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Community-Based Social Enterprises as Actors for Neo-Endogenous Rural Development: A Multi-Stakeholder Approach[☆]

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Abstract Rural shrinking is an ongoing phenomenon in many parts of Europe. Against this backdrop neo-endogenous rural development has been gaining support as a conceptual and policy approach which stress the combination of local and external actors, resources and forces for enhancing an integrated development of rural areas. Within this governance framework rural social enterprises have been stressed as potential key actors contributing to rural development. This paper explores, through 36 semi-structured interviews with diverse stakeholders of two Irish community-based rural social enterprises, the role of these organizations in contributing to a neo-endogenous development. Our findings show how their mobilization of the social attachment of their members, their collective character and their delivery of tangible results have been key to develop collaborative dynamics with stakeholders from different sectors and situated at various spatial scales. Moreover, these organizations have accommodated global-exogenous forces buffering their effects through locally-focused solutions which address the needs of their rural communities, despite their incapacity to address the causes of these global-exogenous trends. We conclude that rural community-based social enterprises can play a relevant role in contributing to neo-endogenous development, however, institutional frameworks that address the diversity of rural areas and that enhance balanced collaborations among different rural development stakeholders are a precondition to unlock their potential.

Introduction

Rural shrinking has been an ongoing phenomenon affecting many European rural areas for decades (ESPON 2017). While this phenomenon is mainly measured by the demographic decline of an area, this is rather a symptom of more complex underlying causes such as economic

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restructuring related to lower job intensity in agriculture and an increasing tertiarized economy, lack of innovation capacity, locational disadvantage, peripheralization or precarious governance (Copus et al. 2020). Despite the heterogeneity of this phenomenon in terms of causes, outcomes and locations, an increasing marginalization of ('lagged behind') rural areas within Europe has been observed (Bock 2016).

Against this backdrop, different policy measures that represent exogenous and endogenous approaches towards rural development have been implemented throughout Europe (Dax and Kahila 2011). Despite the acknowledgement of some benefits and contributions, these approaches have been criticized as largely ineffective for the sustainable development of rural areas, the former due to their incapacity to address the specific needs of rural areas and their populations and the latter for their unrealistic treatment of rural areas as entities disconnected from external global trends (Woods 2011). In this regard, a neo-endogenous approach to rural development has gained increasing attention within European rural development scholars and policymakers (Gkartzios and Lowe 2019; Marango, Bosworth, and Curry 2021). This approach is characterized by focusing on place-based and integrated development, harnessing local resources while, at the same time, competing for extra-local resources and emphasizing the importance of multi-stakeholders rural governance frameworks, in which the state but also other actors, such as rural entrepreneurs and third sector organizations, are increasingly acknowledged as relevant partners for rural development (Bock 2019; Bosworth and Atterton 2012).

Within these players, rural social enterprises have gained attention as actors that integrate social, economic and/or environmental goals and combine a wide range of resources in new ways (van Twuijver et al. 2020). Research on rural social enterprises have shown how these organizations are characterized by being community-based (Peredo and Chrisman 2006), by presenting a strong local focus and by their ability to develop supra-regional networks (Richter 2019). Moreover, these organizations have shown their resourcefulness when developing locally-focused solutions that contribute to community development (Barraket et al. 2019).

The features of rural social enterprises suggest their capacity to contribute to a neo-endogenous development of rural areas. To further investigate this link between rural social enterprises and neo-endogenous development, this paper has been guided by two research questions:

- How do Irish rural community-based social enterprises engage in socio-economic relations with multiple stakeholders to harness resources

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needed to contribute to the neo-endogenous development of their localities?

- How do Irish rural community-based social enterprises react and/or accommodate global-exogenous trends into locally-focused solutions that contribute to the neo-endogenous development of their localities?

These research questions have been explored through 36 semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders including policy-makers, regional and local development experts, for-profit business owners, representatives of third sector organizations as well as staff and volunteers related to two community-based social enterprises operating in Irish rural localities. Through an iterative thematic analysis of the data gathered, our findings examine key elements, such as the informal knowledge of their board members, their collective character and their ability to deliver tangible results and develop cross-sectoral and multi-scalar relations with other rural development actors. Moreover, the findings also examine the capacity of these organizations to challenge the socio-economic and political governance frameworks in which they are embedded, and their ability to buffer the effects of global-exogenous trends through the development of locally-focused solutions that address the needs of their rural areas and populations.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: after this introduction, section two conceptualizes and links neo-endogenous rural development and (community-based) rural social enterprises. Section three presents the research design and methodology of this study, arguing for a qualitative and multi-stakeholder approach. Section four presents the findings from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews and section five discusses these findings with previous literature from the fields of rural development and rural social enterprises. Finally, section six draw some conclusions.

Neo-Endogenous Rural Development and Community-Based Rural Social Enterprises

Since the end of the World War II, top-down sectoral policies based on an agricultural productivist model, developing economies of scale, attracting external firms and investing in transportation and communications that link rural and urban areas dominated the European policy discourse and practice as a solution for the development of rural areas (Shucksmith 2010; van der Ploeg et al. 2000). Although this exogenous approach has led to some important success such as an increased agriculture productivity, improved employment rates, technology and infrastructure in some rural areas; it has also been criticized for creating a

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dependency culture towards subsidies, promoting only certain economic sectors (especially agriculture), creating democratic deficit and being unable to tackle the specific problems of different rural communities (OECD 2006; Woods 2011).

