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Rurality as context for innovative responses to social challenges – The role of rural social enterprises

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ABSTRACT

Rural social enterprises are increasingly recognized as organisations that contribute to local development by providing goods and/or services to meet community needs and by fostering inclusive social and governance relations. The purpose of this paper is to explore how rural social enterprises engage in a plurality of socio-economic relations with different dimensions of their 'place' when contributing to the development of their localities. Based on three in-depth case studies of social enterprises operating in rural Ireland, our findings illustrate how rural social enterprises engage with locational, institutional, material and identity aspects of their 'place', which indicates their 'placial embeddedness'. Moreover, our findings also demonstrate how these organisations engage in, and combine market, redistribution and reciprocity relations, which indicates their 'substantive hybridity'. Based on the interrelated nature of these findings, we argue that it is through a process of *placial substantive hybridity* that rural social enterprises foster social innovation in order to contribute to an integrated development of their localities. They harness and (re)valorise (untapped) local resources while complementing these with other resources from extra-local sources and accommodate and/or respond to structural-exogenous forces based on the needs of their local population in line with neo-endogenous rural development.

1. Introduction

Rural areas represent the vast majority of the European territory. They are key enclaves in terms of biodiversity, food, energy and other raw materials. Moreover, an estimated 29,1% of the total European Union's (EU) population lives in rural areas (Eurostat, 2020a). Rural areas are characterised by complex social and economic relations, diverse functions, representations and meanings and varied levels of socio-economic development (Woods, 2011). While some European rural areas demonstrate higher levels of productivity, GDP, population growth and have ample access to services, others have lagged behind suffering downward spirals of economic decline, low employment rates, out-migration of the youth and better educated, an ageing population and loss of private and public investment in infrastructure and services (Copus et al., 2020). This heterogeneity of rural areas is also reflected in 'intangible' aspects such as their social capital (Lang and Fink, 2019) and their socio-economic and political connectivity (Bock, 2016). Exogenous-structural forces such as global market liberalisation and urbanisation can, in part, explain the uneven development of rural areas, however, these areas and their population have reacted in different ways to these forces to bring about processes of neo-endogenous rural development (Shucksmith, 2010).

The capacity to foster (local) entrepreneurship, citizens collective mobilisation and enabling institutional frameworks that support community action have been stressed as elements that empower local communities/actors to engage with exogenous factors (Bock, 2016; Woods, 2007). In this regard, social innovation has been identified as a significant element when pursuing neo-endogenous rural development (Bosworth et al., 2020), due to its collective and relational character when triggering new solutions for context-specific (social) needs (Moulaert et al., 2013). Social innovation does not occur in a vacuum but it is developed through the interactions of different actors situated in specific contexts and from the interactions of these actors with different elements of their contexts (Neumeier, 2017). Among these actors, rural social enterprises have been identified as organisations that contribute to local development through social innovation (Jungsberg et al., 2020), therefore providing new goods and/or services to meet community needs and fostering inclusive social and governance relations (Defourny and Nyssens, 2013).

To achieve this, rural social enterprises engage in relations with local

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and external actors that allow them to leverage and combine a wide range of resources in new ways to provide tailor-made solutions for the communities in which they are embedded (Richter, 2019). Moreover, the place-based character of rural social enterprises (Lang and Fink, 2019) has enabled these organisations to adapt to opportunities and challenges arising from the rural contexts in which they operate (Steinerowski and Steinerowska-Streb, 2012).

While the importance of engaging in diverse networks for mobilising a wide range of resources and the influence of the rural context in enabling and/or constraining social enterprises is relatively well understood, the relation between the ability of rural social enterprises to participate in diverse socio-economic relations and their engagement with the rural 'places' in which they are based, to deliver novel solutions that contribute to local development, is less well researched. Therefore, the following research question has guided this study: how do rural social enterprises engage in diverse socio-economic relations and with different dimensions of their 'places' in order to contribute to the development of their localities?

In answering this question, this paper contributes to the growing interest in understanding the interaction between socially innovative and entrepreneurial actors and their context within the academic fields of rural social innovation (Jungsberg et al., 2020), rural entrepreneurship (Korsgaard et al., 2015) and rural social enterprises (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). Moreover, the findings we present provide empirical evidence of the potential of rural social enterprises for neo-endogenous rural development and their role in spatially sensitive rural development policy (Bock, 2019; Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the literature that links (rural) social enterprises to social innovation and rural development. Section 3 explains the theoretical underpinnings of this study. Section 4 describes the methodology used and section 5 contextualises and presents the main features of the three case organisations. The findings are presented in section 6 and section 7 presents a discussion of these findings and draws some conclusions.

2. Social innovation and rural development, the role of social enterprises

Social innovation, broadly defined as "innovation in social relations, as well as in meeting human needs" (MacCallum et al., 2009, p. 2), constitutes a key component for the development of rural areas (Bock, 2016). The importance of social innovation for rural development is threefold; first, social innovation as a process focuses on collective processes through which different stakeholders align their interests when developing new solutions for a rural area. Hence, social innovation entails cross-sectoral, collective and collaborative learning and action (Neumeier, 2017). Second, social innovation as an outcome is a response to unmet needs through new solutions that benefit a whole community or a vulnerable group within it. Hence, social innovation contributes to the provision of otherwise non-existent or non-accessible services, products, infrastructures/assets to rural communities (Bosworth et al., 2020; Copus et al., 2017). Third, social innovation emphasises the importance of reconnection across different spatial scales, thus the importance of (socio-political) connectivity of, especially marginalised, rural areas (Bock, 2016).

Empirical studies on rural based socially innovative initiatives developed in specific sectors such as forestry (Ludvig et al., 2018), the arts (André et al., 2013), healthcare (Best and Myers, 2019) and also in the broader field of rural local development (Copus et al., 2017) have shown the contribution of social innovation to rural communities. Besides showing a range of new solutions to challenges faced by rural areas, these studies stress that social innovations occur through the interactions between different actors in, and with, their specific institutional and territorial contexts (Moulaert et al., 2013). Among these actors, social enterprises have been recognized as playing an important role in fostering social innovation in rural areas (Jungsberg et al., 2020; Richter, 2019).

Social enterprises are organisations that mix social, economic and/or environmental goals and pursue them through entrepreneurial means, i.e. combining resources in new ways (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006). Rural social enterprises, more specifically, have shown a number of characteristics that make them significant potential actors for fostering social innovation that can contribute to rural development. Typically organised as collective and collaborative entities (van Twuijver et al., 2020), these organisations depend on the involvement of the local population as a (necessary) way to leverage resources and to build legitimacy within their localities (Smith and McColl, 2016; Vestrum et al., 2017). Additionally, they develop relations with different external stakeholders, such as government/public institutions, universities or other social entrepreneurs/enterprises, through which they leverage resources otherwise unavailable in the localities where they are based (Lang and Fink, 2019; Richter, 2019).

Rural social enterprises have provided rural localities with otherwise not available (basic) services, such as transportation, elder/healthcare, social housing or (community) shops (van Twuijver et al., 2020). Furthermore, they have developed innovative environmental projects, for example related to community renewable energy (Morrison and Ramsey, 2019). Rural social enterprises have contributed to their localities by addressing different dimensions of development concurrently, demonstrating their potential to contribute to new solutions that foster an integrated development which gives them a distinctive role in rural development (Olmedo et al., 2019).

