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Irish rural social enterprises and the national policy framework

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Abstract

There is a growing recognition of the role that social enterprises play in rural areas. In Ireland this is formally acknowledged in recent social enterprises and rural development policies which commit to developing a suite of supports to realise the potential of social enterprises and strengthen their contribution to place-based sustainable rural development. However, these policies offer a generalised approach to social enterprises, compounded to date by the considerable gaps in our knowledge of these organisations. The main purpose of this article is to fill a gap in our understanding of Irish rural social enterprises. Using Defourny & Nyssens' meso-level framework (2017), this paper presents an analysis of surveys completed by 258 Irish rural social enterprises. Our findings illustrate five clusters which represent different types of Irish rural social enterprises. The findings confirm the validity of applying a meso-level approach for capturing in-country heterogeneity within the social enterprise sector and for informing policy supports for these significant actors in place-based sustainable rural development.

Keywords: Social enterprises, rural, Irish policy, survey, place-based development

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Introduction

Social enterprises (hereafter SEs) are increasingly recognised as organisations which address a number of contemporary challenges that face developed countries, such as environmental sustainability, an ageing population, in-migration and out-migration, uneven regional development or lack of employment opportunities, especially for vulnerable groups (European Commission, 2020). Broadly defined, SEs are organisations that trade for a social purpose (Dacin et al., 2010; Doherty et al., 2014). They do so while operating in diverse fields and presenting a wide variety of legal organisational forms (European Commission, 2015, 2020).

The first Irish National Social Enterprise Policy (INSEP) was published in 2019 by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). The policy represents a milestone in the recognition and institutionalisation of SEs in Ireland. While the policy does not define a legal status for Irish SEs, it provides a national operational definition that explains an SE as 'an enterprise whose objective is to achieve a social, societal or environmental impact, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders' (Government of Ireland, 2019, p. 8).

The INSEP stresses the contribution of SEs to the social and economic progress of the country, especially through the creation of jobs and the provision of services, often delivered in innovative and creative ways (Government of Ireland, 2019, p. 5). One of the aims of this policy is 'to improve the range, quality and consistency of supports available to social enterprises throughout the country' (Government of Ireland, 2019, p. 18). The INSEP has a generalised approach to defining SEs, in part attributable to the absence of comprehensive data on different types of SEs, the activities developed by them and their impact (Government of Ireland, 2019, p. 9). However, despite this, the INSEP and, more recently, the National Rural Development Policy 2021–2025 (NRDP), *Our Rural Future*, reinforce the asserted potential of rural SEs to deliver a range of positive social, economic and environmental impacts in rural communities (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 12).

Ireland's rich tradition of self-help, cooperativism and resilience has found expression in rural SEs, typically comprising an important part of local economies in rural areas[5] and often filling gaps in markets

[5] In Ireland rural areas are defined in terms of settlements with a population of less than 1,500 persons (CSO, 2016).

that are not attractive to commercially focused companies due to low population densities or lack of economies of scale (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 40; O'Hara & O'Shaughnessy, 2021). Factors that contribute to the density of SEs in rural areas relate to a tradition of community engagement, density of social networks and entrepreneurial character within rural areas; others relate to a scarcity of basic services, including adequate broadband, public transportation or childcare services (Steiner & Teasdale 2019; Steinerowski & Steinerowska-Streb, 2012).

Given the fact that rural SEs emerge and develop in response to local needs, and draw on local resources in the process of solving these (Olmedo et al., in press; Steiner & Teasdale, 2019), it seems likely that different types of SEs have emerged throughout rural Ireland that would benefit from different types of support. This assumption is further strengthened by research showing that the geographic context induces differences in how SEs operate, with research comparing urban and rural SEs demonstrating that, for example, SEs operating in rural areas draw more strongly on the involvement of the local population than their urban counterparts (Barraket et al., 2019; Smith & McColl, 2016). Given the important role of SEs throughout rural Ireland, and the current policy climate, we believe it to be timely to deepen our understanding of the types of rural SEs that have emerged throughout Ireland, in order to ensure they receive adequate and effective support.

This fits in a line of calls from researchers in the field of rural SEs for more theoretically informed studies on place-sensitive approaches to the study of rural SEs (Steiner et al., 2019; van Twuijver et al., 2020). In response to these calls, this article draws from a theoretical framework developed by Defourny & Nyssens (2017). The main objective of this article is to apply this framework to a sample of Irish rural SEs to deepen our understanding of the types and characteristics of SEs within rural Ireland. Moreover, this article reflects on the implications of these characteristics for the implementation of some of the ambitious objectives of the INSEP and the NRDP to realise the potential of Irish rural SEs.

The paper is structured as follows. After this initial introduction, the development of the Irish SE sector up to the launch of the INSEP is discussed along with an outline of the main features of Irish rural SEs. The theoretical underpinning of this study is then presented, drawing on Defourny & Nyssens' (2017) meso-level approach. This is followed by an explanation of how the data from a survey of 258 Irish

rural SEs were gathered and analysed. The results of this study are then presented and the results discussed. Finally, the paper concludes and presents suggestions for the future development of Ireland's rural SEs in light of recent policy developments.

The development of the Irish SE sector[6] and main characteristics of Irish rural SEs

SEs in Ireland take on many forms and are viewed as part of the wider social economy, including non-profit associations, cooperatives, mutual societies and foundations (Cooke, 2018; O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016). As noted by O'Hara & O'Shaughnessy (2021), the terms 'social economy' and 'social enterprise' first emerged in Irish policy discourse in the 1990s and reflected European policy trends of the time (European Commission, 1993, 1994, 1995). Earlier policy discourse on the sector focused on the potential of SEs to provide goods and services to disadvantaged communities and to facilitate local labour market integration (National Economic and Social Forum, 1995).