As a response to these deficits, during the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, an endogenous approach towards rural development emerged (Ray 2000). This development 'from within' encouraged the implementation of bottom-up initiatives, involving the local population in the identification of the needs and decision making, enhancing local capacity building in leadership, entrepreneurship, innovation and networking (Flora et al. 1997). This approach stressed the socio-economic diversity of rural areas and the access and mobilization of previously untapped resources for boosting the potential of each particular rural area (Ray 2006). The endogenous approach meant a shift towards a participatory, territorial and integrated approach to the development of rural areas (Moseley 2003). Nevertheless, it has been criticized for its limited integration in practice of the needs of (certain) vulnerable groups within participatory democratic processes, its excessive focus on local resources and autonomous rural areas as the basis for development, thus for (potentially) reinforcing inequalities between uneven territories and being unrealistic due to the great influence of external forces on the development of rural areas (Fischer and McKee 2017; Shortall 2008; Ward et al. 2005).

In order to overcome these shortcomings, and as a response to the increasing interaction between actors at different spatial scales, a more relational approach towards the development of rural areas has been proposed (Woods 2011). The so called neo-endogenous approach (Ray 2006) shares with the endogenous model the emphasis on a locally-rooted and territorially-based integrated rural development, the participation of different actors through (local) democratic processes (Cejudo and Navarro 2020) and the emphasis on the valorization of local resources through (social) entrepreneurialism and innovation (Bosworth et al. 2020; Bosworth and Atterton 2012).

However, in line with place-based regional development approaches (Barca, McCann, and Rodríguez-Pose 2012), neo-endogenous development scholars underline that local development is inevitably related to exogenous actors and factors (Chatzichristos, Nagopoulos, and Poulimas 2021; Gkartzios and Lowe 2019). From this perspective non-local actors (can) play a key role both as providers of resources not available at local level but also as 'animators' of the development of rural areas (McElwee, Smith, and Somerville 2018). Moreover, global-exogenous factors such as increasing movement of global

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capital, climate change, urbanization or historical regional inequalities within a country are recognized as having great influence on the development of rural areas (Woods 2011). In this regard, from a neo-endogenous perspective

> the critical point is how to enhance the capacity of local areas to steer these wider processes, resources and actions to their benefit… [being] the focus on the dynamic interactions between local areas and their wider political, institutional, trading and natural environments, and how these interactions are mediated. (Ward et al. 2005:5)

To mediate these interactions between top-down (exogenous) and bottom-up (endogenous) dynamics (Ferreiro et al. in press; Marango et al. 2021), the neo-endogenous perspective stresses the relevance of (multi-stakeholder) 'governance' (Chatzichristos and Hennebry in press; Shucksmith 2010), meaning a governing style in which a range of government and non-government actors, including those from the third (non-profit) sector, participate in the development of rural areas (Cheshire 2016). Within this rural governance framework, the role of the state and its policies is emphasized, but more as enabler of a context which facilitates the emergence and development of local (community-based) initiatives which address their specific problems rather than as an actor that directly organizes and implements projects. Among non-government actors, it is acknowledged that those local actors with the capacity to develop networks, leverage resources at different spatial scales, enhance citizen engagement and entrepreneurialism, can play a critical role as catalysts for local change within rural areas (Shucksmith 2012:16; Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020).

Rural Social Enterprises in Europe

Rural social enterprises have demonstrated evidence of their contribution to local and community development within rural governance frameworks (Bock 2019). These organizations have gained increasing attention as actors that combine social, economic and/or environmental goals developing new services, products and/or modes of production through (socially) innovative and resourcefulness/entrepreneurial practices (van Twuijver et al. 2020).

Studies conducted within European rural areas have shown the contribution of social enterprises to their socio-economic development through the creation of new or previously non-existent services

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in diverse fields such as eldercare, childcare, transportation, affordable housing, café-shops, culture-leisure festivals or tourism (Liddle, McElwee, and Disney 2012; Vestrum 2014; Healey 2015; Mottiar, Boluk, and Kline 2018; Kelly et al. 2019). Often associated with the provision of these services, rural social enterprises have also played a significant role in the retention and/or provision of community assets, such as buildings or other infrastructures (Aiken, Taylor, and Moran 2016) and in the creation of local employment, usually targeting those most vulnerable within their rural localities (Sforzi and Colombo 2020). Furthermore, research on European rural social enterprises have also shown their contribution to the environment through the development of sustainable forestry, community renewable energy, sustainable and organic agriculture, alternative food networks or through educational programs and recycling initiatives that enhance environmental awareness within the local population (Elsen and Fazzi 2021; Jacuniak-Suda and Mose 2014; Morrison and Ramsey 2019). Besides these specific contributions studies on rural social enterprises show that these organizations, and especially those whose main aim is local development, often contribute concurrently to various dimension of development, thus enhancing an integrated development of their rural localities/areas (Healey 2015; Olmedo, van Twuijver, and O'Shaughnessy 2019).

Previous research on rural social enterprises show their strong local focus and their community-based character (van Twuijver et al. 2020). In this regard, community-based social enterprises, understood as organizations that operate "in a defined geographical location or "community" and [by] giving a high priority to engaging local residents" (Bailey, Kleinhans, and Lindbergh 2018:13–14), constitute the main subtype of social enterprises operating in rural Europe. This local and community-based character is also reflected by the intrinsic linkage between rural social enterprises and the geographical, socio-economic and political features of the rural localities/areas where they operate which condition the activities and work of these organizations (Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2015; Olmedo, van Twuijver, and O'Shaughnessy in press).