Finally, rural social enterprises demonstrate an intrinsic relationship with the rural contexts in which they operate, making this rural context an important influence in the types of activities undertaken and in their way of functioning (Barraket et al., 2019; Smith and McColl, 2016). Research on rural social enterprises has shown how the rural context provides enabling factors, such as culture of self-help and voluntarism or lack of market competitors, but also constraining factors, such as limited access to work force and finance or lack of tailor-made policy support, for the set up and development of social enterprises (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019; Steinerowski and Steinerowska-Streb, 2012).

It is their collective and collaborative character, their focus on meeting the needs of (vulnerable) local groups/communities and their intrinsic relation with their rural context that make rural social enterprises interesting actors to explore in relation to their socially innovative capability and their contribution to rural development. In this paper we focus on a specific aspect which has received scarce attention to date, namely the relation between the (socio-)economic relations that rural social enterprises develop and participate in and the way(s) in which they engage with their (rural) 'places' when contributing to the development of their localities.

3. A 'substantive' approach towards exploring rural social enterprises as social innovation actors

The 'substantive' approach to the economy (Polanyi, 1957, 1977) emphasises humans' "dependence for [their] living upon […] the interexchange with [their] natural and social environment" (Polanyi, 1957, p. 243), and thus suggests the embeddedness of economic relations and actors within society and nature. This 'substantive' approach concurs with a conceptualisation of social enterprises as (collective) organisations characterised by their integration of social, economic and participatory governance dimensions (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006; Roy and Grant, 2019).

Following the 'substantive' approach, the economy is formed by three types of (socio-)economic relations that represent different 'forms of economic integration', i.e. market-exchange, redistribution and reciprocity. According to Polanyi (1977, pp. 35–43), *market-exchange* refers to those relations developed within a price-making market system characterised by the presence of supply, demand and competition to allocate resources. These market relations take form of monetary

exchanges in compensation of the purchase of a product and/or service. *Redistribution* refers to those relations in which resources are allocated by a central point/authority that collects and distributes resources. Consequently, redistribution is typically related to the public sphere. *Reciprocity* refers to those relations developed among members of a group/community and/or between different groups/organisations in which mutuality is enhanced, thus, every counterpart is expected to contribute to the allocation of resources based on the social bonds that exist among them. These reciprocity relations can take non-monetary forms such as volunteer labour or in-kind donations but also monetary forms such as sponsorship/monetary donations (Laville and Nyssens, 2001).

Social enterprises constitute organisations that tend to hybridize these three types of (socio-)economic relations illustrating how "they work together rather than in isolation from each other" (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006, pp. 10–11). In this regard, social enterprises tend to combine principles typically associated with the for-profit sector, e.g. sales of goods/services in a competitive market; the public sector, e.g. pursuit of general interest, and; the civil society, e.g. mobilisation of volunteers. These organisations thus occupy an intermediate position between the market, the public sector and the civil society (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017). This enables social enterprises to develop cross-sectoral relations with different stakeholders and to leverage a wide range of resources, whose creative configurations can lead to social innovation (Defourny and Nyssens, 2013).

Besides its plural view towards (socio-)economic relations, the 'substantive' approach emphasises the embeddedness of economic actors and relations within their specific territorial contexts (Peck, 2013; Roberts, 2018). The intrinsic relation of rural social enterprises with the contexts in which they are based, hence their place-based character (Lang and Fink, 2019), concurs with this emphasis on geographical sensitivity. In this regard, we agree with Guthey et al. (2014) who argue that the incorporation of a place-based approach to the study of organisations, including social enterprises, allows us to "conceptualise how […] these 'actors' participate in shaping, and are shaped by, the social and physical world" (Guthey et al., 2014, p. 259; see also Mazzei, 2017).

This study incorporates the concept of 'place'[1] in order to add analytical nuance to the study of rural social enterprises as social innovation actors. 'Places' are defined as unique geographically located entities formed by material objects and social relations that come together in specific times (Agnew, 1987; Hudson, 2001). Moreover, 'places' are infused with (multiple) meanings and identities and inscribed with various emotional and symbolic ties, making them meaningful locations (Massey and Jess, 1995). However, 'places' are not fixed entities with essential features but they are constantly shaped by the interrelations among multiple, local and extra-local, actors and in relation to other places, not in isolation from them (Cresswell, 2004; Heley and Jones, 2012).

According to Agnew (1987) 'places' are formed by three interrelated dimensions, i.e. location, locale and sense of place. *Location* refers to the geographical coordinates (site) in which a place can be found, thus it relates to its topography, natural environment and geographical position (Guthey et al., 2014). *Locale* refers to the material and institutional settings in which social relations occur. Thus, in case of a locality the concrete configuration of buildings, streets, land, workspaces, and institutional frameworks in which activities takes place (Hudson, 2001). *Sense of place* refers to the identification that people express in relation to a specific place as a unique entity. This sense of place can refer to an individual feeling but also to collective feelings, such as a collective sense of belonging towards a locality (Massey and Jess, 1995). Moreover, this identification can refer to an emotional attachment related to the environment/nature, culture or history/roots; however, it can also refer to a social attachment, attributed to the presence of social ties (van Veelen and Hagget, 2017).

In summary, a 'substantive' approach provides a sound overarching theoretical lens to explore rural social enterprises as social innovation actors by stressing the embeddedness of economic relations and actors within society and nature. In this regard, the three 'forms of integration' previously described, i.e. market-exchange, redistribution and reciprocity, provide us with an opportunity to analyse the plurality of (socio-)economic relations that rural social enterprises engage in. This, coupled with an exploration of the concept of 'place' through the three dimensions of location, locale and sense of place, allows us to analyse the place-based character of rural social enterprises (see Fig. 1).

4. Methodology

In order to reach its aim, this study has been informed by a critical realist philosophy of science, which lies in the combination of a realist ontology, thus the natural and social world exists independent of our knowledge of it, with a constructivist epistemology, meaning that our only way to know about this reality is through social constructions which are social and historical dependent (Sayer, 1992). According to critical realism our world is stratified and not every aspect of reality is directly observable, thus the purpose of the social sciences is to establish, through an iteration between empirical observations and theoretical reflections, those 'causal mechanisms' that explain "why what happens actually does happen" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 52).

Due to the limited amount of previous research on the phenomenon studied, an intensive research design (Sayer, 1992) based on three in-depth exploratory case studies of social enterprises based in rural localities has been followed. Case studies are suitable for the in-depth exploration of particular processes within their natural settings using a variety of data sources (Maxwell, 2018).

The three cases that form this study were chosen through a preparatory phase in which the researchers first selected a predominantly rural region recognized for its intensity of social enterprises by regional development actors and national reports on social enterprises (DRCD and SFF, 2018). The researchers visited and conducted (informal) interviews with a number of rural social enterprise members and other rural development actors in this region. Based on these visits and conversations a list of potential cases was established following some pre-established criteria[2] which were used to enhance the comparability among the cases (Miles and Huberman, 1994). From this list three rural social enterprises were selected based on their potential to provide "exemplary knowledge" (Thomas, 2011, p. 514) about the phenomenon researched.

