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Authors	Olmedo, Lucas;Rinne-Koski, Katja Marika;O'Shaughnessy, Mary;Matilainen, Anne;Lähdesmäki, Merja
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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Support structures for a plural economy in rural areas? Analysing the role of community-based social enterprises

Lucas Olmedo PhD[1] | **Katja Marika Rinne-Koski PhD**[2] | **Mary O'Shaughnessy PhD**[1] | **Anne Matilainen PhD**[2] | **Merja Lähdesmäki PhD**[2]

[1]Department of Food Business and Development, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

[2]Ruralia Institute, University of Helsinki, Seinäjoki, Finland

Correspondence
Lucas Olmedo, Department of Food Business and Development, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland.
Email: lucas.olmedo@ucc.ie

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Abstract

Community-led innovative solutions, including community-based social enterprises, have been brought to the fore as significant actors with the potential to contribute to neo-endogenous rural development. Through 34 interviews with stakeholders of four community-based social enterprises operating in rural Ireland and Finland, we analyse the role of these organisations in the institutionalisation of plural (socio-)economic relations within different rural areas of Europe. Our findings demonstrate how community-based social enterprises can act as enablers and supporters of local markets, channels of redistributive resources and coordinators of local reciprocity, thus, contributing to 'institutional thickness' within their localities. We also show how structural differences, such as the role of local government in Finland and Ireland, can partially explain the role of these organisations as rural development actors. Finally, our article stresses the relevance of developing research and policies from a socially embedded and pluralistic view of the economy

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to provide nuanced analysis and realistic solutions to the complex challenges that rural areas face.

KEYWORDS
community-based social enterprises, institutionalisation, neo-endogenous development, plural economy, rural development, rural governance, social embeddedness

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas of sparsely populated regions within Europe are experiencing, in general terms, downward spirals of out-migration, ageing population, narrow labour markets and relatively poor access to a wide range of services, including health care, education/childcare, (public) transportation, shops or financial/bank services (Eurostat, 2022). Within these regions, key services for residents' wellbeing and the development of the areas have been often centralised into local centres (towns and/or cities) (Nordberg et al., 2020). This process is often accompanied by an increasing transfer of responsibility from public authorities to citizens living in rural areas to provide feasible access to these services (Bock, 2016; Rinne-Koski & Lähdesmäki, 2021).

Within this context, European and national rural development policies and programmes enhance the development of community-led innovative solutions that can contribute to service provision, economic development and, more generally, to the revitalisation of rural areas (Bock, 2019; Marango et al., 2021). Social innovative solutions, such as community-based social enterprises, have been brought to the fore as potential solutions to some of the challenges these regions face (Kumpulainen & Soini, 2019; Olmedo et al., 2023; Vercher et al., 2021).

Community-based social enterprises are organisations that combine a social mission with an economic activity, they operate in a defined geographical location or a community, they are often managed and owned by local residents, established to meet local needs and aim to support local participation (Bailey et al., 2018, pp. 15–16). Community-based social enterprises are recognised as the main subtype of social enterprises that operate in rural areas (van Twuijver et al., 2020) and their main features have been linked with neo-endogenous rural development (Olmedo & O'Shaughnessy, 2022).

A key aspect of this link is that community-based social enterprises and neo-endogenous development share a theoretical perspective that draws from the substantive economy developed by Karl Polanyi (Laville, 2014; Ray, 2006), which emphasises the embeddedness of economic relations within society and nature; the relevance of institutions and; the plurality of (socio-)economic relations, including market, redistribution and reciprocity (Polanyi, 1957, 1977). This perspective has been more recently coined as the 'plural economy' (Laville, 2014), which stresses the social construction of the economy and the diversity and complementarity of economic relations that include market, non-market (redistribution) and non-monetary (reciprocity).

Despite the increasing number of studies dealing with social enterprises in rural areas (Steiner et al., 2019; van Twuijver et al., 2020) less is known about the role of community-based social enterprises in the institutionalisation of plural (socio-)economic relations within different rural areas of Europe. Therefore, the research question that guided this study is: How do community-based social enterprises operating within rural areas enhance a plural economy? This question

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is explored through 34 interviews with diverse stakeholders linked to four community-based social enterprises operating in rural villages of Ireland and Finland. These countries share significant shares of rural population (over 30%), low population densities within rural areas and a tradition of integrated rural development policies which, more recently, also recognise the potential importance of community-based social enterprises in (re)vitalising rural areas (Finland's Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2022; Government of Ireland, 2021).

In answering the research question, this article contributes to an understanding of the role of community-based social enterprises in the institutionalisation of a plural economy within rural areas and, therefore, to the study of 'new' actors within rural governance frameworks. The article is structured as follows: Second section presents a review of the literature that links rural development and community-based social enterprises as social innovative and entrepreneurial initiatives. Third section illustrates the theoretical underpinning of this study, that is the plural economy. Fourth section focuses on the methodology. In this section, we profile the four community-based social enterprises studied and describe the methods, processes of data collection and analysis used in the study. Fifth section presents the findings of this study and explain the role of the rural community-based social enterprises studied as enablers and supporters of local markets, channels of redistribution and as coordinators of local reciprocity. Sixth section discusses the findings of this study and their implications for sustainable rural development. Finally, seventh section presents some conclusions, limitations and suggestions for further research.

RURAL GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

European rural areas present great heterogeneity in terms of their social fabric, economic development, geography and institutions (Shucksmith & Brown, 2016; Woods, 2011). Global structural forces, such as global market liberalisation, the growth of mobility of capital, urbanisation, international migration, digitalisation of labour and climate change, have contributed to the uneven development of rural areas within Europe (Bock, 2016; Copus et al., 2020). However, rural areas and their population are not static actors but rather they have reacted in different ways towards the implications of these exogenous-global factors (Dax, 2020).