Despite their local and community character, previous research has shown the ability of rural social entrepreneurs to develop supra-local networks to mobilize resources not available at the local level (Vestrum 2014), these actors being identified as 'embedded intermediaries' (Richter 2019) and 'network architects' (Mottiar et al. 2018). According to Lang and Fink (2019) rural social entrepreneurs occupy an intermediate level, linking their communities with actors such as research institutions, development agencies or government bodies. This

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Table 1. Overlapping Features of Neo-Endogenous Rural Development and Rural Social Enterprise Activities

Neo-Endogenous Rural Development	Rural Social Enterprises
Territorial integrated development	Contribution to multiple dimensions of development (social, economic, environmental), often concurrently
Endogenous and exogenous forces interact	Community-based and strong local focus, but also stress on development of external relations ('embedded intermediaries')
(Social) Entrepreneurship and innovation as catalyst for local change	Locally-focused solutions through resourcefulness practices

intermediate position, according to these authors, is key for the capacity of rural social entrepreneurs to develop bridging social capital through their engagement in horizontal networks with other social entrepreneurs and linking social capital through their engagement in vertical networks with supra-local actors.

This ability to complement the engagement of locals with the development of external networks have contributed to the capacity of rural social enterprises to harness a wide range of resources (Richter et al. 2019). As (social) entrepreneurial and innovative actors, these organizations tend to combine these resources in new ways to develop their products/services, for example by combining different funding streams and volunteers with paid staff labor. These resourceful practices demonstrated by rural social enterprises are a key element in their contribution to the development of their localities (Olmedo et al. in press).

The features of rural social enterprises, i.e., contribution to multidimensional development; combination of community-based character and local focus with the development of external networks and; (social) entrepreneurial and innovative resourcefulness practices, suggest that the way(s) in which rural social enterprises work concurs with the principles advocated by a neo-endogenous rural development approach (Olmedo and O'Shaughnessy 2022), see Table 1.

Research Design and Methods

In order to investigate how Irish rural community-based social enterprises engage in socio-economic relations with multiple stakeholders and how they react and/or accommodate global-exogenous trends into locally-focused solutions that contribute to the neo-endogenous development of their rural areas/localities, this study has followed an intensive research design (Sayer 1992) based on qualitative methods, namely

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semi-structured interviews. This intensive research and qualitative methods allow for gathering rich data for the in-depth investigation of the phenomenon under study (Danermark et al. 2002). Moreover, the semi-structured nature of the interviews conducted allow for having a guideline with common general topics for each interviewee, therefore enhancing the comparability between different interviewees (Brinkmann 2013). While at the same time it allowed for certain flexibility for new topics to emerge and for the refinement of the interview guideline in order to refine and/or confirm preliminary findings during the iterative process between data collection and analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with different stakeholders related to two community-based social enterprises operating in rural Ireland. These organizations were selected through a pre-fieldwork phase of four months in which the researchers conducted desk research of rural development and social enterprises documents within an Irish context, participated in a number of national and regional events, workshops and meetings related to rural social enterprises and conducted informal interviews with rural and regional development experts. From the information gathered the researchers shortlisted eight rural social enterprises, identified by experts as examples of organizations contributing to social, economic, cultural and environmental aspects of the rural localities/areas where they operated, and thus to integrated rural development. These eight organizations were contacted and informal interviews were held with board members and/or staff of each. Finally, two rural social enterprises were selected and further contacted asking for access to conduct this study. The selection of two organizations allowed for the comparability of the findings while at the same time permitting an in-depth engagement with each of the organizations which lasted for over a year with weekly visits.

The selected cases represent typical examples of community-based social enterprises operating in rural villages in Ireland which aim to contribute to local and community development (O'Hara 2001). The organizations selected present similar legal forms (Company Limited by Guarantee), and governance structures (democratic boards of voluntary directors). The organizations have been in operation for more than 20 years, they are also similar in terms of staff (15–20) and volunteers (10–15 regular volunteers) and they are funded through a combination of funding streams from public (e.g., grants, service contracts to public bodies) and private sources (e.g., renting spaces, sale of services, donations). Moreover, both organizations have delivered of a wide range of projects, including social housing, community centers, childcare services, restoration of heritage buildings, adult education courses, community

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Table 2. Interviewees Stakeholders Category

Stakeholder Category	N° Interviews
Community-based Social Enterprise Volunteers (founders, board members, regular volunteers)	16
Community-based Social Enterprise Staff	8
Other Stakeholders (for-profit business, third sector representatives, policy makers, regional development experts)	12
Total	36

chemical-free gardens, farmers-artisan markets, development of walks and parks, environmental awareness programs, catering services, leisure community activities, tourist information office and work integration of long-term unemployed. Despite being situated in slightly different rural areas in terms of accessibility, connectivity and local/regional economies, the rural areas where these organizations are based and operate have been affected by similar trends such as economic and agricultural restructuring, commodification of the countryside and loss of public services.

Besides incorporating the voices of the members of the social enterprises through interviews with staff and volunteers, this study sought a multi-stakeholder approach to also research the relations of these organizations with their wider environment (O'Mahoney and Vincent 2014). In this regard, the perspectives of other stakeholders such as local (for-profit) entrepreneurs, representatives from third sector organizations, regional development experts and policymakers were also incorporated. Moreover, conducting interviews with multiple stakeholders enhanced the triangulation of the data through the confirmation and/or refinement of the findings from different informants (Flick 2018).