This study has followed different qualitative methods for collecting data, i.e. participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010), semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2013) and documents (Rapley and Rees, 2018). The data was gathered over a 15 months' period, September 2018–December 2019, in which the researchers maintained

[1] For this study the concept of 'place' has been chosen as the terminology against related concepts such a 'space'. The reason for this is the incorporation of social and symbolic/identity aspects within the concept of 'place', as opposed to the more abstract conceptualisation of 'space' (Cresswell, 2004, pp.7–9). However, this study acknowledges the interrelation between these concepts and the proximity (or equivalence) between 'place' and 'social space' (Lefevbre, 1991 in Halfacree, 2006). Furthermore, although we acknowledge that 'places' can refer to different entities such as rooms, houses, gardens, neighbourhoods or cities, the usage of 'place' for this study refers to the localities (villages) in which the studied rural social enterprises are based.

[2] Four minimum requisites were established to select the (potential) cases: the organisation clearly fits within the conceptualisation of a social enterprise; the social enterprise is based and operates within a rural area/locality; the social enterprise is an established organisation, i.e. has been in operation for more than 5 years and; the social enterprise has the development of the locality/area as its main goal.

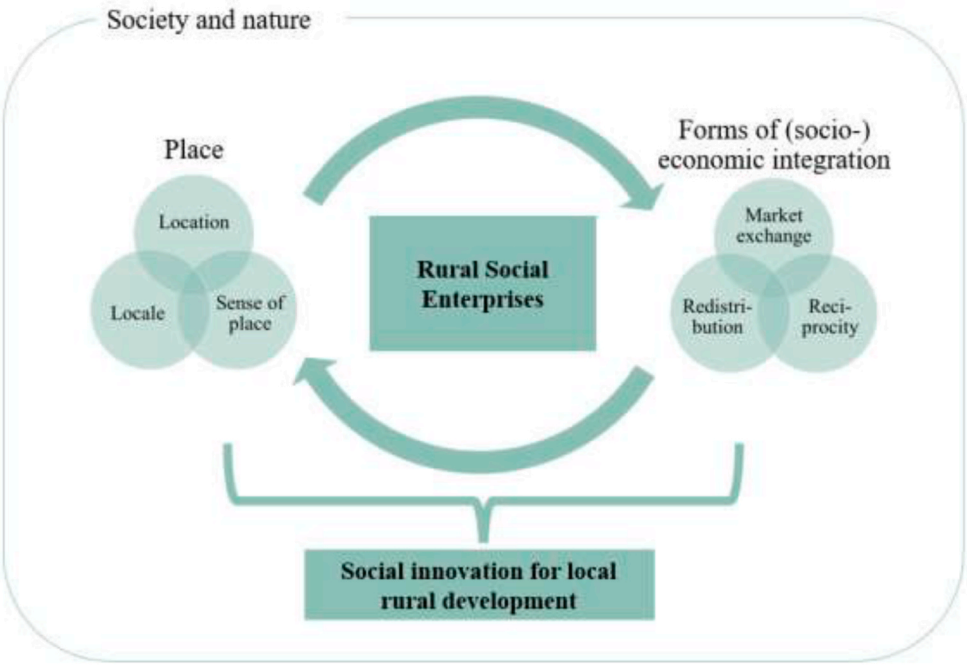


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework. A 'substantive' approach towards exploring rural social enterprises as social innovation actors.

contact on (at least) a weekly basis with each of the three rural social enterprises. With regard to participant observations, a total of 383 pages of field notes were recorded, from different activities such as board meetings, the daily work of the social enterprises, local events organised by the social enterprises and regional/national meetings in which the social enterprises participated. A total of 51 semi-structured interviews, resulting in 2790 minutes of audio records and 954 pages of transcription, were conducted with different stakeholders of the social enterprises. These include internal members such as volunteers, board members and staff, and also external stakeholders such as local private businesses, members from other local organisations, regional development organisations and public authorities. A total of 160 documents were gathered, including internal documents from the social enterprises (e.g. annual reports and strategy documents), regional development plans and previous studies about the organisations (see Table 1).

These multiple methods have been used to enhance the 'triangulation' (Flick, 2018) of the data in two ways. First, as complementary methods that "reveal different aspects of a single complex phenomenon" (Maxwell, 2018, p. 27); second, as a way to corroborate and/or refine the data that supports the findings and conclusions of this study by using the point of view of different informants (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In order to make sense of the vast amount of data gathered, a thematic analysis as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was performed with the assistance of the CAQDAS NVivo 12. The analysis of the data started while the fieldwork was ongoing allowing for an increasingly focused data collection and for the verification and/or refinement of (preliminary) findings (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This intensive research design allowed for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study based on the constant iteration between data collection, analysis and theoretical reflection.

Table 1
Summary of the data gathered.

Methods	Semi-structured Interviews		Participant Observations	Other Material/ Documents
	Internal Stakeholders	External Stakeholders		
Total	36	15	383 pages of field notes	160 documents

5. Framework, contextualisation and description of the case studies

The three cases presented in this paper are situated within the Republic of Ireland, which has about 5 million inhabitants (CSO, 2019) and is characterised by a low population density of about 71 persons/km^2, mostly concentrated around the capital (Morgenroth, 2018). Despite having one of the higher percentages of rural population within the EU (Eurostat, 2017), Ireland's population trend reflects a growing process of urbanisation as the share of people living in rural areas has declined from 53,6% in 1966 to 37,3% in 2016 (CSO, 2016).

Ireland's economy is highly globalised, greatly dependent on foreign direct investment and affected by global market trends (O'Hagan, 2018). This model has led to an increasing commodification of the Irish countryside and to processes of economic restructuring in rural areas (Creamer et al., 2009; McDonagh et al., 2009), which, especially in times of crisis, has meant higher than average unemployment rates, low average disposable income, reduced service levels, increased out-migration and more business closures than in urban areas (CEDRA, 2014; O'Hara and O'Shaughnessy, 2015).

In politico-administrative terms, Ireland presents levels of public expenditure in services such as education, health or transport below the EU average (Eurostat, 2020b, 2020c). This underspend is notably significant in rural areas which have been suffering from a decline in service provision and from communication and infrastructural deficits (Morgenroth, 2018). Furthermore, Ireland has been characterised by a centralised government system, the historical reduced presence of Regional Authorities[3] have led to a greater presence of organisations and institutions emerging from the civil society. Thus, leaving a historically significant role for the Irish third sector in local job creation, service

[3] Within the Irish political architecture, the county (and in some exceptional cases also the city) forms the core element of local government. In this regard, within Ireland the (City and) County Councils are called the 'Local Authority' as there is no lower tier of government with enforcement powers. However, within this study these political institutions are named as 'Regional Authorities' as they cover areas which includes multiple 'localities', including rural dwellers, small villages, towns and cities.

delivery and local development (Donnelly-Cox et al., 2001; O'Hara, 2001). Irish social enterprises, including those in rural areas, have been acknowledged by the Irish government for their contributions to the social and economic progress of the country through innovative tools and in 2019 the first National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland (2019–2022) was published, representing a milestone for their institutional recognition (Government of Ireland, 2019).