By early 2000 the Irish government had established a national Social Economy Programme (SEP) that would support SEs with specific characteristics such as community ownership, a local-development focus and provision of work-integration opportunities for the long-term unemployed. By 2006 the SEP was renamed as the Community Services Programme, which strengthened the association of SEs with locally based community development and work integration (O'Hara & O'Shaughnessy, 2021).

It was not until the 2012 publication of the *Action Plan for Jobs*, as part of its response to the national recession and high unemployment, that the Irish government included a working definition of SEs as business models set up to tackle social, economic or environmental issues and engaged in trading or commercial activities to produce social and community gain (Government of Ireland, 2012, p. 67). This was followed by the publication of the Forfás report in 2013,[7] which explained SEs as not-for-profit organisations, driven by social objectives, separate from government, where at least part of the income generated is from trading activity and the surplus is reinvested

[6] For a more detailed discussion, see O'Hara & O'Shaughnessy (2021).

[7] Forfás was, until 2014, the national policy advisory board for enterprise, trade, science, technology and innovation in Ireland. When it was dissolved most of its functions were incorporated into the government department responsible for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

in social objectives. This operational definition remained in place until the publication, in 2019, of the INSEP. According to this policy, SEs are explained as follows:

- An SE is an enterprise whose objective is to achieve a social, societal or environmental impact, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders.
- It pursues its objectives by trading on an ongoing basis through the provision of goods and/or services, and by reinvesting surpluses into achieving social objectives.
- It is governed in a fully accountable and transparent manner and is independent of the public sector. If dissolved, it should transfer its assets to another organisation with a similar mission. (Government of Ireland, 2019, p. 8)

This national policy acknowledges the many SEs that have evolved from Ireland's community and voluntary sector, typically delivering a wide range of social, economic and environmental impacts, and contributing to rural development. This political acknowledgement of the potential positive impacts of rural SEs is also reiterated in the NRDP. This policy emphasises the importance of rural SEs to local rural economies, including their contribution to rural regeneration, rural community resilience and rural service provision (Government of Ireland, 2021).

This significance of Irish rural SEs has been acknowledged by previous research studies, especially in terms of their contribution to local development (Lang & Fink, 2019; O'Hara, 2001; Olmedo et al., in press) and to the work integration of vulnerable groups (O'Shaughnessy, 2008). Moreover, studies on Irish rural SEs also show their contribution to basic services provision such as transportation (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2011) or childcare services (O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2013) and to the tourist sector (Mottiar et al. 2018). These SEs operating in Irish rural areas have been characterised by their ability to enhance social capital at community level, but also linking the communities where they are based with other actors beyond their localities (Lang & Fink, 2019). Thus, Irish rural social entrepreneurs have been identified with the role of the 'network architect' (Mottiar et al., 2018). Furthermore, Irish rural SEs are also characterised by their ability to mobilise a wide range of resources due to their embeddedness in their places. This allows them to harness previously untapped resources which they combine to develop innovative, locally

focused solutions for the development of their rural communities (Barraket et al., 2019; Olmedo et al., in press; van Twuijver et al., 2020).

Despite the characteristics of Irish rural SEs as outlined by previous research, there is a dearth of comprehensive data on the sector to date, which makes it challenging to deliver on the commitments of the above-mentioned national policies to enhance a suite of measures to support the development of SEs, including those operating in rural areas. The purpose of this paper is to fill a gap in our understanding of the specific characteristics of Irish rural SEs and shed some insights into how current, and future, policy might support their development and realise their potential. In the next section of this paper, we explain the theoretical context in which we have studied the characteristics of a sample of 258 Irish rural SEs.

A meso-level approach towards the study of SE characteristics

There is a lack of an internationally agreed common definition for SEs (Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). A number of studies have analysed the characteristics of SEs within different national contexts (see, for example, Spear et al. (2009) for the UK; Lehner (2011) for Austria; Fisac & Moreno-Romero (2015) for Spain; Barraket et al. (2017) for Australia; Backer (2019) for the Netherlands; Bidet et al. (2019) for South Korea; or Ciepielewska-Kowalik et al. (2021) for Poland).

Within these studies, the Macro-Institutional Social Enterprise (MISE) framework (Kerlin, 2013, 2017) has been commonly applied (e.g. Douglas et al., 2018; Fisac & Moreno-Romero, 2015; Gática, 2015). The MISE framework proposes the utilisation of national-level (macro) statistical indicators from formal and informal institutions, such as government, economy, civil society and culture, to determine the influence of the national context on the types of SEs present in a given country (Coskun et al., 2019). Despite its benefit for international comparability, due to the use of well-established indicators available for a great number of countries, this framework has been criticised for neglecting meso and micro influences[8] that can

[8] Kerlin (2017) acknowledges some of the shortcomings of the original MISE framework and provides some guidelines to incorporate meso-level indicators within the framework. However, Kerlin (2017) also states the difficulty of incorporating (internationally comparable) meso and micro indicators because of the specificity of the different national contexts (see also Coskun et al., 2019).

provide a more dynamic and bottom-up approach towards understanding the heterogeneity of the types and characteristics of SEs within a country (Mason & Barraket, 2015).

A theoretical approach which has evolved to develop an international typology of SE models is the meso-level approach proposed by Defourny & Nyssens (2017) within the context of the International Comparative Social Enterprise Model (ICSEM) project.[9] This approach focuses on the organisational indicators which support the classification of SEs according to their organisational characteristics.