Following a theoretical sampling procedure (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2015), a total of 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted (see Table 2). The profile of the interviewees (see Table 3) present an overrepresentation of women (64%), which concurs with the overrepresentation of women within Irish third sector organizations and in Irish public and semi-public bodies (Benefacts 2019; Russell et al. 2017:16). Moreover, in terms of age the interviewees ranged from early 30s to late 70s. Despite the fact that an age balance was sought, the cohorts 60+ represents over 30% of the interviewees. This can be explained by the aging population of Irish rural localities and by the tendency of older people to occupy positions within the boards of Irish third sector organizations (Benefacts 2019). The interview guideline received the ethical approval from the University

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Table 3. Characteristics of Interviewees Sample

Characteristics Interviews	N° Interviewees
Gender	
Male	13 (36%)
Female	23 (64%)
Age group	
30–40	8 (22%)
40–50	9 (25%)
50–60	7 (20%)
60–70	9 (25%)
>70	3 (8%)

Social Sciences Ethical Research Committee and written consent was obtained from each participant before the interview started. All interviews were audio-recorded and have an average duration of 55 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim generating 680 pages of text.

A thematic analysis was performed to identify, organize and interpret themes from textual data (King and Brooks 2018) using the CAQDAS NVivo12. More specifically the analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach towards qualitative data analysis, therefore descriptive, interpretative and pattern codes (see Table 4) were generated and refined in an iterative process between data collection, analysis and theory which started with the beginning of data collection (November 2018), continued during all field work and lasted until the writing of the final results (October 2020).[1] This process allowed for an increasingly focused data collection and for the verification and/or refinement of (preliminary) findings (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Examining Irish Community-Based Social Enterprises Contribution to Neo-Endogenous Rural Development

Examining Cross-Sectoral and Multi-Scalar Relations in Irish Community-Based Rural Social Enterprises

The Irish community-based social enterprises studied need a wide range of financial and non-financial resources in order to develop their activities that contribute to the integrated development of their rural localities/areas.

[1]The findings presented in this article forms part of a PhD thesis submitted in December 2020 and successfully defended in March 2021.

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Table 4. Examples of Themes (Pattern Codes), Description and Interview Extracts

Themes (Pattern Codes)	Description	Interview Extract (Example)
Collaboration with other key local third sector organizations	CBSEs establishing synergies among third sector organizations within the locality in order to harness resources and to have a complementary role towards the development of the locality	"What we (rural CBSE) have done is we got together with the GAA because we found that if you are going out to the people in the community too often, for money and help, they get tired of you, and nobody benefits. So 3 people in the group today as directors of the [rural CBSE] are actually working with the GAA. We work together on the village festival. We work together on the Christmas fair. We work together on a bingo on a Friday night. So what you are doing is you are pooling your resources"
Strong Regional Links	External (supra-local) relations developed by rural CBSEs that facilitate the resource mobilization, especially redistributive resources. Especially important are those with RDC & Regional Authorities on a regular basis	"When we sit down with the County Council, we do that twice a year, in January they will ask us what's our plan for the year. We outline that, and then a month later the County Council will be looking at aiding different sections of the people"
Reaction to global-exogenous challenges (economic restructuring)	CBSEs react against the effects of rural economic restructuring developing locally-focused solutions	"There was a chicken process industry in the village which was a big employer […] so people went from school, maybe 14 or 15 straight into work, until suddenly it closed down so there was a lot of unskilled people and people with little or no education that suddenly were unemployed, so there was a need, so the CE scheme [ALMP] started on that, the [adult education] courses started on the back of that, just to get people retrained"

In terms of funding, these organizations obtain income from the direct sale of services to local customers, e.g., rent of the social housing units, tickets from leisure and cultural events, fees paid for services (community childcare). Another significant source of income is the renting and

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leasing of premises to local organizations, for example to hold meetings and/or to run events, and to local individuals who want to develop their own business but lack the financial capacity to invest a significant sum of money.

Our findings show that these economic relations are developed with local individuals, organizations and businesses. A key element in the development of these relations is the ability of the collective body of governance (board) of the social enterprises to harness the skills of locals and spot opportunities in local needs by developing new local market niches. These opportunities are realized through the social enterprises board members' informal knowledge but also through community planning and consultation processes in which they engage the community to address collectively local needs

> They [Community-based social enterprise board members] tend to know who lives here because they are from the area, so they try and go, 'We might get such a one to come in today now and she might be good with the youth club. We'll get her starting that.' […] They do tend to bring in people and then they would help them. They thank them and they make them feel like they are doing a good job. I think that's why people stay doing it, because it's not just a case of, 'You're doing that now and we'll see you.' It's not like that. It does tend to be a community effort. [Casey_ Community-based social enterprise staff]They [Community-based social enterprise] were ahead of their time in realising that you had to have consultation, you had to bring people together, you had to discuss, you had to see, and you had to prioritise what it was that might make a difference to them. [Mary_County Council Representative]

Complementary to the local informal knowledge from board members and collective planning and consultation processes, the capacity of these social enterprises to demonstrate the local community tangible results, for example improving the aesthetics of their localities or developing infrastructure and buildings, explains their ability to build on trust from individuals and organizations within the community in the social enterprise and their activities.