The three rural social enterprises studied, i.e. Masvil, Deethal and Scéal,[4] are based and operate within the South-Mid West of Ireland[5] (see Fig. 2). Overall, this region presents lower levels of population density and growth, together with higher old age dependency and a higher rate of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion than Ireland's national average. Moreover, after the last economic crisis (2008–2012), this region suffered a level of employment recovery (2012–2016) below that of the national average, denoting its weak economic performance (see Table 2).

Within this region, the three rural social enterprises studied are based in small villages of between 200 and 800 inhabitants. They are situated within a farming landscape of rather small plots and are close to scenic natural features such as a mountain range, lake and hills. The rural social enterprises operate in relatively isolated locations, characterised by limited public transport connections and poor access to internet broadband (CSO, 2016). Furthermore, the localities have limited (basic) services and a few SMEs. However, these localities are also characterised by (relatively) high levels of third sector organisations.

The three rural social enterprises studied were formally established in the 1990's with the aim of fostering the development of their local community. They operate as non-profit organisations[6] in which democratic decision-making is formally established by their articles of association. The social enterprises present relatively modest annual incomes, which are mainly used to pay fixed and running costs, such as insurance or electricity, or is reinvested in projects managed by the organisations. The social enterprises employ between 12 and 18 staff, mainly subsidised through government Activation Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) (see Table 3).

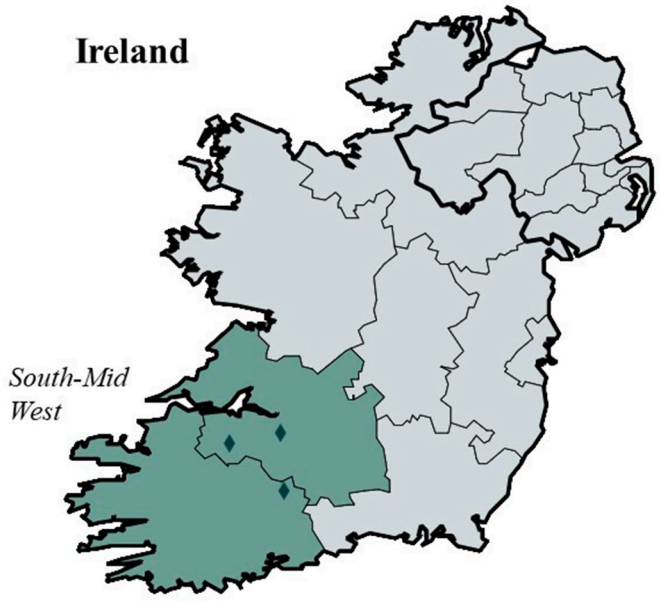


Fig. 2. Map of South-Mid West of Ireland and location of the three case studies. Source: own elaboration, created with mapchart.net.

Table 2
Main characteristics of Ireland's South-Mid West Region (NUTS 3).

	South-Mid West	Ireland
Population density (2018)	52,75 p/km^2	70,9 p/km^2
Annual Population growth (2011–2016)	0.55%	0.7%
Old-age dependency rate	23,45	21,2
Decline in employment (2008–2012)	14,55%	14,5%
Recovery of employment (2012–2016)	5,2%	9,7%
Risk of poverty and social exclusion	23,7%[a]	22,7%

[a] This information is at NUTS 2 level, thus refer to Southern region which includes the NUTS 3 Mid-West, South-West and South-East.
Source: own elaboration with data from CSO and Eurostat.

The three social enterprises have developed a wide range of 'projects'[7] within their localities (see Fig. 3). Some of these projects are common to the three social enterprises, including the development of community buildings, such as community centres/halls, and public outdoor recreational spaces such as playgrounds, picnic areas or parks. Moreover, these social enterprises regularly organise community events including leisure, cultural, environmental and community planning activities. In addition, Masvil and Deethal have implemented catering services (restaurant, café-shop) and community offices from where they host and manage the abovementioned ALMPs and where the local population can avail of basic administration services. These social enterprises have also developed social housing and community garden projects within their localities. In addition, Masvil runs two adult education courses and a childcare service, Deethal has developed a community car park and a bi-weekly farmers and artisan market while Scéal runs a heritage centre and hosts guided tours of the local area.

6. Findings

Our findings show five different, but interrelated, mechanisms that explain how rural social enterprises engage in a plurality of (socio-) economic relations and with different dimensions of their 'place' to develop new solutions and/or (inclusive) social and governance relations, while contributing to the development of their localities.

6.1. Harnessing locational aspects to create (local) market relations (mechanism 1)

An important feature of a 'place' is its relative geographical position (location). Even though the locations in which the rural social enterprises studied are based present challenging characteristics such as

Table 3
Summary of main characteristics of the social enterprises Masvil, Deethal and Scéal.

	Masvil	Deethal	Scéal
Established	1996	1993	1993
Aim	Local and Community Development		
Governance Structure	Non-profit distribution Democratic decision-making (each director/member one vote)		
Turnover	25–50.000€/ annual	75–100.000 €/annual	100–125.000€/ annual
Employees	17	18	12

[4] These are fictional names.

[5] The region of the study corresponds to two EU NUTS 3 regions, i.e. Mid-West and South West. The statistical information provided in this section is obtained through the combination of statistics from these NUTS 3 regions.

[6] Masvil and Deethal are legally registered as Companies Limited by Guarantee whereas Scéal is legally registered as a Co-operative Society Limited.

[7] 'Projects' refer to the activities, services, products and/or infrastructures developed by the social enterprises.