Arguing that SEs are organisations that operate within (or are closely related to) the third sector, Defourny & Nyssens' (2017) approach is based on Gui's (1991) work on the economic principles of interest (capital, mutual and general interest) of capitalist and non-capitalist organisations. According to Gui (1991), capitalist organisations' main driver is seeking profits for their shareholders ('capital interest'), which sets them apart from third sector (non-profit and other non-capitalist) organisations. Within the third sector, Gui (1991) distinguishes between 'mutual-benefit organisations' and 'public-benefit organisations'. In the former, decision-makers and beneficiaries are represented by the same group of stakeholders, e.g. traditional cooperatives and voluntary organisations such as book and sport clubs; thus, they are based on 'mutual interest'. The latter are based on 'general interest' as the stakeholders that make decisions represent a different group than the beneficiaries, e.g. advocacy voluntary organisations. This 'general interest' concurs with institutions operating within the public sector.

The theoretical model presented by Defourny & Nyssens (2017) combines these principles of interest with the type of resources employed by SEs. As hybrid organisations, SEs tend to draw on different monetary (market and non-market) and non-monetary resources (Gardin, 2006). In this regard the proposed theoretical model differentiates between those SEs that rely mainly on non-market resources, those which mainly rely on market resources and those which hybridise market and non-market resources.

From the combination of the different principles of interest and the resource mix of SEs, this meso-level theoretical approach presents four general models of SEs:

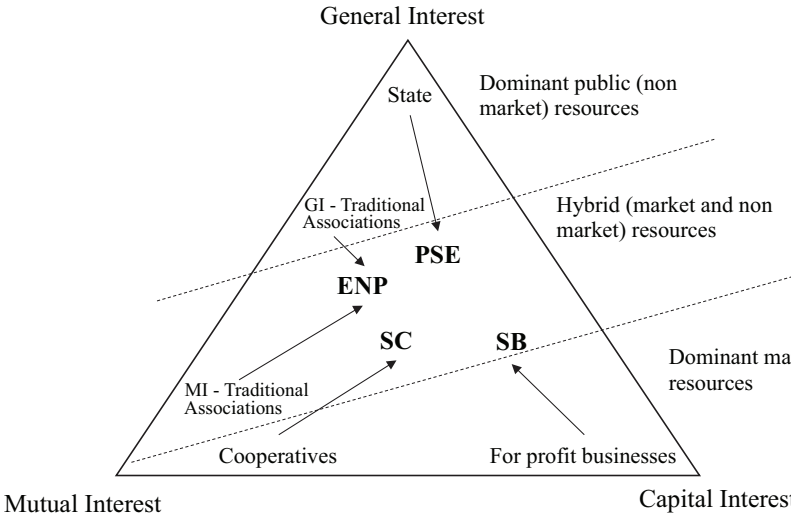
[9] ICSEM was launched in 2013 and aims to compare SE models and their respective institutionalisation processes across the world. More information can be found at https://www.iap-socent.be/icsem-project

- 'Entrepreneurial non-profits' (ENPs), which represent non-profit organisations that develop an earned-income business through the sales of goods and/or services in support of their social mission. ENPs can arise from general interest, traditional associations that demonstrate a greater entrepreneurial dimension, which situates them into a space where more market resources are mobilised. Moreover, they can also be closer to, or arise from, mutual interest associations that, besides mobilising (some degree of) market resources, have moved towards more general interest goals. In general, these organisations mobilise resources from both market and non-market origins, with the balance between them depending on their activities and field of operation.
- 'Public-sector social enterprises' (PSEs), which represent public sector spin-offs in the light of privatisation of public services under New Public Management frameworks. These SEs are usually heavily dependent on non-market resources such as public funding and are based on general interest principles.
- 'Social cooperatives' (SCs), which represent organisations that come from or are close to (traditional) cooperatives but with a greater emphasis on general interest goals that transcend the interests of the single cooperative group, usually incorporating different stakeholders within their governance bodies. Although market resources can play an important role within SCs, these organisations tend to draw in non-market resources to a greater extent than traditional cooperatives.
- 'Social businesses' (SBs), which represent mission-driven businesses. These organisations develop business approaches to address social issues. They are characterised by mobilising a great degree of market resources. However, in relation to private for-profit businesses, SBs have moved towards a more general interest perspective, abandoning the pure capital/profit maximisation goal exhibited by conventional organisations guided by capital interest and operating in the private for-profit sector.

The models show how different types of SEs come from and/or are closer to the principles typically associated to the state (general principle), for-profit organisations (capital interest) or traditional third sector organisations such as cooperatives or mutuals (mutual interest); see Figure 1. However, these models emphasise that SEs tend to converge in more intermediate positions in which the

economic interest principles are blurred and market and non-market resources are mixed[10] (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017).

Figure 1: Typology of social enterprise models



Source: Based on Defourny & Nyssens (2017, p. 323).

This perspective represents a meso-level approach towards the classification of SEs which combines institutional logics from the broader ecosystems in which SEs operate with the specific characteristics of SEs operating within the field, therefore allowing for the capture of in-country SEs' heterogeneity.

Defourny & Nysssens (2017) have applied this framework to a worldwide sample of SEs, i.e. 721 SEs across 43 different countries.[11] Yet, to the knowledge of the authors this is the first time that this

[10] The arrows of Figure 1 represent these movements/trajectories towards convergence into an intermediate position. Defourny & Nyssens (2017) stress that SEs can represent new organisations and organisational forms but can also derive from new dynamics within 'traditional' organisations from any of the three sectors.

[11] The data that provide empirical support to this typology draw from the ICSEM project, which aims to compare the situation of SEs in different countries around the world. Within this project 220 researchers from more than 50 countries have participated. The empirical test of this typology confirmed the presence of seven clusters (*continued overleaf*)

framework has been used to reflect the types and characteristics of SEs within rural Ireland. Thus, it is the first time that it has been applied to show in-country heterogeneity within a specific sample of SEs.