The relevance of community-led action, including community-based social innovative and social entrepreneurial initiatives, for the development of rural areas is recognised by international organisations and policy documents such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 'Rural Policy 3.0' (OECD, 2019) and the European Commission 'Long-term vision for rural areas' (European Commission, 2021). This emphasis is also reflected in national rural policies, for example in Ireland and Finland Ireland's 'Rural Development Policy. Our rural future 2021–2025', recognises social innovation and social enterprises as key for enhancing an integrated placed-based development of rural areas (Government of Ireland, 2021). Similarly, Finland's 'Countryside renewing with the times: Rural policy programme 2021–2027', recognises the potential role of (community-based) social entrepreneurship for the place-based development of rural areas and aims to incorporate a rural perspective in the national discussion on social entrepreneurship and create prerequisites for the development of cooperatives and social enterprises in rural areas (Finland's Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2022).

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These policy documents align with governance principles advocated in the neo-endogenous rural development approach (Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019). From a neo-endogenous perspective, 'governance' understood as

> a new mode of governing that is no longer enacted solely through the formal, coercive powers of the nation state, but is exercised through a range of government and non-governmental actors and entities operating at different spatial scales and across different sectors (Cheshire, 2016, p. 596),

represents a key aspect for the development of rural areas/localities. Community-based social enterprises have been acknowledged as organisations with potential to contribute to rural development within these governance frameworks (Bock, 2019; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2023).

Previous studies on community-based social enterprises have shown how these organisations have developed a wide range of products and services within rural communities in fields, such as health, eldercare, childcare, adult education, sustainable agriculture, transport, tourism, renewable energy, community infrastructure and village shops (van Twuijver et al., 2020), contributing to the resilience and neo-endogenous development of rural areas (Apostopoulos et al., 2019; Chatzichristos et al., 2021; Olmedo & O'Shaughnessy, 2022). Previous research has also shown the potential of these organisations on working with networks of stakeholders across different sectors and spatial scales (Lang & Fink, 2019; Richter, 2019); their resourcefulness and innovative capacity (Barraket et al., 2019); and how they harness previously untapped human, material, institutional and natural resources of the places where they are based (Olmedo et al., 2023). To develop all the former, a central aspect of community-based social enterprises is their embeddedness within their contexts (Chatzichristos & Nagopoulos, 2020; Musingunzi et al., 2023).

This potential, and positive, contribution towards an innovative and integrated rural development, however, contrast with studies that show how the increasing responsibilities assumed by (community-based) social enterprises in rural areas can overburden those residents involved (Bock, 2019). Moreover, previous research shows how these organisations are unable to modify the (root) causes that provoke uneven rural and regional development (Olmedo & O'Shaughnessy, 2022), and on some occasions they can reinforce territorial discrepancies and inequalities (Bock, 2016; Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). However, the contribution of community-based social enterprises to place-based development, their ability to mobilise a diversity of resources and engage with a multiplicity of stakeholders also make them well placed to contribute to neo-endogenous rural development.

THE PLURAL ECONOMY

Community-based social enterprises form part of the wider social and solidarity economy. Following Laville (2014), in order to analyse the role of organisations within the social and solidarity economy a theoretical framework based on a plural view of the economy is needed.

In this study, we use a framework based on the work of Polanyi (2001 [1944], 1957, 1977) which represents a critique of neo-classic economics as it stresses the intrinsic relation among the economy, society and nature. Therefore, economic relations cannot be detached from their socio-historical and geo-political context (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]). Accordingly, the plural economy stresses the social embeddedness of economic actions (Granovetter, 1985), the role of (collective) institutions rather than individual actors (Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990) and the

diversity of economic relations that include market, non-market and non-monetary relations (Gardin, 2006).

For Polanyi (1957) economic relations are not based on rational individual behaviour but they are 'embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and noneconomic. The inclusion of the noneconomic being vital' (Polanyi, 1957, p. 250). Institutions refer here to a set of rules, norms and (organisational) structures that are relatively stable and shape social and economic behaviour (Scott, 2004; Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990). These institutions act as 'supporting structures' (Polanyi, 1957) that frame and shape the (socio)-economic relations developed.

The plural view of the economy also distances from a 'market fundamentalist' view of economic relations (Block & Somers, 2014). The plural economy acknowledges the presence of three forms of (socio-)economic integration that include market exchange, redistribution and reciprocity (Polanyi, 1977). 'Market-exchange' refers to the (socio-)economic principles that shape the relations developed within a price-making market system, defined by the presence of demand and supply and by competition that determines the rate at which goods and/or services are exchanged. These economic relationships are developed for the sake of commodities and the goal of obtaining profits (Dale, 2010). These market-exchange relations take form of monetary exchanges in compensation for the purchase of a product and/or service. 'Redistribution' refers to the (socio-)economic principle that shape the relations in which resources are allocated by a central authority that gathers and distributes resources (Polanyi, 1957, p. 254). This central institution is usually related to a public authority that works at society level, typically related to the public sphere. 'Reciprocity' refers to the (socio-)economic principle that shape, typically, non-monetary exchanges based on mutuality; thus, economic relations are based on social bonds and social norms between the parts (Dale, 2010; Polanyi, 1957).

According to Ray (2006, p. 80), these three 'forms of economic integration' form part of the theoretical underpinnings of neo-endogenous rural development, and studies taking this approach are concerned with how these 'forms of economic integration' manifest at local and regional level. These three 'forms of economic integration' tend to coexist within each specific context. However, specific institutional arrangements (can) make some more dominant than others at specific times and locations, thus contributing in greater and/or lesser extent to the development of a plural economy (Laville, 2014; Polanyi, 1977). According to Polanyi (1977, pp. 35–43), the institutionalisation of these forms of economic integration needs 'supporting structures' that enhance the occurrence of these plural (socio-)economic relations in a regular and structured fashion.