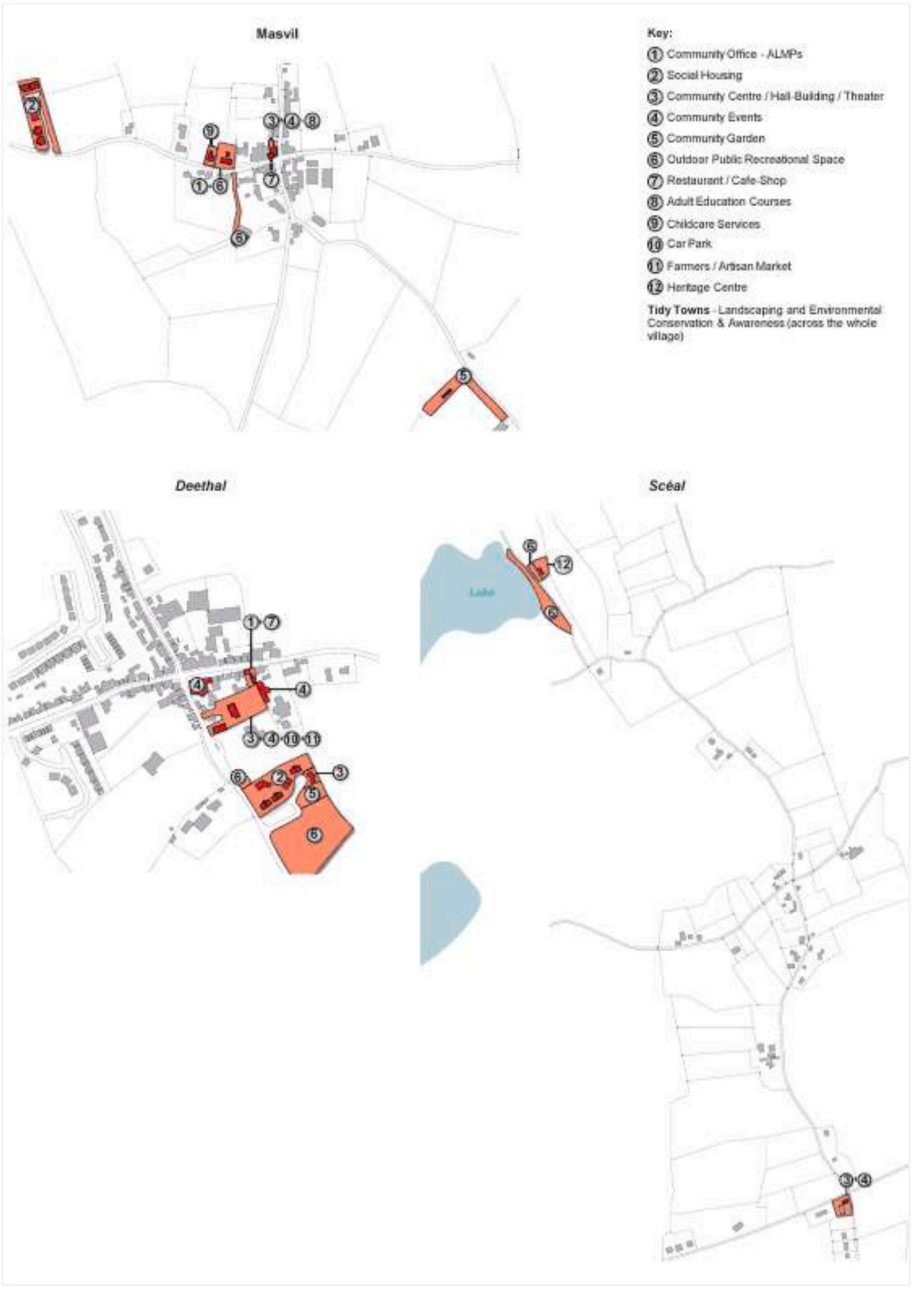


Fig. 3. Projects of the rural social enterprises Masvil, Deethal and Scéal.

relative isolation due to difficult road access and limited public transport and internet connectivity, these organisations have harnessed specific locational aspects presented by their 'places' as a way to create market relations. In this regard, historical features such as the presence of archaeological sites (Scéal) and natural assets such as mountains or lakes close to the villages have been used by these rural social enterprises as the basis for the development of some of their projects. Examples of these include the development of internationally recognized walking routes, guided tours and a heritage-interpretation centre, all of which have contributed to the (re)valorisation of locational elements for the local population and attract (national and international) visitors to the localities, hence, generating market revenues for the social enterprises and, as a ripple effect, for other local for-profit businesses.

> "[The staff and volunteers] see the beauty of the lake. I think that that really is the driving force behind it [the heritage centre]." [Scéal_Volunteer_01]

Furthermore, these social enterprises have harnessed their geographical location in terms of (road) connections. In the case of Deethal, the locality is situated next to a national road with regular passing traffic. This social enterprise has harnessed this location by establishing a restaurant, a service previously non-existent within the village. Moreover, Masvil has provided services such as childcare and adult education courses which have sustained over time due to their capacity to address needs presented by geographically and socially vulnerable local populations unable to access such services in other towns/cities because of a lack of affordable private and/or accessible public transport facilities.

> "I find in the case of Masvil with the Healthcare programme that's run there, it's had fantastic certification and placement over the years, and it's because of its location; […], trying to come into the city campus every day is a challenge logistically if you don't have access to a car, and public transport is limiting […] it's meeting the

needs of the people in that catchment area, that driving to the city is not feasible but they can make it to Masvil village". [Masvil_Regional Education Body Staff_16]

Therefore, this social enterprise has harnessed its geographical isolated position to develop and facilitate otherwise non-existent services for the population of the area in which it is based and which generate, at the same time, an income for the organisation.

Our findings show how these rural social enterprises have been able to harness locational aspects of their places to provide services and create (local) market relations that were previously non-existent. These market relations, besides generating local employment and promoting local spending, have generated income for these rural social enterprises, which is used to cover the costs of the projects and/or invested in the development of new projects that contribute to the development of their localities.

6.2. Navigating their regional framework to enhance institutional connectivity (mechanism 2)

Another important aspect of a 'place' is its institutional setting. In order to develop their projects the rural social enterprises have engaged with national and, especially with, regional institutions such as Regional Authorities and Regional Development Companies.[8] These regional institutions are in charge of the implementation of key funding programmes utilised by these rural social enterprises such as the EU LEADER programme, the national Town and Village Renewal Scheme[9] and/or other smaller regional funds. Moreover, these institutions provide key guidance in terms of expertise for the projects of the rural social enterprises and in some instances they provide the buildings and/or land where the projects of the social enterprises are developed.

Each of the three rural social enterprises has been able to navigate their regional development framework to build strong and long-lasting relations with these (regional) institutions in order to enhance the institutional connectivity of their localities. Hence, the social enterprises have developed, and refined over time, a capacity to leverage redistributive resources otherwise not available within their localities. This institutional connectivity has been developed by the social enterprises through diverse means such as writing applications for competitive funding programmes; participating in national and regional 'competitions', especially related to their landscaping and environmental conservation projects; organising or hosting regional events such as information and networking meetings and; regularly linking with their local and regional public elected representatives.

All of the former represents ways in which these rural social enterprises have navigated their regional framework in order to establish strong links and to gain recognition and support of their (regional) institutions. This has led to the legitimisation of these rural social enterprises as recognized actors capable of speaking on behalf of their localities. One of the ways in which this (local) legitimacy is built is through community planning processes. These processes are used by the social enterprises to gather the needs and perspectives from the local population so to allow for the articulation of a structured and cohesive vision for the development of their localities. Moreover, the formalisation of these ideas into (written) documents, typically in the form of multi-annual strategic planning, has been key in terms of accessing external (redistributive) resources, such as grants, from institutional bodies.

"Every application I did for about four years, I used to send out the five-year plan with it, and more or less they [funding-institutional bodies] wouldn't question it, because they say, 'they have a plan, they know where they're going'". [Deethal_Board Member_08]

Overall, enhancing institutional connectivity is an important function of rural social enterprises especially in politico-administrative frameworks such as the Irish, with a historical absence of a strong local (municipal) tier of government. Within this context, rural social enterprises (can) take on some of the local functions that, in other parts of Europe, usually fall into municipal bodies (institutions), such as voicing up and negotiating local demands, linking their localities with higher institutional levels and/or redistributing some (public) resources within their localities.

6.3. (Re)valorising existing underutilised material settings for communal benefit (mechanism 3)

Another aspect of a 'place' is its material setting, represented in this study by the land, buildings and/or the physical composition of the localities where these social enterprises are based and operate. The (historical) configuration of material assets within their localities has played an important role in the work of these rural social enterprises as these organisations have been able to (re)valorise underutilised settings.