> I had looked from the outside at the work they [Community-based social enterprise] had been doing here in the local village. I could see, over the last number of years, the transformation; what has happened in the village due to [Community-based social enterprise], and with the help and the support of the community. […] When people see improvement, they will row in behind you. [Liam_ Community-based social enterprise board member]

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The development of trust has been a key aspect for harnessing resources, not only in terms of financial revenue—through the utilization by the local population of the services developed by the social enterprises, monetary donations or sponsorship from local businesses; but also in terms of the mobilization of non-monetary resources which are essential for the development of the social enterprises activities. Examples of the latter include in-kind donations, such as cakes, trees, petrol, sound systems or even land and buildings to implement projects; share of machinery and specialized tools from local contractors and farmers who lend free of charge these items and/or supply materials at a reduced cost price; cooperation with other local organizations with whom the social enterprises develop joint projects and events and share spaces and buildings; and the engagement of volunteer labor of local individuals which provide their time and skills to the social enterprises.

> We [local business] gave [the community-based social enterprise] the building [for the community café-shop]. We've kind of donated that building to them. They're renting off us for a nominal fee of one euro per year. […] I think it would bring life back to the village plus I think, when people get together and get innovative in a community […] what more could you ask for in life, from the point of view of sense of achievement for everybody involved. [Jamie_Local (for-profit) entrepreneur]

Despite the strong relations developed by the social enterprises with other stakeholders within their localities our findings show some challenges in these local relations. These challenges are linked with the limited engagement of some cohorts such as the youngsters within the social enterprises. Shortcomings in terms of communication of the activities and projects of the social enterprises and the perception by some individuals of the social enterprises as 'closed shops' can explain this limited engagement.

> We've been really bad at doing that [involving new people in the community-based social enterprise]. It's one of the first things that we really need to work on. I think that a lot of our work is probably hidden away. We are not terribly transparent about it. [Amy_ Community-based social enterprise board member]

Moreover, comparative analysis shows how the social enterprise which is based in a community with greater population to draw from, characterized by higher educational levels, and a more diverse local business

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sector has greater capacity to find the necessary local support and skill base required to advance their projects.

Beyond these local relationships, the community-based social enterprises have developed relationships with actors and institutions beyond their own localities which have also played a key role in their capacity to harness resources otherwise non-available within their localities.

Our findings show how the social enterprises have engaged with institutions that administer public resources at national and regional[2] level. The relations with national public bodies are based on the participation of the social enterprises in nationally designed but locally implemented programs, such as Activation Labour Market Programs (ALMPs)[3] from the Irish government targeted at reducing unemployment levels in vulnerable groups. These ALMPs constitute the main paid workforce for these organizations due to their limited capacity to pay competitive salaries with their own means. National programs have also contributed to the financial sustainability of some the services provided by the social enterprises, making them viable to all users including those in situations of vulnerability. As an example, the community childcare represents a service partially subsidized by public resources which cover part of the fees of those families in greater need.

> [The parents pay] depending on their situations at home […] if your child has a medical card, or anything like that, you get X amount of money off, and the Government will pay X amount of money, and the parents will pay the balance. That's how that works. [Aine_Community-based social enterprise staff]

Furthermore, the community-based social enterprises studied tend to apply for grants to rural development programs such as the EU LEADER and the national Town Village and Renewal,[4] especially to

[2]Within the Irish political architecture, the county (and in some especial cases also the city) forms the core element of local government. In this regard, within Ireland the County Councils are called the 'Local Authority' as there is not a lower tier of government with enforcement powers. However, within this study these political institutions are named as 'Regional Authority' as they cover areas which includes multiple 'localities', including rural dwellers, small villages, towns and in some occasions also cities.

[3]ALMPs are policy interventions with the purpose of improving participants' prospects of finding gainful employment and/or increase their earnings capacity.

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

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develop infrastructure projects that require a relatively significant investment such as the renovation of buildings or the development community centers. Despite the European and national design of these programs, within an Irish context these are administered at regional level by regional development companies[5] and regional public authorities (County Council).

The community-based social enterprises studied regularly engage with these regional organizations and institutions. These relations have been instrumental for the work of the social enterprises, providing grant funding and technical support through the skills and expertise of the staff of these regional bodies. Despite the public nature of regional authorities, our findings show how the relations of the social enterprises with these institutions is usually built on the active demands coming from the social enterprises members, so they are impulses from the bottom-up. Nevertheless, the track-delivery record of the community-based social enterprises studied developed over two decades and their collective democratic structures, deemed to be representative of their communities, have strengthened their relations with regional authorities and regional development companies.

> I firmly believe that local areas know best what they need for their communities, but sometimes they don't articulate that very well or they haven't come together in a formal way to make those decisions, so the messages and the signals can be confusing for a politician. It can be the loudest in the room that is getting what they want, not necessarily what is of most benefit to people. That is why I like how [Community-based Social Enterprise] functions, because they have consultations. They have their own development before they meet us [County Council] to see what it is, and they have prioritised what actions they want delivered on. […] The biggest asset is its people. They have a structure. [Mary_ County Council representative]

Despite the power imbalance observed between County Councils, regional development companies and community-based social enterprises in terms of staffing, skills and funding, our findings also observed a

[5]Regional/Local Development Companies are multi-sectoral partnerships that deliver community and rural development services. Those Local Development Companies which are not specifically focus in the development of a city cover multiple rural settlements such as rural dwellers, villages and towns thus they operate throughout a wide area (region). Therefore, within this study the Local Development Companies are (re)named as Regional Development Companies to distinguish them from local organizations such as the rural community-based social enterprise studied and others which are focused in the development of a specific locality and its surroundings.