We suggest that community-based social enterprises, with their combination of social and economic goals, their collective, cross-sectoral and place-based character, could act as 'support structures' for the institutionalisation of market, redistributive and reciprocal economic relations within the rural areas they are based and operate; this article addresses the empirical investigation of this theme.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question that guided this study, a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews has been followed to gather rich and in-depth data about the phenomenon studied (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Stakeholders related to four community-based social enterprises, two located in rural Ireland and two in rural Finland (see Table 1 and Figure 1), were interviewed.

The organisations selected present some similar features. They can clearly be classified as community-based social enterprises (Bailey et al., 2018) as their main goal has a social–community

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TABLE 1 Main characteristics of community-based social enterprises and their rural areas.

Name	Cill (Ireland)	Durry (Ireland)	Jaakkola (Finland)	Mattila (Finland)
Aim	Local and community development	Local and community development	Local and community development	Local and community development
Governance	Democratic	Democratic	Democratic	Democratic
Employment	12 (approx.)	10 (approx.)	6 (approx.)	1–2 (approx.)
Volunteers	+10	+20	+10	+10
Typology rural–urban	Highly rural/remote area	Rural area with moderate urban influence	Rural heartlands area	Rural area located and functionally close to urban area
Population (village)	Approx. 300	Approx. 700	Approx. 420	Approx. 300

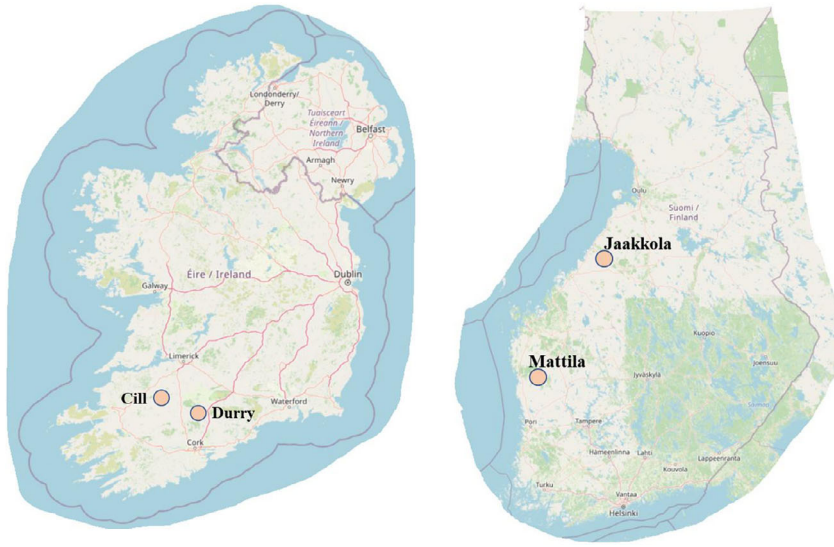


FIGURE 1 Approximate location of community-based social enterprises study.

focus, they develop entrepreneurial/economic activity, they are geographically bounded and are governed by a collective and democratic body of governance formed by local residents. Moreover, the organisations selected have been in operation for more than 5 years, thus having sufficient time to potentially contribute to the institutionalisation of plural (socio-)economic relations within their rural localities. On the other hand, the community-based social enterprises studied are based and operate within different rural areas (according to national rural–urban classifications), reflecting the heterogeneity of rural areas. They also are within two different national jurisdictions (Ireland and Finland) allowing for the transnational comparison of the data.

The Irish community-based social enterprises are represented by Cill and Durry.[1] The main aim of these community-based social enterprises is contributing to the local and community

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development of their areas/localities. These organisations were formally established in the early 1990s and include a democratic body of governance represented by a board of voluntary directors (10–15) in which each person has one vote. Within their socioeconomic activities both social enterprises have developed social housing for vulnerable populations, community infrastructures (e.g. office space, café–restaurant and halls/centres). They also organise cultural events, festivals and education/training courses. Income in both organisations is generated through the sale of services, renting spaces, grants and fundraising. Labour is mixed between (part-time) employees (10–15 depending on the time of the year) and volunteers.

According to a six-tier urban–rural typology developed by the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2019),[2] Cill is situated in a highly rural/remote area. The area is characterised by a declining and ageing population with an age dependency ratio higher than the national average, low levels of formal education and low access to IT services, about 40% of Cill's population do not have Internet access at home (CSO, 2016). Durry is situated in a rural area with moderate urban influence; its population has been increasing since 2006, and its age dependency ratio and the level of (formal) education of its population are close to the national average. Regarding IT, about 70% of households in Durry village have access to a computer and to the Internet (CSO, 2016).

Both Finnish community-based social enterprises stem from the traditions of village association movement in Finland. The first village councils were established in the early 1970s as a counter-reaction to rural migration. During the 1980s, village association movement expanded to cover the whole Finland, when they also began to become formally organised and established. European Union's funding opportunities for rural development meant that these village associations increasingly developed service production and business activities while still maintain their focus on more traditional village activities (Niemi, 2022).

The Finnish cases are represented by Jaakkola and Mattila. The main objective of these community-based social enterprises is to preserve and maintain local services. They represent all residents of the local community, and their operations are run by a board consisting of voluntary members. They have developed summer theatre activities, leisure activities and events and have organised rehabilitative work activities. In Jaakkola, the village association is also the main owner of the Village Service Ltd which provides daycare, lunch and housekeeping services, travel and housing services and lecture and training services related to rural development. Village Services Ltd has been granted the 'Finnish Social Enterprise Mark' by the Finnish Labour Union. In Mattila, the association also rents spaces for different events and runs a shop. Labour is mixed between 2 and 6 employees and volunteers.

Finnish urban–rural areas have been divided into seven categories of which four are considered rural[3] (Finland's Environmental Administration, 2019). According to this classification, Jaakkola represents a rural heartlands area with approximately 420 inhabitants and has a rather versatile economic structure. The village has about 200 industrial jobs and limited agricultural activities. Mattila, on the other hand, is a rural village, with approximately 300 inhabitants, located and functionally close to an urban area. Also, in Mattila there are more jobs in industry than in agriculture, which has, together with the location close to urban area, increased the population in the village during recent years. Both Jaakkola and Mattila have good road connections to the nearby cities.