Methods

Preceding the launch of the INSEP, the DRCD initiated, in partnership with the Social Finance Foundation (SFF),[12] a national research and consultation process. The goal of this process was to generate background information for the development of the policy (DRCD & SFF, 2018). One of the elements of this process was an SE mapping project, initiated with the goal to create an understanding of the extent and nature of the SE sector in different geographical areas of Ireland. Three research areas were selected, which covered (parts of) the counties of Cavan, Waterford, Cork and Limerick.

The mapping involved two stages. The first stage was to compile a valid register of SEs in each research area. Because at that point in time a national definition of SE in Ireland was lacking, the research team used an operational definition provided by Forfás (2013) as a guide. This definition was acknowledged to be the most widely accepted national definition available within Ireland. Local development companies[13] in each of the selected research areas

[11] (*continued*) of SEs, which represent three of the models theoretically proposed, i.e. SBs (one cluster), ENPs (four clusters), SCs (two clusters). The PSE model was not confirmed from the empirical findings; however, in two of the ENP clusters (those corresponding with WISEs) over 10 per cent of SEs were found to have a governmental agency among their founding members, thus indicating the importance of public institutions as partners (rather than as the main driver) within these types of SEs (Defourny et al., 2021).

[12] The SFF is an organisation that was launched by the Minister of Finance in 2007. The organisation operates as a wholesale lender of social finance. Its core business is to provide finance to social lending organisations, who, in turn, lend to borrowers seeking funding for community development and SE initiatives. For more information, see www.sff.ie

[13] In Ireland local development companies implement a wide variety of national and international funding programmes with a range of themes, including labour market activation, community and rural development, social inclusion, climate action and (social) enterprise services. They operate within a catchment area including multiple villages, towns and cities, and are active in both rural and urban areas. Currently, there are forty-nine local development companies in Ireland. They are typically non-profit organisations that are led by a volunteer board comprised of members representing the local private, public and community/voluntary sector.

compiled the register within their own region. Because of the everyday nature of their work, local development companies have close interaction with individuals, communities and organisations within their region and utilised their extensive networks to prepare the register. This 'on-the-ground knowledge' was supplemented with the use of public registrars (e.g. the non-profit register of Benefacts).[14]

In the second phase of the mapping, a survey was sent out to the organisations included in the register.[15] The survey included twenty-seven closed-ended questions relating to general organisational characteristics, including location or year of establishment/foundation; information on staffing, volunteering and financing details; objectives of the organisation and goods and services provided; and, finally, trends perceived by the organisation in relation to changes within the organisation, barriers to organisational development, business and innovation practices used and expected types of finance. The online survey was sent by email to all SEs within the register. The survey was kept open for six weeks in each region, with reminders issued in week three and at the end of week four. In total 592 surveys were distributed, of which 383 surveys were returned, giving an overall return rate of 64.7 per cent. After deleting duplicates, surveys whose respondents reported no trading income (and who therefore did not meet the inclusion criterion as an SE) and those located within a city boundary, there were 258 surveys for analysis.

The sample shows diversity with respect to goods and services produced, levels of volunteerism and employment created. Furthermore, it is recognised by the DRCD and the SFF to be 'the most up-to-date data available for social enterprises in Ireland' (DRCD & SFF, 2018, p. 16).

The analysis of the data was conducted using a combination of factor and cluster analysis that followed the methodological description in Defourny et al. (2021)[16] as closely as possible. An initial set of twenty-one measures were derived from questions in the questionnaire along the five dimensions of measurement described by Defourny et al. (2021, p. 427). Because we wished to retain as much information as possible in these measures and because many of them were scalar or ordinal rather than simply nominal (categorical), we

[14] Extensive details of the approach to, and the issues involved in, the data collection are given in Cooke et al. (2017).

[15] Two of the authors of this paper were involved in the design and execution of this survey and the survey was undertaken in 2017.

[16] See also Defourny et al. (2019) for an earlier version of this paper.

used Nonlinear Principal Component Analysis (Linting et al., 2007) for the factor analysis step, as implemented by the CATPCA procedure in SPSS Version 26 (Linting & van der Kooij, 2012; SPSS Inc., 2021). Based on results of that analysis we removed four measures that explained little of the variance in the structure and settled on a solution with seventeen measures and five dimensions[17] (see Table 1). This solution explained 59.5 per cent of the variance in the data (see Table 2).

As in Defourny et al.'s (2021) analysis, we then carried out a hierarchical cluster analysis, with distances based on Wald's criterion, using the HICLUS procedure in SPSS Version 26. Two clusterings were quantitatively plausible – one with four clusters, and one with six – but the clustering with six was more qualitatively interpretable. In a final step we omitted one of the six clusters because it accounted for only 1.9 per cent of the cases (five cases), and because those five enterprises seemed in some other respects to be 'outliers'. The matrices show that the clusters are reasonably cohesive and clearly delineated from one another across the dimensions of the factor solution; see Figures 2, 3 and 4.[18]

Results

The analysis of the survey data shows five different clusters which typify Irish rural SEs (see Table 3). These clusters are defined based on the mix of income generated (traded income/grant funding/fundraising), the average amount of financial turnover per year, the type of labour utilised (paid labour/volunteers), the organisational reach (local/national/international) and the main organisational focus (mission and sector). The five clusters provide an insight into the different types of SEs that have emerged in rural areas in Ireland. Below, the main characteristics of each of the five clusters are discussed.

[17] Nonlinear PCA uses the term 'dimension' in preference to 'factor', but conceptually the two are very similar.

[18] Cluster 6 in Figure 4 corresponds to Cluster 5 in the 'Results' section presented within this paper. The reason for this change in the numbers is that one of the clusters was finally omitted, as explained within the 'Methods' section.