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rather symbiotic relation in which win-win situations are sought between these and in which each organization and institution tend to know about the role and importance of the others.

> What I have noticed since I got involved [as a volunteer in the community-based social enterprise] from day one is, we have an incredible communication with both County Council and the Regional Development Company. That is down to one word; it's a win-win situation. […] We are continuously improving, and they are always there to help. They can see the results in the village here […] Great communication, and great understanding of each other, what both sides are about. [Carl_Community-based social enterprise volunteer]

Finally, our findings show that the community-based social enterprises have also developed more timely relations with other regional and/or national actors, including similar organizations based in other rural areas of the country with whom they exchange ideas and knowledge about the funding and implementation of specific projects/services; philanthropic foundations to obtain funding for projects; universities from which they avail expertise, and; loans from regular banks and/or a national community loan social finance institution (Clann Creedo)[6] that usually complement other funding streams such as grants which only cover part of the projects developed.

> One of the bigger challenges for community-based social enterprises is that match finance and arranging bridge finance prior to submitting an [grant] application, so they will have had their procurement done, their quotes, they know what they're dealing with, but they'll not alone have to say 'Where will we find that 25%? Do we have that?' They'll also have to talk to the bank or the social finance groupings like Clann Creedo and work out how they can support them in bridge financing that project. [Anna_Rural and regional development expert]

This section has shown how Irish community-based social enterprises engage in collaborative relations with other local and extra-local actors from the private for-profit, public and third sectors in order to harness a wide range of resources needed to implement services that contribute to an integrated development of their rural localities and areas.

[6]Clann Credo—Community Loan Finance is a social enterprise established in 1996 that provides affordable loan finance to community organizations that generate social benefit.

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We explain how the strong local relations developed by the social enterprises are linked to the informal knowledge especially of their board members, but also to their capacity to show results to the local population and to the creation of collective democratic spaces that enhance trust within the local community. Moreover, the section shows some challenges in terms of engaging parts of the local community and the difficulty posed by structural conditions in terms of diversification of skills and resources within the social enterprises.

Although our findings show how collaborative relations at local level are essential for the work of community-based social enterprises, these relations and resources are necessarily complemented with resources drawn beyond their rural localities. These extra-local relations and resources are influenced by often nationally designed programs and by the relations developed with regional institutions and organizations which play a key role for supporting the work of the social enterprises studied. These relations with regional bodies are based on the track delivery record of the social enterprises and their capacity to develop collective structures that are considered as representatives of their communities.

Examining the Reaction to and/or Accommodation of Global-Exogenous Trends into Locally-Focused Solutions by Irish Community-Based Rural Social Enterprises

The neo-endogenous approach to rural development stresses the influence of global-exogenous forces in the development of rural areas. However, it also emphasizes the development of tailor made solutions that address specific local problems. Therefore, a key element for neo-endogenous rural development is how global-exogenous phenomena can be accommodated into locally-focused solutions for specific rural areas.

The community-based nature of the rural social enterprises studied indicate their focus on the needs of a specific geographical area and the population living within it. However, our findings show how the members from these local organizations are strongly aware of the impact of global-exogenous factors for their communities. The economic restructuring which affected Irish rural areas during the 1980s and 90s meant an increasing mechanization and concentration of farming which in turn had a ripple effect for the socio-economic fabric of rural communities in terms of lower employment opportunities, closure of businesses and out-migration (Creamer et al. 2009). Against this backdrop groups of committed citizens from rural communities set up the community-based social enterprises studied to react to these challenges.

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> About '87, the Regional Dairy Company, who were the main employer in the area, started to close all the creameries [from small villages]. Then […] in '91 they started telling the farmers, 'you've got to get bulk tanks. That's where the lorry would come in and collect your milk in the farmyard. That stopped all the farmers. The farmers were coming to the village on a daily basis, so that started to have a huge ripple effect on the village itself. I remember from about 1993 to 1997, I'm not exaggerating when I say this, between shops and pubs; we probably lost 10 out of the village. For a small village like this, that was huge. Unless somebody somewhere was going to stand up and say, 'Okay, this is happening', and we had seen this happening in England before that, 'Is this what we want for our community or are we going to try and do something about it?' So we set up the community-based social enterprise. [Damian_ Community-based social enterprise board member]

Another important challenge faced by some regions and rural areas due to increasing economic globalization has been the re/delocalization of industries and factories, leaving significant pockets of low skilled unemployed population. This has been the case of the rural areas where the community-based social enterprises studied are based. For example, in one of the cases, the community was severely affected by the closure (re-location) of a multi-nationally owned chicken factory which employed over 200 people from the local area. In reaction to this challenge, the community-based social enterprise set up, in partnership with two public institutions, a local community employment scheme and adult education courses to provide employment and training to those affected by the factory closure These services are still in operation after more than 15 years due to their success in providing employment for long-term unemployed and officially accredited training for early school leavers adults in fields such as healthcare, childcare and organic agriculture.