Related to this are also limitations for the work of these rural social enterprises, illustrated by the lack of premises to hold big community events, the limited availability of land to expand their social housing units, or the limitations of planning permissions and/or activities in some protected areas and buildings. Despite these limitations, these rural social enterprises have turned a number of underutilised material settings, such as idle farmland, closed police stations, schools and creameries, into functional social and community spaces such as outdoor recreational spaces or community halls/centres and theatres.

Beyond the transformation of the aesthetics of their localities and the conservation and/or promotion of local cultural and historical sites/assets, the (re)valorisation of underutilised assets has also meant the development of premises for new local businesses. These local businesses provide (previously non-existent) basic services and by operating from spaces leased/rented from the social enterprises, also generate a market income for these latter organisations.

"When the country went bust, they started selling off Police stations […]. As it turned out it was a fantastic site. We [Masvil] had a big building. We realised we badly needed a preschool. […] Maria said she would take over the preschool if we basically did it up, we put the money in to make it functional. Maria pays rent, she's now paying 75 euros a week plus half the costs". [Masvil_Board Member_ 01]

Nevertheless, the main contribution these rural social enterprises make through the (re)valorisation of underutilised material settings, as community assets, is through the provision of physical spaces for the local population to gather and socialise, hence, contributing to tackling social isolation which is an important challenge for Irish rural communities. Furthermore, through the physical community infrastructures developed by these rural social enterprises collaborative synergies among different organisations have been fostered at a local level, which have in turn promoted local reciprocity relations.

"It's a fantastic facility over in [the] carpark. The collaboration started when Deethal bought and developed the carpark […]. The GAA[10] has held a festival for years, and with [rising public liability] insurances [costs] in the GAA it's got more difficult to hold events here [in the pitch], so we went over to Deethal and we split some of

[8] Regional Development Companies in Ireland are typically, non-profit organisations comprised of private, public and community/voluntary representatives with responsibility for the implementation of national and EU programmes including the LEADER Rural Development Programme.

[9] Town and Village Renewal Scheme was introduced by the Department of Rural & Community Development in 2016 with the aim to rejuvenate rural towns and villages throughout Ireland.

[10] Gaelic Athletic Association.

the bigger events". [Deethal_Other Local Organisations Volunteer_12]

The (re)valorisation of underutilised material settings has usually been accompanied by a transfer of ownership of land and buildings from private to community hands. While this has increased the responsibility of the social enterprises for maintaining the land/buildings, it has also increased their capacity to (partly) take 'ownership' (decide) over some aspects of the future development of their localities.

Hence, through their engagement with material aspects of their 'places', these rural social enterprises have (re)valorised existing underutilised settings turning them into functional spaces for their communities, facilitating social relations among the local population and contributing to the development of market and reciprocity relations between the social enterprises and other local stakeholders such as private businesses/entrepreneurs and other third sector organisations. Consequently, these new material settings, regularly, provide a material base for the further development of existent and/or the emergence of new local projects.

6.4. Leveraging individual attachments and (re)enhancing an inclusive collective sense of belonging to foster collective action (mechanism 4)

An important aspect of a 'place' is the individual and collective identification of the population with this place as a unique entity. The localities where these rural social enterprises are based present a tradition of community involvement and the local population tends to strongly identify with the locality, showing a strong attachment to 'place'. Such characteristics have been harnessed by these rural social enterprises in two different ways.

First, by leveraging the attachment of local individuals through their willingness to work and especially to volunteer in the social enterprises. The members of the social enterprises studied demonstrate a great attachment towards their localities. This attachment is particularly important in the case of the (voluntary) board members that assume a high level of responsibility for the governance and management of these social enterprises without any remuneration and/or financial rewards. These volunteers demonstrate extensive social connections within the localities (social attachment), but they also exhibit an important emotional attachment in relation to their (family) roots, the history and the natural environment of their localities. Both social and emotional attachments spur the involvement and commitment of these regular volunteers.

> "I believe that board members like those of Masvil are the unsung heroes of the country. Because they bring their expertise, whatever it might be, there's nobody better that has local knowledge. But they just spend so much time on their communities, because we just want to see Masvil village improving. […] we have that basic love of our area and that's where it comes from". [Masvil_Board Member_08]

Additionally, the extensive social attachment of the volunteers and staff has been instrumental in attracting new volunteers and workers to these organisations but also in leveraging in-kind and monetary donations and facilitating the borrowing of materials, tools and machinery from other local stakeholders such as farmers or local for-profit businesses. Hence, this social attachment has been instrumental for the development of, especially, reciprocity relations within their localities.

Second, these social enterprises have (re)enhanced an inclusive collective sense of belonging within their localities. By organising regular community events, where the local population is asked to participate from the planning phase to its implementation, they have contributed to engaging a wide range of local people in community affairs. An inclusive collective sense of belonging is enhanced due to the diversity of activities and services developed by these rural social enterprises to address the needs of different groups within their localities. This inclusivity is exemplified by the development of community outdoor recreational spaces and community events such as coffee mornings, international food fairs and local festivals in which people can participate and gather regardless of their creed, values, age, nationality or socio-economic situation. In this regard, these social enterprises fulfil an important social function aimed at inclusivity, in which they complement the work of traditional social institutions in their localities, like the church or GAA.

This inclusive and collective sense of belonging has been further strengthened by the development of collective democratic spaces, such as the previously mentioned community planning projects. Besides having provided the opportunity to local people to express their opinions in the development of their localities, these collective democratic spaces have been used by these rural social enterprises to engage a wide range of local people in the participation of community projects developed and/or promoted by these organisations, therefore to encourage collective action at a local level.

> "Deethal has a huge role in helping people here to get funding for worthwhile projects. The other role I think is just bringing people together […] and coming up with ideas that might sound crazy but making them work. […] Deethal has given us confidence in ourselves that we can do it. […] Deethal has instilled that pride in our place in that you'll go the extra mile and do something because you know it's going to benefit everybody eventually". [Deethal_Other Local Organisations Volunteer_14]

Hence, these rural social enterprises have engaged with identity aspects of their 'places' by leveraging the social and emotional attachments of local individuals and by (re)enhancing an inclusive collective sense of belonging that stimulates the collective interest and action of the local population towards the development of their localities.

6.5. Combining (substantive) plural socio-economic relations: a common denominator (mechanism 5)

The four mechanisms described above show the different ways in which rural social enterprises engage with locational, institutional, material and identity dimensions of 'place'. While collectively these mechanisms give rise to local development, they are only made possible through the mobilisation and combination of a plurality of socio-economic relations (market, redistribution and reciprocity) with different stakeholders. This represents a fifth mechanism and a common denominator in the processes that lead to the engagement of these rural social enterprises with their 'places', thus aids to explain how these organisations contribute to the development of their localities.

When developing projects that have harnessed locational aspects of their 'places', these rural social enterprises have combined resources accessed through reciprocity and redistribution relations. This is evidenced particularly in the landscaping and environmental projects and/or tourism related projects such as guided tours. For these projects the rural social enterprises usually combine labour coming from employees subsidised by ALMPs and volunteers together with donations (in-kind and monetary) from local individuals and businesses and small grants and prizes from regional institutions.