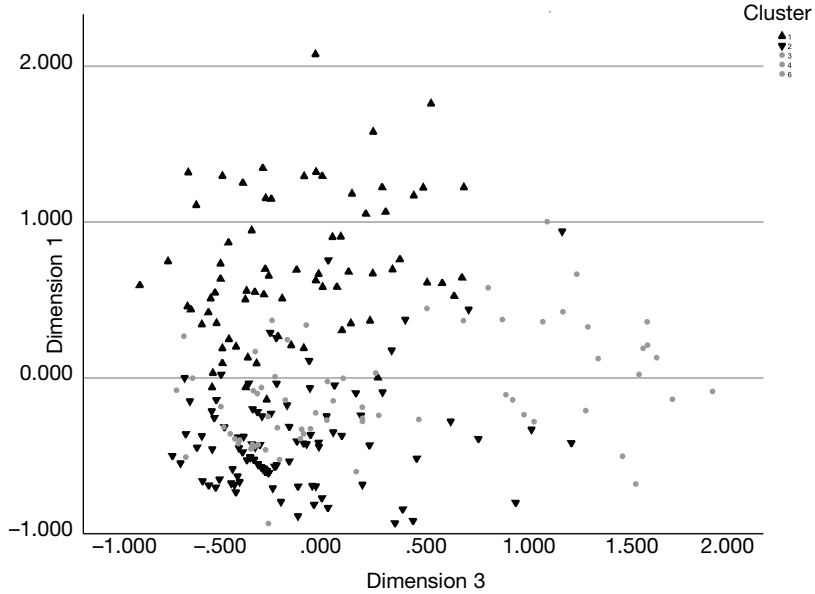
Table 1: Rotated component loadings

	Factor (Dimension)				
Variable	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
Total number of volunteers	–0.496				
% in trading income	0.608				–0.467
Total income to the organisation in the last financial year (2016)	0.638				
Total employees	0.645				
Which term best describes your organisation?	0.690				
Sector		–0.756			
Primary objective		0.661			
% Income from grants		0.698			
Intensity of business practices			0.675		
Intensity of social practices			0.828		
When was the organisation established?				–0.764	
% Income from fundraising				0.570	
Total number of board members				0.691	
% of employees employed through active labour market programmes				0.459	
Organisational reach (local -> international)					0.591
Use of non-market resources					0.596
% Income from labour market schemes					0.635

Table 2: Variance accounted for (17 variables, 5 dimensions CATPCA)

Dimension	*Variance accounted for*	
	Total (eigenvalue)	*% of variance*
1	3.753	22.076
2	2.257	13.277
3	1.540	9.060
4	1.467	8.630
5	1.102	6.485
Total	10.120	59.529

Figure 2: Dimension 1 by dimension 3, showing Clusters 1 and 2



Cluster 1: Community SB

Cluster 1 is formed by a total of seventy-two cases, approximately 28 per cent of the sample. The SEs within this cluster are characterised by a strong market orientation. The results show that SEs within this cluster mix different types of income. However, trading income represents more than 70 per cent of the total income for the majority of these organisations. Besides the low levels of income from grants and fundraising, these SEs have, in comparison to the other clusters in this sample, low levels of engagement of volunteers as 45 per cent of the SEs within this cluster declare that they do not engage with volunteers at all and 32 per cent of the organisations engage with less than ten volunteers. On the other hand, SEs within this cluster show, relative to the other clusters, higher levels of paid employees, with a fifth of the cases employing between thirteen and twenty-five staff members,[19] and a moderate (€25,000 to €100,000) to high level

[19] In comparison to the other clusters, the SB cluster reports the highest number of paid employees. However, it should be acknowledged that, when compared to standard SME typologies (https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/sme-definition_en), the vast majority of rural SEs in this study fall in the category of micro (<10 employees) or small (<50 employees) enterprises.

Figure 3: Dimension 1 by dimension 2, showing Clusters 3 and 4

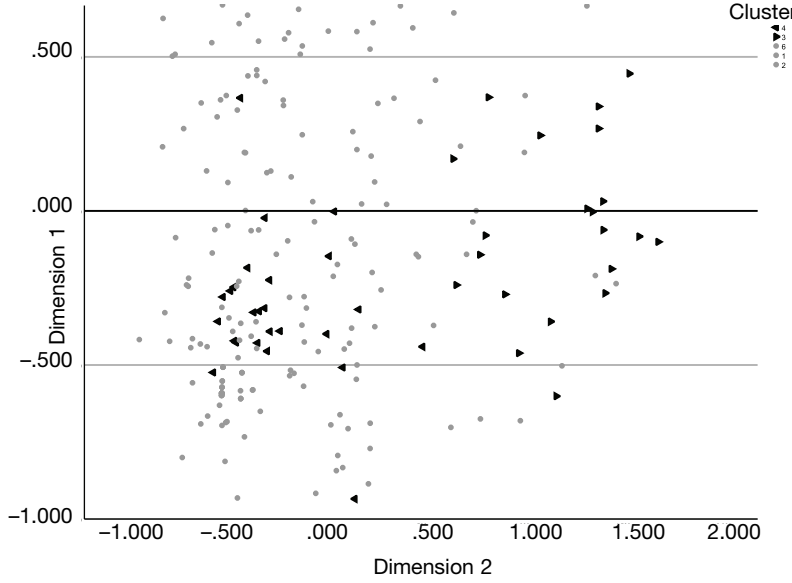
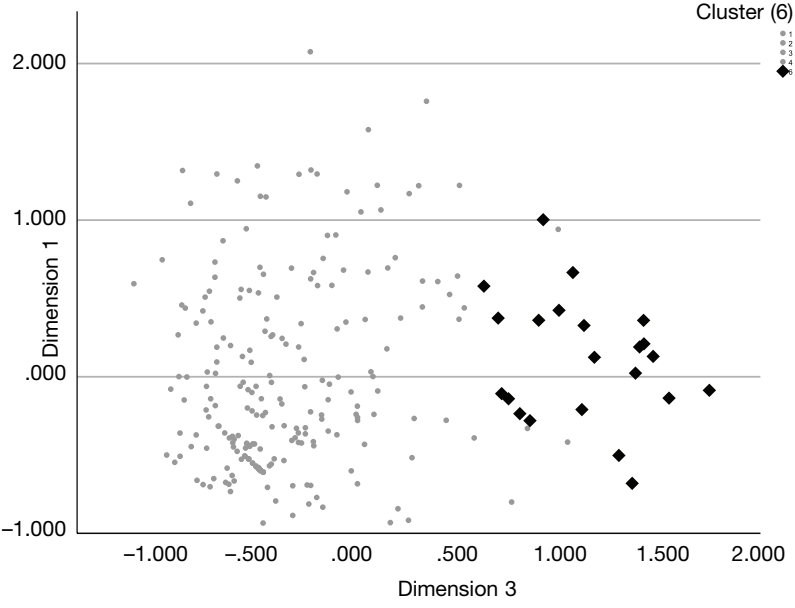