In total 34 semi-structured interviews, 18 in Ireland and 16 in Finland, with diverse stakeholders of the four community-based social enterprises were conducted between autumn 2018 and spring 2022 to gather the data for this study. Stakeholders interviewed included staff-managers; volunteers and board members; public authorities' representatives; rural and regional development experts and other stakeholders such as business owners and business and local associations' representatives (see Table 2).

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TABLE 2 Interviews with diverse stakeholders.

Stakeholder category	No of interviews			
	Cill (Ireland)	Durry (Ireland	Jaakkola (Finland)	Mattila (Finland)
Volunteers-board members	3	3	2	2
Staff-managers	2	2	1	1
Public authorities representatives	1	1	1	2
Rural-regional development experts	1	2	2	2
Other	2	2	1	2
Total interviews	9	10	7	9

An interview guideline was agreed in advance between the Irish and Finnish research teams to gather data that covers similar topics and therefore assure the comparability of the data (see Table 3). The interviews started with an introductory section, in which interviewees were asked background information and about their role and/or relationship with the community-based social enterprise. The guideline also included a section about the way(s) in which the community based social enterprises work to develop their activities and about how the organisations tackle the challenges face(d) by their communities and/or rural areas. Finally, the interview guideline included a section about the type of relations of the community-based social enterprises with other relevant stakeholders/actors within the village (e.g. local for-profit businesses, other third sector organisations, local public authorities and local population) and outside (regional/rural development stakeholders, regional/national public authorities and other non-local third sector organisations).

Although all sections were covered in the interviews, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility in the order of the sections and in the follow up questions for more in-depth exploration of themes, asking for relevant examples and emerging (sub)themes brought by the interviewees. The interviews lasted from 50 to 120 min; the average length being approximately 70 min. Twenty interviews were conducted face to face, whereas 14 were conducted virtually due to the health and safety measures derived from COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with the previous written consent of participants.

Thematic analysis of the data was conducted (Patton, 2002). The research team agreed preliminary/a-priori codes that reflect the theoretical concepts presented earlier in this article, such as the plural forms of economic integration (market-exchange, redistribution and reciprocity) and institutionalisation process (regular occurrence, duration on time). These broad a-priori codes were complemented by inductive codes emerging directly from the data gathered. These inductive/emerging codes were usually more specific and were contained (as child nodes/codes) within higher levels codes and lately in the broader preliminary codes (parent node/code). For example, the emerging code 'providing premises' (child node level 2) was contained within the code 'support to new entrepreneurs-business' (child node level 1), which in turn was contained within the preliminary code 'market-exchange' (parent node), see Figure 2 for an extract of the thematic coding structure.

Data analysis was performed in three stages: First, interviews related to each community-based social enterprise were analysed. Second, findings were compared at country level and; third, international comparison of the data was conducted.

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TABLE 3 Summary of sections and examples of questions of the interview guidelines.

Section	Main themes	Examples of questions
Introduction	- Background information - Role and relation of interviewee with community based social enterprise	- Can you tell me a bit about yourself (link with the locality-area, employment)? - How did you become involved in 'name of the CBSE' (for board members/volunteers/staff)? - What is your relationship with 'name of the CBSE' (for external stakeholders)?
Work and challenges addressed	- Implementation and development of services/activities by community based social enterprises - Tackling challenges of rural communities by community based social enterprises	- What is the relevance of the services/activities developed by the CBSE for the locality? - Which have been the key factors for the implementation and continuation (or not) of the services/activities of the CBSE? - How has 'name of the CBSE' accessed to the resources needed to implement and develop their services/activities? - How the CBSE has changed (or not) the locality and address (some of) their main challenges?
Type of relations of the community based social enterprises with other relevant (rural development) stakeholders/ actors	- Type of relations with relevant stakeholders/actors within the village (local for-profit businesses, other third sector organisations, local public authorities and local population) - Type of relations with relevant stakeholders/actors outside the locality (regional/rural development stakeholders, public authorities (regional, national) and other non-local third sector organisations)	- How does 'name of the CBSE' gather the views/ideas of different people form the community? - How has 'name of the CBSE' encouraged the participation of the people from the locality/community? - How is the relation of 'name of CBSE' with other third sector organisations of the village? and with the local (for-profit) businesses? and with the local public authority/municipality? - How is the relationship of 'name of the CBSE' with other stakeholders outside the locality? - How relevant are these relationships for the development of the services/activities of the CBSE?

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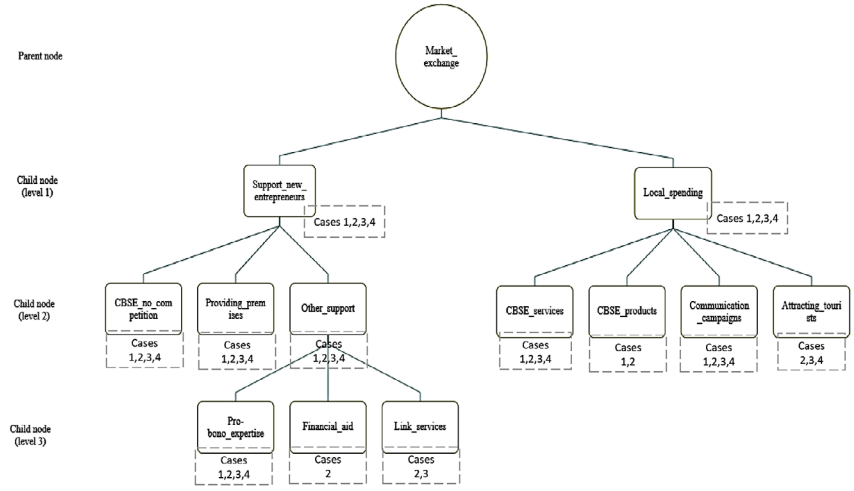


FIGURE 2 Extract of 'market-exchange' coding structure (simplified version-mind map).