> "We have a great CE scheme [ALMP] here under the local supervisor, Ruth. We [volunteers] work in co-operation with her people. We are a small group, but when it comes to the litter pick ever year, and the spring litter clean, we could have up to 30, 35 people on the rota". [Deethal_Board Member_05]

In order to navigate their regional frameworks, the personal relationships developed by staff and board members with their regional institutions are of great importance. Moreover, having a track record of previously secured, and successfully managed grants (redistribution relations), along with evidence of diversified and sustainable sources of income from the sale of services and/or products (market relations) and/

or from regular fundraising activities (reciprocity relations) have also been identified as important factors when applying for funding to these institutions.

In order to (re)valorise underutilised material settings, these rural social enterprises have acquired land and/or buildings through purchases (market), nominal leases either from public authorities (redistribution) or from private local individuals and/or organisations (reciprocity). Although the main construction and renovation works are often contracted with (local) private contractors, the volunteers of these social enterprises play an important role in supervising the implementation of the projects, thus market and reciprocity relations are also mixed in this regard. Furthermore, redistribution resources, namely in forms of grants, have been key for renovating underutilised material settings and turning them into functional community spaces. These grants are combined, necessarily, with match-funding obtained through reciprocity resources such as fundraising/donations from local stakeholders, and market resources such as loans from regular banks and/or national community finance organisations. Therefore, a combination of diverse resources derived from market, redistribution and reciprocity relations are used by these rural social enterprises in order to (re)valorise underutilised material settings.

> "So, they've got 75% grant aid,[…] the group [Scéal] have been very successful in getting some match funding through the local authority for these key projects. But there's still a 5% cash contribution that is required by the group, […] I mean they would have had to take out loans, social finance loans in respect of the building because grants will go so far, match will go so far but there's always going to be loans that are carried." [Scéal_Regional Development Company Staff_02].

Finally, when leveraging individual attachments and (re)enhancing an inclusive collective sense of belonging to foster collective action, different types of reciprocity relations have been key. These include the volunteer labour of local individuals and the synergies with other local stakeholders, such as third sector organisations, with whom the social enterprises organise joint projects. The former is also combined with redistributive relations, for example in the case of the community planning processes in which the staff from the Regional Development Company, in tandem with the volunteers and staff from the social enterprises, play an important role in facilitating this process within the local communities.

These findings show that a common denominator in the work of these rural social enterprises is their engagement in, and combination of, a plurality of (socio-)economic relations when fostering new solutions that contribute to an integrated development of their localities. The mechanisms described above illustrate how the engagement with, and (re)valorisation of, various aspects of their 'places' are intrinsically related to their mobilisation, and combination, of a plurality of (socio-) economic relations, i.e. market, redistribution and reciprocity. Therefore, we argue that the interrelation of these mechanisms offers an explanation of how rural social enterprises contribute to the development of their localities (see Fig. 4).

7. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper is to explore how rural social enterprises engage in a plurality of (socio-)economic relations, and with different dimensions of their 'places', in order to contribute to the development of their localities.

Our findings have shown how the rural social enterprises studied engage with locational, institutional, material and identity dimensions of their 'places'. By showing this engagement, this study reinforces previous research that has stressed the inextricable link between rural social enterprises and their rural context (e.g. Smith and McColl, 2016; Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). Moreover, our findings concur with literature from the field of rural entrepreneurship which stresses the importance of rural entrepreneurs' 'placial embeddedness', understood as the "entrepreneur's intimate knowledge and use of the (local) physical, cultural and historical landscapes and the concern shown for the well-being of the places" (Korsgaard et al., 2015, p. 586). Our study adds nuance to this previous research by illustrating that this 'placial embeddedness' is also a significant characteristic of collective entrepreneurial entities such as rural social enterprises. Furthermore, this study has shown specific mechanisms that explain how these rural social enterprises engage with their 'places' as a way to foster social innovation and contribute to local rural development.

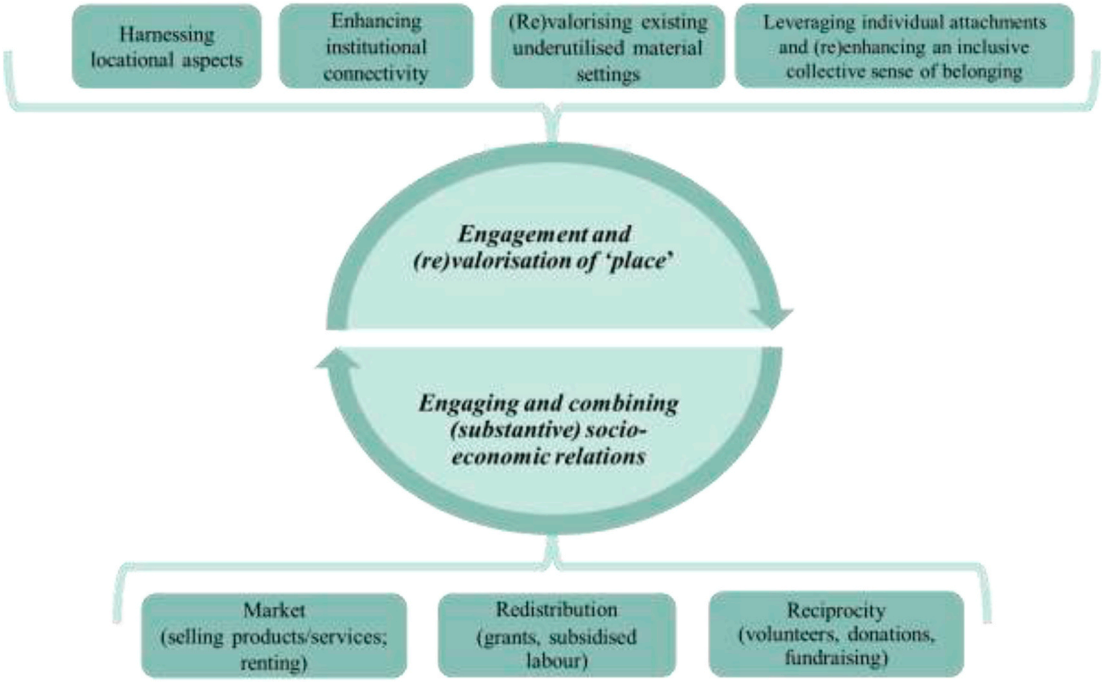


Fig. 4. Interrelation of engagement and (re)valorisation of 'place' and combination of (substantive) socio-economic relations by rural social enterprises.