Figure 4: Dimension 1 by dimension 3, showing Cluster 6



(€100,000 to €500,000) of income/turnover, with over a quarter of the organisations within this cluster declaring an annual income between €100,000 and €500,000.

Despite their market orientation, these SEs show a strong local and community focus and mainly provide infrastructure, enterprise and support services for the communities in which they operate. Hence, this cluster shows features close to the SB model of SE described by Defourny & Nyssens (2017); however, due to their clear community orientation, we argue that this first cluster of Irish rural SEs represents a Community SB model. Examples of SEs within this cluster include (but are not limited to) food enterprise centres, community enterprise centres and credit unions.

Cluster 2: Local/Community Development ENP

Cluster 2 is formed by 113 cases, approximately 44 per cent of cases; thus, this is the most populated cluster from our sample. The business model of these SEs is characterised by a mix of resources coming from different sources. However, fundraising represents the most prominent source of income, with 62 per cent of cases within this cluster declaring that more than half of their income is derived from this source. Moreover, within this cluster the majority of SEs declare having no income from grants and almost three-quarters (72 per cent) show that their trading income represents less than 40 per cent of their average total turnover. The great majority of the SEs in this cluster (81 per cent) show modest annual incomes of less than €25,000 and very low levels of employees, with over half of the cases (57 per cent) having no paid staff and almost a third (29 per cent) having only one or two employees. On the other hand, SEs within this cluster are characterised by their mobilisation of high levels of volunteers. Roughly half of the SEs in this cluster (51 per cent) report to have between ten and fifty active volunteers within the organisation.

These SEs also show a clear local and community focus by providing infrastructure services for the community, developing services in the fields of tourism, leisure and culture/arts, and more comprehensively addressing local/community development. Hence, based on their business model and focus, we argue that this cluster is representative of a Local/Community Development ENP model of SE. Examples of SEs within this cluster include (but are not limited to) community development associations and community-run organisations focused on the development of leisure and tourism activities.

Cluster 3: Care Services ENP

Cluster 3 is formed by twenty-one cases, representing 8.1 per cent of the total sample. SEs within this cluster show a business model characterised by a mix of resources, where grants represent the main source of income of the vast majority (89 per cent) of these SEs. At the same time, SEs within this cluster present low levels of income from fundraising and from trading. In terms of annual turnover, SEs within this cluster generally present a low annual income, with 35 per cent of the cases having an annual income lower than €25,000 and 40 per cent of the cases earning between €25,000 and €100,000 annually. The most common range of paid staff within this cluster is between three and six employees (43 per cent of the cases), although almost 19 per cent employ between seven and twelve staff members. These SEs are also characterised by their engagement of a low number of volunteers as almost half of the SEs (43 per cent) surveyed engage no volunteers in the provision of their services and another 38 per cent engage less than ten volunteers.

In terms of their reach and focus, 64 per cent of the cases show a strong local focus whereas 24 per cent of the sample state that their reach is national. SEs within Cluster 3 are clearly aimed at providing essential services, often related to the provision of care services. Hence, we argue that Cluster 3 represents a Care Services ENP model of SE. Examples of SEs within this cluster include (but are not limited to) community childcare and day-care centres operating an SE model.

Cluster 4: Community Sports ENP

Cluster 4 is formed by twenty-five cases, representing approximately 10 per cent of the total sample. SEs within this cluster are characterised by a large share of income generated through fundraising, showing very low levels of income deriving from grants and trading. SEs within this cluster generally present low annual income and low numbers of paid staff, with almost three-quarters of cases (72 per cent) having between zero and two employees. On the other hand, SEs within this cluster are characterised by their significant mobilisation of volunteers as almost half of these organisations engage between ten and fifty volunteers to deliver their services. These SEs' main aim is the betterment of their community, mainly through the delivery of sports-related services/activities. The SEs combine a strong local focus and a national reach, and are represented significantly by local sporting clubs such as the Gaelic

Athletic Association (GAA)[20] and include community halls providing sport facilities. Hence, we argue that Cluster 4 represents a Community Sports ENP model of SE.

