and social systems. The most important difference between 'general' structure and 'rural' microstructure are geographical conditions and consequences of those (see Table 1). In fact, it could be argued that geographical conditions, which present non-human resources, influence other non-human resources (e.g. transport issues), human resources (e.g. lack of skilled staff), procedural rules (e.g. community collaboration), moral issues (e.g. community support and help-giving) and social systems which are adapted to local environment (e.g. people understand that to survive they need to work together; they possess the local power associated with living in a particular

Table 1. Conducive and non-conductive elements of structure relating to remote and rural social enterprise.

Conducive elements of structure relating to remote and rural social enterprise		Example data
Elements of structure	Analytical 'story'	Example data
Social system	Legitimation	People understand that you can't separate out your social needs and the economy and the services. Everything has to come together because the communities are so small (social enterprise employee 2)
	Domination	In small rural areas they know an awful lot more about what counts in the community, they operate at grass roots level (volunteer 19)
Rules	Procedural	Rural areas can be very creative (social enterprise employee 34)
	Moral	People are grateful for having a new . . . service (volunteer 25)
Resources	Non-human	Load of community projects (social entrepreneur 16)
	Human	People have got more interest in working together to solve things collectively (social entrepreneur 11)
Non-conductive elements of structure relating to remote and rural social enterprise		
Elements of structure	Analytical 'story'	Example data
Social system	Legitimation	Whatever business you undertake either you have to go into local partnership with someone or you look at the business which doesn't substitute anybody else's business (social entrepreneur 15)
	Domination	A lot of the [support] agencies are based in the central belt (social entrepreneur 28)

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Conductive elements of structure relating to remote and rural social enterprise		Analytical 'story'	Example data
Elements of structure			
Rules	Procedural Moral	Challenges associated with geography impose the way the practice is performed, e.g. difficulties in running social enterprises Appropriate social enactment might limit business options	Trying to get people to or take things to people in the rural areas is much more difficult (social enterprise employee 23) You don't want to step on any local competitor, it's such a small place (social entrepreneur 15) Transport is a real issue (volunteer 19)
Resources	Non-human Human	Geographical conditions impose high costs of running a business Limited skills of local people	You don't have a variety of people living in an area that actually could provide... a social enterprise (service provider 20)

area). Thus, structuration presents 'adaptive' capability of agents who need to understand micro-structural forces and co-construct with them.

Discussion

The article considered contextual factors including promoters and barriers to remote and rural social enterprise. Aspects of rural context were often noted as being simultaneously opportunities and threats, specifically, market context and the embedded nature of business relations, the latter implying that, if a niche can be found, an enterprise might meet with considerable supportive resources. Evidence of a strong ethos of solidarity was found, with examples given of high engagement in informal and formal help-giving. To grow, rural social enterprises need to develop a unique business idea that does not threaten neighbouring businesses. The study showed that empowerment is really occurring from within communities. The evidence suggests flourishing rural social enterprise needs specifically rural sources of finance and advice.

Looking through the lens of structuration theory, a summary of the foregoing analysis indicates that the remote and rural context presents a microstructure which exposes social enterprises to specific promoters and barriers. The study identified that rural microstructure is largely influenced by geographical conditions and consequences of those, e.g. transport issues, sparsely populated areas with a limited number of potential experienced employees, community cohesion/collaboration and traditional dependence on community support and help-giving. Structural factors associated with remote and rural areas might be difficult or even impossible to modify. However, the study shows how, for example, agents adapt to the local environment.

Thus, rather than attempting to change structure, the study findings highlight the adaptive capability of agents who need to understand micro-structural forces and co-construct with them. This means that barriers to remote and rural social enterprise development require a unique adaptive approach enabling social enterprise to work alongside the structural challenges. Also, remote and rural characteristics present unique promoters which should be harnessed for social enterprise to succeed.

Structuration theory provided a framework for looking at descriptive data about processes influencing rural social enterprise development indicating how social enterprises emerge and what influences the growth of rural social enterprise. The barriers presented to rural social enterprise development relate to many structural factors which cannot be changed—this suggests primacy of structure over the agents. Yet, the study observes ‘adaptive structuralism’, i.e. as the agents are unable to change some of the structural features (e.g. geographical context), they modify their behaviours showing adaptive capacity. As such, the agents are neither supreme nor purely determined by structure.

So what does it all mean? First, for politicians this study emphasized the importance of tailored rural social enterprise policies. Specific structural features do influence agents and how they act and policy makers should be aware of those. Second, the article sends a message to practitioners indicating that, to succeed, rural social enterprises require an adaptive and flexible approach drawing on specific rural features such as the culture of self-help. Third, for researchers this study adds to knowledge about rural social enterprise presenting the novelty and relevance of looking at rural social enterprise development through the lens of structuration theory.

Conclusions

The remote and rural context presents a ‘microstructure’ which exposes social enterprises to different structural factors; these create specific promoters and barriers which are different to promoters and barriers found in a ‘general’ structure. These issues raise a point, i.e. there are specific rules in different contexts. For instance, in case of this study geographical context imposes adaptive capacity on agents. Hence, the way that agents act depends on the particular context in which they are immersed, e.g. remote and rural areas (geographical context) imply high costs of running a business and this issue cannot be easily overcome. Instead, those living in remote and rural locations might draw on local characteristics and modify their behaviour in order to function well. Thus, what is perceived here is what we call ‘adaptive structuralism’.

Findings indicate that social enterprises might contribute to creating sustainable rural communities but to do that, they need to be sustainable themselves. Thus, it may be that rural areas would benefit from specific and targeted rural social enterprise policy initiatives that would consider structural features helping to develop stronger and socially entrepreneurial communities.

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