FINDINGS

This section presents the analysis of the role of community-based social enterprises as 'support structures' for the institutionalisation of market, redistribution and reciprocity relations based on the theoretical framework of this study.

Community-based social enterprises as enablers and supporters of local markets

All four community-based social enterprises studied engage in market exchanges with other stakeholders. These include the sale of products to end customers, for example organic vegetables from community garden, tickets for cultural events. Market-exchange relations of these organisations also include the provision of services such as childcare, and renting spaces, such as buildings to local entrepreneurs and (social) houses to disadvantage/vulnerable individuals.

Despite these market-exchange relations represent a more market oriented alternative than for example traditional village associations, the community-based social enterprises are not considered, neither by their members nor by other (market) stakeholders, as typical market actors which trade their products and/or services to obtain profits; moreover, they are regarded as actors reluctant to take risky business decisions. These rural community-based social enterprises are very careful about not competing with other local businesses, especially SMEs, but rather try to collaborate with them and develop services and products needed by local residents but not provided locally neither by the public sector nor by private businesses.

> We also think what we can offer to the local companies. So we try to provide them business opportunities and make easier for them to operate here. We don't want to start competing with them. It's not worth setting up a social enterprise like this if you want to compete with other local companies. (Jaakkola_Board member)

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In this regard, our findings show how the community-based social enterprises act as 'supporting structures' of local market-exchange relations in different manners. In the first instance, they continuously promote and enhance local spending, first, by providing services and products that enhance market-exchanges between local and regional customers/users. Second, by developing and engaging in regular communication campaigns that support spending in local businesses (e.g. 'buy local') and by disseminating news and advertisements from local businesses free of charge through their community social media channels and community offices. Third, the organisation of community leisure and cultural events (e.g. family fun days, village theatre, Christmas and midsummer parties) and landscaping and environmental projects developed by the community-based social enterprises help portray their localities as 'welcoming and beautiful places' which in turn contribute to attracting tourists and to providing local and regional residents with possibilities to spend their time and money within the localities.

> The aim is to keep these people [tourists passing through the national road], when they come to an area, keep the money within the area. Hopefully, that you'll get them to spend their money, and spend some time in the area. You can get somebody flying through a village. They will go for a walk, but they're not spending money. The aim is, entice these people to spend money. [. . .]. We can see here [in the restaurant], Saturday morning, people going or coming from the bike trail will pop in for a cup of coffee. That means spending money in the area, keeping the money. (Durry_Volunteer and Board member)

Furthermore, the community-based social enterprises in Ireland and Finland act as enablers of emergent local businesses/entrepreneurs. This support is especially provided by developing and making accessible premises, such as buildings, rooms and/or land that can host (new) local businesses, which otherwise would have found difficult to develop their businesses activities.

> It was brilliant for me, because I was able to come in, start up my own business [restaurant] without covering huge investment, because the investment was already here. The building was done, the kitchen was done, so I was able to open up the door and just buy in food and a little bit of equipment, and I was ready to go. I couldn't have done that without Durry social enterprise. (Durry_Local private business/entrepreneur)

Among these emergent local businesses, the Irish community-based social enterprises studied have directly supported a horticulture micro-enterprise (since 2009), a restaurant (since 2013), a bi-weekly farmers and artisan market on which local producers sell their goods (since 2017), a crèche and afterschool (since 2019), a café-shop (since 2021), and provided facilities for different kinds of recreational clubs and activities. While in the Finnish cases, the support to emergent local businesses/entrepreneurs is not so institutionalised due to a lower business activity in the villages studied and the wider coverage of services by municipalities (local government), the community-based social enterprises also create spaces/infrastructure often used by the municipalities to provide different services in the community.

> We have accessible spaces with a central location. The senior club gathers there, and there are other leisure opportunities. And in addition to that, the space is also used

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> by the local community college to provide all kind of activities for local inhabitants. (Jaakkola_Board member)

Beyond the contribution to local businesses through the provision of suitable infrastructure, the community-based social enterprises have also demonstrated their support to emergent local businesses by providing pro-bono expertise, small financial aid in the early (planning) stages, supporting the renovation of premises to comply with new regulations and/or cooperating to link the services of new businesses with those developed by the community-based social enterprise.

> Business activities are developing in the vicinity of the village hall, so we wonder if those accommodation services will also develop from them. It [accommodation service] doesn't have to be organised by us, we just support if someone else wants to come here as an entrepreneur. We'd be happy to cooperate and connect these services [accommodation] with ours [other services]. It doesn't have to be ours. (Jaakkola_Volunteer)

In summary, our findings show how the community-based social enterprises studied act as 'support structures' that contribute to enhance regular local market-exchange relations within their rural areas. They have done so by continuously promoting and enhancing local spending and by enabling the emergence of local business/entrepreneurs within their localities.

Community-based social enterprises as channels of redistribution

Our findings show how the community-based social enterprises studied have regularly engaged in redistributive relations with public institutions. These relations have allowed the organisations to access resources such as grants/funding from local, regional, national and EU programmes (including LEADER) and to subsidised labour/employment.

In both countries, the community-based social enterprises have used these redistributive resources to develop projects with the aim of enhancing the integrated local and community development of their rural areas. Examples include the development of subsidised educational and training courses for vulnerable communities/people in rural areas and use of LEADER funding for refurbishment of heritage buildings and for the development of a café shop. Our findings show how the presence of a structured organisation such as the community-based social enterprises can help local communities to access crucial redistributive resources from public authorities to meet essential local needs.