Cluster 5: ENP WISEs

Cluster 5 is formed by twenty-two cases, representing 8.5 per cent of the total sample. SEs within this cluster are also found to mix different types of income. Grants form an important part of this mix, with income derived through this source representing over 50 per cent of total income for almost half (48 per cent) of the SEs within this cluster. Despite the great significance of grants, these SEs tend to combine these with fundraising and especially with traded income. The organisations within this cluster present a high annual turnover, with 41 per cent of the cases having an income between €100,000 and €500,000 annually. In terms of staff, this cluster presents moderate–low levels of employees, generally employing between three and twelve staff members. A prominent characteristic of SEs within this cluster is that most of these employees are people distant from the labour market and are employed through labour activation market programmes. Next to the paid staff, a high level of volunteers are mobilised by these SEs for the delivery of their services. The geographical reach of SEs within this cluster is mainly local (64 per cent) although some of the organisations have a national reach (23 per cent). In terms of their aims these SEs present a very miscellaneous field of activity ranging from transportation to broadcasting (radio) services. Hence, we argue that Cluster 5 represents an ENP WISE model of SE.

Common governance model and legal structure across the Irish rural SE clusters

Despite the specificities demonstrated by each of the five Irish rural SE clusters, the analysis of the surveys shows two (interrelated) cross-cluster commonalities sharing a similar governance model and legal structure. The data show how Irish rural SEs are governed by voluntary boards of directors which are in charge of the strategic decision-making of the SE and hold the ultimate legal responsibility of the organisations. The data also show how these boards are generally

[20] Founded in 1884 the GAA is a national sporting and cultural organisation, focused primarily on promoting indigenous Gaelic games, including the sports of hurling, camogie and Gaelic football.

Table 3: Irish rural social enterprise clusters

Social enterprise models	*Social business*	*Entrepreneurial non-profit*			
Cluster no. & dominant type in the cluster	Cluster 1 Community SB	Cluster 2 Local/Community Development ENP	Cluster 3 Care Services ENP	Cluster 4 Community Sport ENP	Cluster 5 ENP WISEs
Number of observations	72	113	21	25	22
Economic (Business) model	Mainly trading income (but mix market/non-market resources)	Mainly fundraising (but mix market/non-market resources)	Mainly grants (low mix of resources)	Mainly fundraising (low mix of resources)	Mainly grants (but mix of resources, especially with trading income)
Paid employees	Relatively high (20%, between 13 and 25 staff)	Very low (57%, no employees)	Low (43%, between 3 and 6 staff)	Low (43%, between 1 and 2 staff)	Moderate–low (43%, between 3 and 6 staff; 37% between 7 and 12 staff)
Volunteers (excluding board members)	Low (45%, no volunteers)	High (51%, between 10 and 50 volunteers)	Low (43%, no volunteers)	High (44%, between 10 and 50 volunteers)	High (55%, between 10 and 50 volunteers)

Table 3: Irish rural social enterprise clusters (Contd.)

Social enterprise models	*Social business*	*Entrepreneurial non-profit*			
Cluster no. & dominant type in the cluster	Cluster 1 Community SB	Cluster 2 Local/Community Development ENP	Cluster 3 Care Services ENP	Cluster 4 Community Sport ENP	Cluster 5 ENP WISEs
Annual turnover/income	Moderate–high (28%, €100–500,000/year)	Very low (81%, less than €25,000/year)	Low (35%, less than €25,000/year; 40%, €25–100,000/year)	Low (38%, less than €25,000/year; 42%, €25–100,000/year)	High (41%, between €100–500,000/year)
Organisational reach	Local (72%)	Local (71%)	Local (64%)	National (68%)	Local (64%)
Main focus (sector)	Community infrastructure; enterprise/financial services for the communities	Local/community development; infrastructure, services, tourism, leisure and culture/arts	Care services	Sports	Working integration in diverse sectors
Governance model	Board of voluntary directors (one person, one vote)				
Legal form(s)	Company Limited by Guarantee				

formed by a limited number of voluntary directors, with less than ten for the majority of SEs in every cluster except in Cluster 4, in which the board is usually comprised of between ten and fifteen directors.[21] This specific governance model denotes the collective and democratic (at least formally) character of Irish rural SEs, as strategic decisions are usually taken following the rule of one person, one vote and are not based on capital/shareholding nor based on individual decision-making.

The data from the survey illustrate, in line with previous reports on Irish SEs (see, for example, European Commission, 2016), that the typical legal structure of Irish rural SEs is the Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG). This legal structure, besides limiting the financial liability of the members of the SE, requires the presence of a (voluntary) board which holds the ultimate responsibility for the SE.

Discussion

Our findings illustrate five different types of SEs that have emerged throughout rural Ireland. By revealing variations in the mix of income generated, the average turnover and number of employees, the type of labour utilised and the organisational focus, the findings demonstrate the diverse nature of Irish rural SEs. Our findings illustrate how the meso-level approach proposed by Defourny & Nyssens (2017) provides a suitable framework to capture in-country SEs' heterogeneity, thereby complementing macro-level SE sector classifications (Kerlin, 2013, 2017). Moreover, our findings give insight into the heterogeneous character of SEs, something which can inform effective policy and support structures on a regional and/or national level. With both the current INSEP and NRDP in Ireland being focused on creating a suite of supports for SEs, our study provides evidence to argue that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to such supports is likely to be ineffective (Mazzei & Roy, 2017). Given the different characteristics of SEs – for example, their distinct resource mobilisation patterns – different types of support will be of relevance to different organisational types of SEs.