The first two mechanisms, harnessing locational aspects to create (local) market relations and; navigating their regional framework to enhance institutional connectivity, demonstrate how rural social enterprises engage with geographical, natural and institutional aspects of their 'places' in order to negotiate and/or translate structural-exogenous dynamics such as the effects of rural economic restructuring or problems of connectivity into concrete (organisational and community) action which have led to the implementation of new locally focused solutions (Bock, 2016). The third mechanism, (re)valorising existing underutilised material settings for communal benefit, shows how rural social enterprises engage with material aspects of their 'places' such as idle land or derelict buildings, turning them into functional community spaces. This mechanism stresses the significance of 'suitable' community material assets (infrastructures) as a necessary base for the socio-economic development of rural localities (Woods, 2011) and shows the key role that rural social enterprises play in providing these (Healey, 2015). The fourth mechanism, harnessing individual attachments and (re)enhancing an inclusive collective sense of belonging, shows how rural social enterprises engage with identity aspects of their 'places' as a way of fostering collective action at a local level. This mechanism highlights the ability of rural social enterprises to leverage unique resources such as those related to the sense of place of their local population (van Veelen and Hagget, 2017). These mechanisms demonstrate how rural social enterprises engage with their rural context as a (integrated) 'place', i.e. as a unique entity that combines location, locale and sense of place dimensions. Therefore, our findings illustrate how through their 'placial embeddedness' rural social enterprises develop new solutions to meet local needs and inclusive social relations at a local level.

In addition, our study shows how rural social enterprises engage in a plurality of (socio-)economic relations through which they leverage a wide range of resources that are combined in innovative ways. Thus, our findings reinforce previous work which highlights the resourcefulness of these organisations (Barraket et al., 2019). In order to leverage these resources, our findings illustrate how rural social enterprises develop cross-sectoral and multi-scalar relations with diverse actors such as local individuals and businesses, regional institutions or other third sector organisations, concurring with previous literature that stresses the role of rural social entrepreneurs as 'embedded intermediaries' (Richter, 2019). However, our study highlights that this intermediary role is assumed, mainly, by a collective entity rather than by a single social entrepreneur, thus our findings align rural social enterprises with some of the key elements of social innovation, i.e. its collective and collaborative character (Neumeier, 2017).

Moreover, our findings add nuance to previous literature by showing how, in order to leverage this wide range of resources, rural social enterprises engage in and combine plural socio-economic relations representing the three forms of economic integration that constitute the 'substantive' economy (Polanyi, 1977). Our study shows that rural social enterprises hybridize market-based, reciprocity and redistributive relations in their organisational activities (Roy and Grant, 2019), and that creating synergies from these plural socio-economic relations allows these organisations to alter existing material, social and institutional relationships within their localities (Moulaert et al., 2013). Therefore, we argue that this 'substantive hybridity' is an important characteristic of the socially innovative character of rural social enterprises. The kind of hybridity we observe in the rural social enterprises studied is fundamentally different from forms of hybridity often associated with social enterprises in current literature, which is based on a social and economic dyadic in which social and economic logics are portrayed as competing dimensions (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Smith and Besharov, 2019). Yet, our findings concur with ideas about the 'substantive' economy, in which 'the social' and 'the economic' are not seen as opposing forces, but where economic relations and activities are embedded within society and nature (Polanyi, 1957; Roy and Grant, 2019).

To conclude, we argue that 'placial embeddedness' and 'substantive hybridity' are intrinsically related within rural social enterprises and that the combination of these two aspects represent an essential feature to explain the (potential) social innovative character of these organisations. Therefore, our study shows that rural social enterprises (can) foster social innovation through a process of *'placial substantive hybridity'*. By this term, we mean the ability of rural social enterprises to engage with their rural context as a 'place', thus harnessing and (re)valorising locational, material, institutional and identity elements that form their 'places' and; concurrently, engaging in and combining a plurality of (socio-)economic relations, thus, hybridising market, redistribution and reciprocity relations for the provision of collective locally focused solutions. The combination of these two aspects, thus their *'placial substantive hybridity'*, has allowed these rural social enterprises to contribute to an integrated development of their localities by harnessing and (re)valorising (untapped) local resources while complementing these with others coming from extra-local sources, and by accommodating and/or responding to structural-exogenous forces based on the needs of their localities and population (Woods, 2007). These characteristics concur with a neo-endogenous approach towards rural development in which bottom-up and top-down initiatives/actors and forces are necessarily linked (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019). Our empirical research contributes to the literature that links the fields of rural social enterprises, rural social innovation and (neo-endogenous) rural development (Bosworth et al., 2020) by demonstrating how rural social enterprise, through *'placial substantive hybridity'*, can foster social innovation that contributes to neo-endogeneous rural development (see Fig. 5).

However, despite the potential shown by rural social enterprises, our study also stresses that this is only made possible through the partnership of these organisations with other stakeholders such as local businesses, public authorities and third sector organisations rather than as substitutes for any of these (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). This is in line with the suggestion that an enabling state, that can establish these collaborative frameworks, seems to be a necessary (pre)condition for unlocking the social innovative capacity of rural social enterprises (Bock, 2016; Shucksmith, 2010).

Finally, we acknowledge that this paper has some limitations. A first

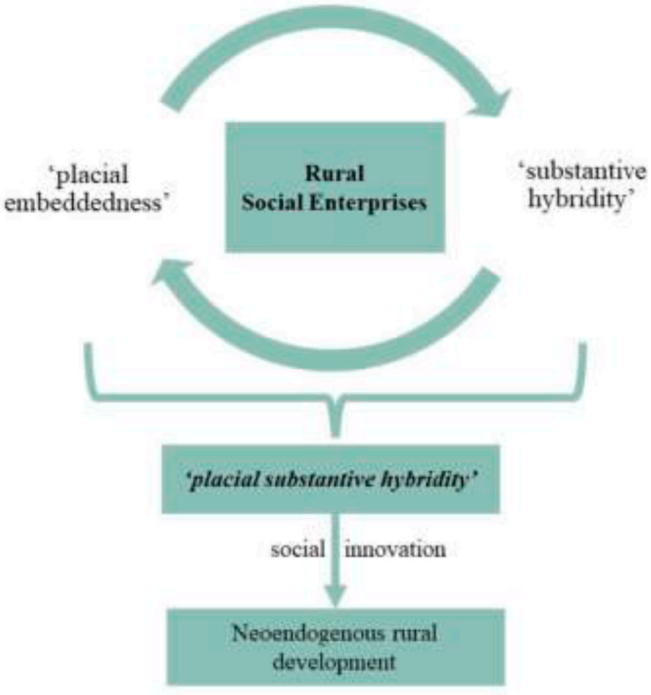


Fig. 5. Rural social enterprises 'placial substantive hybridity'.

limitation is related to the limited (statistical) generalizability of the findings of this research due to the specificity of the context of the case studies and the in-depth but limited sample. Despite this, we believe that a rather theoretical generalization of the mechanisms that emerged in this research is possible, and that this theoretical generalizability could be explored in future studies in different contexts. A second limitation concerns our intentional selection of rural social enterprises that aim to contribute to local development, meaning that our findings are confined to this type of rural social enterprise. We would encourage further research on other types of rural social enterprises operating in different fields. Finally, the focus of this study has been on the rural social enterprises as one pivotal actor for fostering social innovation conducive to neo-endogenous rural development. Our findings confirm the contribution of rural social enterprise to this end; however, they also highlight that social enterprises represent but one of the key actors whose social innovative capacity can be unlocked through a collaborative framework of a diversity of actors and institutions. Future research might focus on exploring such collaborative frameworks for successful neo-endogenous rural development.

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