> What the Regional Authority always says is if there are people they can work with in the community that are structured, they're organised, they know what they're about, the Regional Authority is more likely to go out and engage with those than a community who is unstructured or where they don't know what they're about and it's very hard for the Regional Authority to go out and engage in a situation like that. (Cill_Rural and regional development expert)

The subsidised employment for vulnerable groups represents the main paid labour force of the community-based social enterprises studied. In the Irish cases, the community-based social enterprises have been coordinating, managing and hosting at a local level from their premises

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(community offices) National Activation Labour Market Programmes for more than 20 years. These programmes, such as Community Employment and Rural Social Schemes, provide job opportunities to local people distant to the labour market.

Significantly, the subsidised labour acquired through these programmes work beyond the specific projects developed by the community-based social enterprises. Part of the work done by these subsidised workers relates to the maintenance of public spaces and small infrastructures within the Irish localities studied. Moreover, some of the subsidised employees managed by the community-based social enterprises also work as part of their duty for other local organisations, for example maintaining the GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) pitch, the gardens and graveyards of the church, or doing refurbishment work of buildings acquired by other non-profit local organisations. Therefore, the work of the subsidised staff managed by the community-based social enterprises is usually also shared with other local organisations.

> We have had a Community Employment (CE) scheme 22 years now. [...] you could only make an application if you had a development group [Cill social enterprise], which we had in Cill village [...] We had some funding available to buy the day-to-day things for the participants [CE workers] [...] A big thing at the time was the footpaths, the infrastructure. Our footpaths were very, very bad [...] We got our footpaths put in. We got our own little stone walls on the approach roads done [...] [Another local organisation] had acquired the old primary school, [...] with the CE participants there was a new roof put on it, new ceilings inside, new floors, bathrooms, toilets. (Cill_Volunteer and Board member)

Similarly, in the Finnish cases, the community-based social enterprises employ long-term unemployed people through governmental funds and offer also rehabilitative work activities. For example, in Mattila, the village association has an agreement with the municipality about offering suitable job opportunities and training places for disadvantaged groups.

> We have both rehabilitative work activities and work try-outs, so at best we had eight people here and a foreman at the same time. It is very important, and we are able to develop things further. And it's also an important social service that we can offer for the community. (Mattila_Board member)

In addition, the Irish community-based social enterprises studied have regularly supported other, usually smaller, local (third sector) organisations when applying for grant funding, for example, providing letters of support, making available the expertise of some voluntary directors in writing and filling the application forms and, in some occasions, applying for grant funding on behalf of local groups/organisations which have not been legally constituted or which were in their early stages.

> We [Durry social enterprise] would be the umbrella. The groups would function, but if they wanted in particular to get grants, or they wanted to apply for funding, then we would have the history of having it, so we could get it. They could have it, but we could get it. If you look now at what is happening with the childcare group, they are, eventually, going to try to get funding, but they have no history of ever having completed a project. So, if they come in with us, we could say, 'Yes, they're part of us, and we want the funding, and look what we have done.' [...] because you have to

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> have that for grants. One of the questions is nearly always, 'Have you ever managed a project before? It's very difficult to get funding the first time. (Durry_Board member)

Despite some similarities shown by the Irish and Finnish community-based social enterprises in terms of accessing and channelling redistributive resources from public administration and programmes to their local areas, our study also shows some significant differences in this regard. In the Irish cases, the community-based social enterprises play a key role in channelling redistributive resources not only for their projects but also for other local organisations and for the maintenance of community (quasi-public) services. In the Finnish cases, the organisations studied are more focused on getting resources for their own activities; despite, these usually benefit the wider community. In the Finnish cases, the community-based social enterprises are more a target of the redistribution from public authorities than an actor generating it, such as the case of Irish community-based social enterprises where this relation is rather bottom–up. The different traditions regarding the role and strength of local public administrations in both countries represent an important factor in explaining the different ways in which the community-based social enterprises act as support structures for redistribution in their rural localities. This explanation lies in that Finish municipalities (local government) have been, historically, strong actors in local development in contrast to Ireland, which has less of a tradition of municipalities/local government structures.

In summary, our findings demonstrate how the community-based social enterprises studied have acted as 'support structures' that channel redistributive (public) resources towards their localities for enhancing local and community development. However, we show that there is some variation in the redistributive role of these community-based social enterprises based mainly on the differences between public administrations in Ireland and Finland.

Community-based social enterprises as coordinators of local reciprocity

The community-based social enterprises studied engage in several reciprocity relations, including volunteer work, in-kind and monetary donations, transfer of assets from local individuals for a nominal fee. Reciprocity relations have been critical for the sustainability of the organisations and the development of their projects.

To enhance reciprocity relations, the community-based social enterprises studied in both countries have established diverse communication channels (offline and online), for example regularly updated websites and social media profiles, community text phones and community newsletters (printed weekly/monthly). These communication channels target different audiences (such as local residents, business, public representatives and regional development companies) in a regular and systematic manner. These channels developed by the community-based social enterprises have been used to disseminate information about their activities but also to leverage resources, such as donations or volunteer work for their projects. However, the use of these communication channels is not restricted to the community-based social enterprises but they are also regularly used by different local actors such as individuals, business, other third sector organisations and/or (local/regional) public authorities with similar purposes as the abovementioned. Hence, these diverse communication channels provide a permanent platform ('support structure') for enhancing regular and systematic synergies between different individuals and organisations within the localities contributing to the institutionalisation of reciprocity relations among local actors.

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> The community office of Durry social enterprise is where you get your information in, and you get your information out for the people. So for example if the GAA wants to put on something, they will decide to do it, but then they will come in here [to the community office] and they will say, 'can you advertise that for us?' This will be the hub to get the information out. [. . .] The community office is looking for something, but it's on behalf of somebody else. [. . .] It's also about the simple little things. Somebody loses a dog, you put it up on Facebook. We do posters. We put it out there. It's all about working for the community. (Durry_Staff)

The community-based social enterprises also engage in reciprocity relations with other local third sector organisations and local businesses by co-organising events and projects. These collaborations have enabled the mobilisation of a great number of volunteers from the local population and of donations and sponsorship (monetary and in-kind) from local actors such as local businesses and individuals. Moreover, these collaborations contribute to a more efficient use of resources and reduce the overlap of actions, thus contributing to an integrated development of the localities.