Furthermore, in designing support for SEs, fluidity between SE typology boundaries should be acknowledged as SEs develop and change over time. This is in line with previous work which found that

[21] This can be explained by the extensive community engagement upheld by these community sporting SEs.

different levels of organisational development require specific forms of support (Blundel & Lyon, 2015; Christmann, 2020). The business/financial model and/or level of service provision of an organisation evolve, and hence an SE can move from one cluster to another over time. For example, to fulfil a local need for elder care, a young SE can train people to provide care services to the elderly, starting out with a very local level of service provision. Such an organisation is characterised by a low level of turnover and a low number of employees, and hence would fall into Cluster 3, as described in our findings. If over time the demand for the services increases, and the organisational capacity for growth (in terms of human, financial and material resources) is present, such an SE can evolve to be a regional (or even national) service provider with a capacity to directly employ a large number of carers and support staff. Increased annual turnover, a higher level of direct employment and a wider organisational reach create different organisational dynamics, which are more in line with Cluster 1, as described in our findings. In order to support such transitions, insight on the local and regional circumstances that influence these transitions is necessary. In previous research it is acknowledged that resources necessary for organisational development are not evenly distributed among regions and localities (Bock, 2016; Lang & Fink, 2019). Hence, support structures should be aware of the local conditions (e.g. market demand) and the availability and distribution of resources (financial, human and material) that either stimulate or hamper processes of development in order to support such shifts in organisational development. Moreover, global trends also influence and shape local circumstances, resulting in a constantly evolving playing field that requires support structures to be responsive to ever-changing conditions.

In relation to stimulating organisational development and growth in SEs, it should be acknowledged that almost all of the SEs in our sample have a local focus. This is in line with previous research that characterises rural SEs as being rooted strongly in local communities (Barraket et al., 2019; van Twuijver et al., 2020). Previous research also points out that this local character, and the local commitment that is created by it, is a critical factor for SE success (Olmedo et al., in press; Smith & McColl, 2016; Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). Hence, traditional strategies that focus on the scaling-up of services to different geographical areas might not necessarily provide a sustainable growth strategy (Bauwens et al., 2020) and could even diminish the contributions that rural SEs are able to make to the areas

they serve (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). Increasing the scope of activities of SEs – for example, by expanding the number of services offered to address multiple local needs – has been found by previous research to be a strategy more in line with the way in which SEs naturally operate (Olmedo et al., 2019; Steiner & Teasdale, 2019).

In terms of employment, this sample of Irish rural SEs shows low levels of paid staff. When employment targets are included in SE supports, on paper, the employment potential of rural SEs might seem small, yet the effect on rural communities of these small numbers should not be underestimated (O'Shaughnessy, 2008; Róbert & Levente, 2017). When employment numbers are related to population density and the working population in a specific area, employment created can provide significant and multiple positive impacts for smaller and peripheral rural communities.

Finally, despite their strong local focus, rural SEs have shown their need (and capacity) to mix different resources to deliver their services; for example, by combining local volunteers with grants obtained from regional, national and/or international programmes. This mix suggests that local resources are complemented by other resources not available at the local level. Therefore, rural SEs represent actors that contribute to a neo-endogenous development of rural localities/areas in which the harnessing of local resources is complemented by external resources in order to fulfil local needs/seize local opportunities (Chatzichristos & Nagopoulos, in press; Olmedo et al., in press).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to establish the types and characteristics of SEs operating in rural Ireland. We used this typology to discuss how related policies such as the INSEP and the NRDP might unlock the potential of these rural organisations.

Our findings show the heterogeneity of rural SEs within Ireland. This heterogeneity is represented by five distinctive clusters that concur with two of the models of SEs proposed by Defourny & Nyssens (2017), namely the SB and the ENP. The characteristics of rural SEs within each of the clusters show their contributions to their local economies through the creation of employment and the circulation and spending of money within their local areas. Their contributions also relate to the provision of, otherwise unavailable, infrastructure and services for their local communities. Moreover,

Irish rural SEs are characterised by collective governance bodies represented by voluntary boards of directors which are in charge of the strategic decision-making of the SE and hold the ultimate legal responsibility of the organisations.

Rural SEs are complementary actors to other stakeholders, such as for-profit business, other third sector organisations and government, that contribute to the development of rural areas (Shucksmith, 2012). However, the distinctive features demonstrated by the rural SEs within each of the clusters presented also suggest that in order for policy measures to be effective, their design should be based on a critical understanding of the specific nature of these organisations, the rural context in which they are situated (including the resource base available to them) and a consideration of the (positive and negative) implications of encouraging different forms of organisational growth. Hence, this study supports the call for a place-sensitive approach to SE policy (Olmedo et al., in press; Steiner et al., 2019). This entails measures, supports and assessment indicators that acknowledge the differences (in geographical, social and economic terms) of the areas where SEs are based and operate, rather than a clear-cut distinction between the rural and the urban (Skerratt, 2012; Steiner et al., 2019). This proposal for more placed-based and joined-up thinking concurs with the stated objectives of Ireland's recent NRDP, which advocates a development approach that recognises that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to meet the development needs of rural areas, and one in which SEs are recognised as relevant actors (Government of Ireland, 2021).[22]

While this paper presents a first-ever attempt to employ a meso-level theoretical analysis of rural SE types in Ireland, the paper is not without limitations. Firstly, we acknowledge that the sample of rural SEs included within this paper could be improved by extending the geographical scope of the areas surveyed and by generating a national census of SEs that allows for further comparisons. Moreover, this paper is focused on rural SEs as a subset of the whole SE sector in Ireland, but further analysis between SEs located in different rural and urban areas is needed to inform a suitable suite of place-based, tailor-made supports to SEs more generally. Finally, while we argue for the theoretical relevance and practical usefulness of Defourny & Nyssens' (2017) theoretical meso-level typology of SE models, only two of the models (and some subtypes) have emerged in our sample analysis.

[22] See policy objectives 30, 31, 37, 63 & 69 in particular.

Therefore, we suggest that, for the case of Irish (rural) SEs, further theoretical reflections, and/or refinement of the models, and more data will improve our understanding of these organisations and their (potential) contribution to place-based (rural) development.

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