> There was a chicken process industry in [village] which was a big employer, you know, for many years, so people went from school, maybe 14 or 15 straight into work, until suddenly it closed down so there was a lot of unskilled people and people with little or no education that suddenly were unemployed. So there was a need, you know to keep people, so the community employment scheme started on that, the [adult education] courses started on the back of that, just to get people retrained, the courses were full of people that needed re-education. [Ailish_Community-based social enterprise staff]

Many rural areas across Europe and Ireland have been affected by neoliberal government policies related to cuts in public spending and austerity,

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especially after the global financial and economic crisis of 2008. These policies, which strive for the (economic) 'effectiveness' of public spending, have left many Irish rural areas without public services such as post offices, public transport, healthcare/GP practices or police stations. As a consequence, the community-based social enterprises studied have developed basic services for their local population such as community childcare, community texts alerts for addressing issues of household insecurity and have contributed to the development of local bus routes which connect villages and towns. Another consequence of this decline of public and private services within rural localities has been the abandonment of buildings and land which previously housed these services and businesses. Community-based social enterprises have responded to these opportunities by purchasing and renovating these spaces, converting them into community owned assets and developing services which meet local needs.

> The building was an old farmhouse, even though it was in the middle of the village. There was a farmyard at the rear of it. […] We [the community-based social enterprise] converted it into a community center. Any group that wants to hold a meeting now, they can hold it there. It has kept the village alive. There are two training courses on there as well, Monday to Friday, during the week. There are always people around, […] and then on the weekends, you might have a couple of functions on there. [Warren_Community-based social enterprise board member]

Our findings explain how community-based social enterprises have accommodated global-exogenous trends such as rural economic restructuring, cuts in public spending and services, and the abandonment of buildings and land into locally-focused solutions that target the needs of their rural communities and the population living within it. These locally-focused solutions implemented by the organizations studied have provided a buffer to the consequences of some of these global-exogenous forces. However, these organizations do not show a capacity nor a willingness, for example in terms of ideological critique or establishing structured alliances with other organizations and institutions beyond their localities affected by similar challenges, for transformative change that addresses the causes of these global-exogenous trends. The organizations, instead, adapt these global-exogenous forces to local circumstances. Despite the strong connection of the community-based social enterprises studied, with regional organizations and institutions which act as intermediaries for their demands, they do not perceive these regional bodies as having the capacity to influence higher institutions at national level nor in policies which have direct consequences for their rural localities.

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> I don't think they [regional development company or county council] have a very strong voice at that table. I really don't. […] I think in terms of the Councils it seems to be very much like a reporting mechanism, that they implement the programmes that Government decides and they have to return the statistics. And I don't really know that they have much of a voice. […] That is what has happened. They are implementers of national rules. [Ellie_ Community-based social enterprise board member]

Therefore, our findings show the capacity of community-based social enterprise to provide innovative solutions at local level, however, they also show a very limited capacity to influence, neither by themselves nor through their intermediary connections, the broader causes that pose challenges to their rural communities.

Discussion

The neo-endogenous approach to rural development stresses the need of complementary stakeholders operating at different spatial scales for the implementation of sustainable solutions for rural areas (Chatzichristos et al. 2021; Olmedo and O'Shaughnessy 2022). The first research question of our study examines how Irish rural community-based social enterprises engage in socio-economic relations with stakeholders to harness resources for their activities. Our findings show how a key aspect of the resourcefulness and entrepreneurial capacity of these organizations lies in their ability to engage with actors from the for-profit, public and third sectors, establishing cross-sectoral collaborative dynamics to leverage resources needed to implement their services and activities (de Bruin, Shaw, and Lewis 2017).

Our findings show the strong local focus of rural community-based social enterprises reinforcing previous research in the field (e.g., Valchovska and Watts 2016). Three elements have been key for the development of these strong local relations, i.e. the informal knowledge of board members of the social enterprises, the collective democratic consultation and planning processes developed, and the capacity to demonstrate tangible results. These elements show the relevance of harnessing the social attachment (van Veelen and Hagget 2017) of local stakeholders but also the relevance of enhancing material aspects to build trust of community stakeholders in the activities and work of the social enterprises. With trust appearing as a necessary element enhancing the legitimacy and mobilization of resources by community-based social enterprises (Munoz et al. 2015; Richter et al. 2019).

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Our findings demonstrate that these local relations are complemented by the engagement of social enterprises in extra-local relations (Morrison and Ramsey 2019; Vestrum 2014). These relations are mainly influenced by the availability of programs designed at national and supra-national (EU) level, by the capacity of the social enterprises to deliver results in accordance with the expectations of programs administrators and to be considered by external bodies as collective representatives of the demands of their communities (Lang and Fink 2019).

The findings from our study differ from previous studies in the field of rural social enterprises which have stressed the engagement of, particularly, individual social entrepreneurs in supra-regional (national and international) networks (Berkes and Davidson-Hunt 2007; Richter 2019). Our findings do not point towards the relevance of highly mobile (individual) rural social entrepreneurs but rather towards the importance of collective and locally rooted structured organizations that have developed numerous and diversified links at the local and regional levels and, a capacity to develop timely strategic links at higher levels (particularly national) for specific projects. Despite the limited supra-regional links established by the Irish community-based social enterprises studied, this observation does not diminish their 'embedded intermediary' role (Richter 2019:186) between actors from different sectors and at different spatial scales, mainly local and regional.

The role of the community-based social enterprises studied as collective representatives of their communities to extra-local actors/institutions is associated with responsibility(ies) for the development of their localities (Bock 2019). This opens questions about the legitimacy of these organizations as their members have not been democratically elected (Connelly, Bryant, and Sharp 2020; Kleinhans, Bailey, and Lindbergh 2019). Our findings concur with Healey (2015) as they illustrate how this legitimacy is based on the track record of delivering projects and in the regular development of democratic spaces/processes, such as community planning processes, by the community-based social enterprises.