Examples of this regular collaboration and its relevance for the institutionalisation of local reciprocity include a regular annual meeting hosted by Jaakkola (Finland), in which other third-sector organisations are invited to jointly coordinate activities and events and mapping out co-operation possibilities among the organisations.

> Well, we have an annual joint meeting where each association can tell what they have been thinking and planning for the next year – so that there really is no overlap, we'll go over [events, etc.] together. And then we raise ideas, that what will be organized and by who, which company or the association, who does what. (Jaakkola_Volunteer)

In the Irish cases, Durry and the local GAA have established, since 2014, a collaboration to co-organise the local summer festival, these organisations established annually an independent subcommittee in charge of the event. This regular and structured collaboration, besides leverage a great amount of (reciprocity) resources, has spurred further joint projects between both organisations such as for example the co-organisation of a weekly bingo within the locality.

> It's a very strong relationship now [between Durry social enterprise and the local GAA], because I mean there is a lot being organised between the two. I suppose none of the two are big enough to hold a good fundraiser event on their own, so it was a great idea to come together and unite the two. And I suppose you had more workers to participate then between the two organisations. [. . .] We've been together now for so many years. (Durry _Volunteer and Board Member)

By regularly enabling and coordinating these types of events, the community-based social enterprises foster synergies between different local stakeholders, which enhance mutual support and foster a collective sense of belonging.

On some occasions, these collaborations have gone beyond the locality. The community-based social enterprises have cooperated with organisations from other villages to exchange information and resources and enhance the development of an entire area. For example, in Mattila (Finland), which is a small community, the use of external networks of community members is a necessity for

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sustainable operations, such as organising the local summer theatre events. These events attract approximately 4000 visitors annually and are a huge effort that brings together activists also from other villages in the region to co-organise the events.

In addition, Mattila social enterprise is also institutionalising the co-operation with other villages by coordinating a joint development project for all the villages in the region. The main aim of this project is to strengthen the co-operation by developing joint marketing and information sharing, creating a common website for the internal and external communication of the villages, and forming a common communication network between the village boards. Through this co-operation Mattila has further developed their external networks and gained more expertise and visibility to implement, for example marketing activities.

In summary, the findings from this study demonstrate how the community-based social enterprises studied have acted as 'support structures' that coordinate regular and structured reciprocity relations among different actors within their localities, therefore, contributing to the institutionalisation of reciprocity at local level. They have done so, by establishing diverse communication channels that serve as regular platforms for the exchange of information and (mutual) support; by regularly co-organising joint events with other local organisations and; by facilitating and coordinating groups of multiple local, and in some occasions regional, stakeholders for the organisation of (community) events and projects.

DISCUSSION

This study shows how the community-based social enterprises studied have contributed through their engagement with diverse stakeholders to the development of regular and (relatively) stable market-exchange, redistribution and reciprocity relations within their localities, thus supporting a plural economy at the local level. The role of these community-based social enterprises as 'support structures' is evidenced not only in the implementation of their own projects but especially by acting as a 'structure which can take the initiative and work across the community by engaging a range of organizations' (Onyx & Leonard, 2010, p. 395). In this sense, our study aligns with Barraket et al. (2019, p. 196) for whom rural social enterprises can act as a community resource for the local population.

By acting as (community) 'support structures' at the local level these community-based social enterprises have contributed to the emergence of new local organisations and businesses and to the regular interaction, exchange and co-operation between local organisations; establishing regular coalitions that enhance awareness and collaboration within the local population. According to Amin and Thrift (1994, pp. 14–15) when these elements are brought together they enhance the 'institutional thickness' of an area; acknowledged as a significant feature to foster local and regional development due to its relevance for institutional persistence and flexibility, that is the reproduction/stability of organisations and their ability to learn and change; collective knowledge and capacity building; innovation; trust and reciprocity; and a sense of inclusiveness (Amin et al., 2002; Copus et al., 2011; Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2020; Zukauskaite et al., 2017). Hence, our study shows how the community-based social enterprise studied contribute to the 'institutional thickness' of their localities.

In terms of institutionalisation, a study from Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos (2020) conducted in rural Austria illustrates how the institutionalisation process of a rural social enterprise, within its regional political–institutional framework, can be explained by a combination of structural forces and the actions (agency) of the social enterprise. The differences found in our study between

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the Irish and Finnish community-based social enterprises align with this previous research as they show how, despite similar ways of structuring the organisations and working, differences in structural factors, such as history and national politico–administrative frameworks, can partially explain the role of community-based social enterprises in the institutionalisation of plural (socio-)economic relations in rural areas.

The four organisations studied actively interact with other actors from the public, (for-profit) private and third sectors. Through their relations and projects, community-based social enterprises engage in public and community, therefore, political, discussions that affect the development of their rural localities. The role played by the community-based social enterprises in this study as actors supporting the institutionalisation (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) of a plural economy within their rural areas stresses the public and political dimension of these organisations (Laville et al., 2006), thus their active participation and relevance in the governance of rural areas (Chatzichristos & Hennebry, 2023).

Within a rural governance framework, rural policy in both countries studied as well as at EU level recognises the potential role of community-based social enterprises in revitalising rural areas. According to Bock (2016, 2019) a lot is expected from innovative citizens-led initiatives, including community-based social enterprises, to overcome the challenges of marginalised rural areas within multi-governance frameworks. However, as shown by Mazzei and Roy (2017) in their study of urban and rural social enterprise practitioners and social enterprise policy in Scotland, these expectations from policy are not usually met with adequate resources and measures that support the potential of community-based social enterprises, and especially those operating in rural areas (see also Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). Our study concurs with this study reinforcing the need of a rural proofing of policies linked to social enterprises/entrepreneurship that acknowledge and address the specific characteristics and needs of social enterprises operating in rural areas (Olmedo et al., 2021), for example in terms of their role as channels of redistribution towards rural localities and their work in usually low-density populated areas and narrow labour markets.

By showing the relevance of (socio-)economic relations that transcend market-exchanges, our study also highlights the importance that policies addressing rural development include a socially embedded and plural approach to economic relations; focusing on a mix welfare in which reciprocity and redistribution are acknowledged as relevant forms of economic integration alongside market exchange. In this sense, by providing a support structure at a local level for redistribution and reciprocity, the community-based social enterprises studied can relieve the feelings of (spatial) injustice of rural inhabitants that are caused by the deficiencies of the contemporary dominant organisation of the economy based on the predominance of the market (Block & Somers, 2014).

However, these community-based social enterprises are not challenging the normative, prevailing institutional economy based on market-exchange but adding to it by strengthening the other two ways of economic organisation (reciprocity and redistribution). By linking the analysis of the institutional role of community-based social enterprises operating as rural development actors with the plural 'forms of economic integration' proposed by Polanyi (1977), this study adds empirical evidence to the old but still relevant call of Ray (2006) for studies of neo-endogenous development to focus on how market-exchange, redistribution and reciprocity manifest at the local level and 'more importantly […] whether, and how, these factors can be manipulated so as to create the conditions for territorial development' (Ray, 2006, p. 280).

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CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, our study brings empirical evidence on the apparent importance of community-based social enterprises within rural governance. Our results highlight the increasing importance of the socially embedded nature of economic relations by recognising the importance of reciprocity and redistribution along market exchange. According to our results, rural community-based social enterprises (re)vitalise and act as support structures for market, redistribution and reciprocity economic relations in rural areas, contributing to the 'institutional thickness' and enhancing the plural economy in their localities. This in turn contributes to the neo-endogenous development of rural areas. Especially they do so through their engagement with other actors in rural development such as public authorities, local businesses and other third sector organisations and by taking a proactive role in this co-operation.

Our results also indicate that community-based social enterprises are especially relevant for enhancing a plural economy due to their operational model, based on the mix of social and economic goals, their focus on local community needs and their aim of enhancing participation of multiple stakeholders in the management and activities of the organisation (Bailey et al., 2018). Their community-based approach includes, inherently, elements like reciprocity and redistribution (Opare, 2007) and thus for them it is organic to be part of a plural economy, in comparison, for example, to a social enterprise with a narrower social goal, like recycling, or a social enterprise aiming to offer sport or leisure activities to children.

Community-based social enterprises are owned and managed by the community and typically set up to support the whole community by enhancing local welfare or local services. This kind of social goal is leading them to seek diverse options to support a plural economy rather than focus only on market exchange. Our study shows how community-based social enterprises act as channels of redistributive relations and resources and as coordinators of reciprocity at local level, by doing so, they also can contribute to the attributes of social resilience identified by MacLean et al. (2014), namely community networks and infrastructure, diverse and innovative economy and knowledge, skills and learning, sense of community and engaging governance to local level. In this light, community-based social enterprises also can be seen as actors with potential to strengthen the resilience of rural communities (Berkes & Ross, 2013; McAreavey, 2022), constituting this an interesting future research avenue.

Our study shows that, in order to enhance the plural economy, especially in rural areas and rural villages, local public administration should pay more attention to rural community-based social enterprises and develop local support policies accordingly. However, we understand that community-based social enterprises are not a one-fits-all solution for tackling the challenges faced by rural areas, and that these organisations need to cooperate with public institutions and other private organisations to develop their activities. It is not uncommon that community-based social enterprises in rural areas develop services and infrastructures that in more populated areas are often delivered by the public sector; we acknowledge that community-based social enterprises by themselves are not likely to have the capacity to balance the loss of all (public) services in rural areas but these organisations contribute to the institutionalisation of a plural economy in rural areas when acting as partners of other rural development stakeholders (see also Barth et al., 2015).

Our study is not absent of limitations, first, our study focuses on four rural community-based social enterprises operating in two European countries. Despite that, we believe that our study still can have implications for other rural areas in Europe and the findings can be theoretically generalised (see Hammersley, 2008 in Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014), as many European rural areas face

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similar challenges. We are, nevertheless, aware of the need for further research in other rural areas that can support these observations and/or bring other perspectives to them to have more nuanced understanding on the complex issues that rural areas face. We also stress the relevance of additional quantitative research approach that can complement this in-depth qualitative knowledge, for example by developing indicators that assess the (quantitative) contribution of community-based social enterprises to the development of plural socioeconomic relations in rural areas. Also, more in-depth understanding of possibilities and challenges regarding co-operation between community-based social enterprises and local administration and their underlying reasons would provide an interesting future research avenue.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualisation; methodology; data collection; analysis; writing and editing: Lucas Olmedo. *Data collection; analysis; writing and editing*: Katja Marika Rinne-Koski. *Conceptualisation and editing*: Mary O'Shaughnessy. *Analysis and editing*: Anne Matilainen. *Data collection; analysis and editing*: Merja Lähdesmäki.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data can be made available upon request to the authors. Sensitive data will not be made available in order to protect participants on this study.

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ORCID

Katja Marika Rinne-Koski PhD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8569-4248
Mary O'Shaughnessy PhD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6875-0359
Merja Lähdesmäki PhD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0787-8871

ENDNOTES

[1] Names of all four community-based social enterprises are fictious to ensure anonymity of participants in the study.
[2] See, https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-urli/urbanandrurallifeinireland2019/introduction/
[3] See, https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/315440/SYKEra_21_2020_Kaupunki_maaseutu_2018.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

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