Our findings also explain how these Irish community-based rural social enterprises have developed relations with other rural based actors and institutions, such as other rural based third sector organizations and for-profit businesses, regional development companies and County Councils. These findings differ from a study conducted by Noack and Federwisch (2019) in rural Germany which stressed the significant development of cross-border (rural–urban) constellations of actors, including social enterprises, when providing new solutions for challenges faced by rural areas. The findings from our study demonstrate that the

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most regular and strong relationships have been developed with actors that share similar challenges associated with being based and operating in a rural area. This observation does not deny the interconnection between the 'rural(s)' and the 'urban(s)', yet, for the work of these rural community-based social enterprises this interconnection is more related to structural processes, such as out-migration or counter-urbanization, which influence their work rather than to the development of collaborative relations with 'urban stakeholders'. Hence, this study stresses the significant role that geographical, social, economic and/or identity aspects related to the 'rural(s)' have in the development of the relations by Irish rural community-based social enterprises (Olmedo et al. in press) and the relevance of rural–rural linkages for these organizations when contributing to a neo-endogenous development.

Furthermore, our second research question examines how rural community-based social enterprises accommodate global-exogenous trends into locally-focused solutions. Our findings support the idea that these organizations can play a significant role to steer these wider political and socio-economic processes to create solutions that can benefit their local rural communities (Barraket et al. 2019; Onyx and Leonard 2010). Three key elements have been identified to explain how community-based social enterprises achieve this. These are their awareness of the impact of global-exogenous forces in other similar communities, their partnerships (especially) with public institutions and, their transformation of underutilized private and public spaces and buildings into community-owned assets that host services that meet local needs. These elements concur with the role attributed by Nyssens and Petrella (2015: 183) to social and solidarity economy organizations as producers of 'quasi-collective' goods and services that benefit the community as a whole.

Despite their ability to buffer some effects of global-exogenous trends affecting rural communities and seeking new opportunities from the consequences of these trends, this study also shows the limited capacity of these local actors to influence, neither by themselves nor through their intermediary connections, the wider institutional frameworks in which they are embedded and which affect their work (Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos 2020). This concurs with previous studies on rural social enterprises that show the limitations of (purely) bottom-up processes and stress the relevance of institutional frameworks that enable local socially entrepreneurial initiatives (Chatzichristos and Hennebry in press) and introduce external actors which are complementary to and 'animate' local actors and processes (Farmer, Hill, and Muñoz 2012; Munoz et al. 2015).

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Hence, our findings show how Irish community-based social enterprises actively participate as local-community development actors within rural governance frameworks (Cheshire 2016), assuming some responsibility(ies) for the development of their localities (Bock 2019). However, these organizations do not demonstrate a transformative willingness nor capacity at a societal level, thus suggesting compliance with, rather than a critique and/or transformation of, the development policies/frameworks in which they are 'invited' to participate (Chatzichristos et al. 2021).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to explore how community-based social enterprises work to contribute to the neo-endogenous development of the rural localities where they are based. Through an in-depth qualitative exploration, our findings largely confirm that the way(s) in which rural social enterprises work concurs with the principles advocated by a neo-endogenous rural development approach (as shown in Table 1). Our study explains how these organizations cross and blur boundaries between different sectors and spatial scales representing a clear example of hybrid actors that, through collective social entrepreneurship and innovation enhance local change, and contribute to a neo-endogenous rural development (Olmedo et al. in press; Richter et al. 2019; Shucksmith 2012). Moreover, our findings also show how the community-based and strong local focus shown by the rural social enterprises studied and their engagement in extra-local relations have been key for accommodating global-exogenous trends into innovative locally-focused solutions. Therefore, the study illustrates how interrelations between endogenous and exogenous forces are mediated. However, our research also demonstrates the difficulties faced by these organizations, to engage certain cohorts of the local population and (especially for those in the more structurally weak regions) to find a local, diversified skills base. In effect reinforcing their limited transformative capacity to tackle ongoing rural shrinkage.

This discussion of the relation between rural community-based social enterprises and neo-endogenous development, comes with two cautionary observations. First, we do not claim rural social enterprises as a panacea for solving the complex issues of rural areas and their populations but rather as one of the different partners within rural governance frameworks that can genuinely contribute to rural and regional development (Barth et al. 2015; Nordberg et al. 2020). Second, this study supports the call of Bock (2016:570) for a 'nexogenous' rural development theory which acknowledges the significant

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role that social innovative and entrepreneurial initiatives can play in rural development but also warns that if these initiatives are understood simply in terms of self-help and local civic action the development of marginal areas is seriously hampered. Social innovative and entrepreneurial initiatives are promising when developed within frameworks that (re)establish socio-political connectivity of marginal rural areas through linkages and collaborations which enable access to exogenous resources, consider urban–rural linkages and address social and spatial solidarity among different groups and regions (Goodwin-Hawkins et al. 2022).

Finally, this study is not absent of limitations, first, the study has been conducted within a specific context of rural Ireland; despite the peculiarities of this context, conceptual rather than statistical generalizations can be inferred from this study. However, more research would be needed, especially in other contexts, to confirm this statement. Second, a more thorough investigation of the role and impact of rural community-based social enterprises compared with other rural development stakeholders can provide further detailed insights of the contributions of these organizations to neo-endogenous rural development.

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