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Social and Solidarity Economy

Community-Based Social Enterprises Fostering Inclusive Development in Peripheral European Rural Areas

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What Role for Social and Solidarity Economy?**

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Abstract

Social enterprises (SEs) have recently attracted great attention due to their ability to combine social and economic goals through entrepreneurial and innovative strategies. Our study focuses on a subtype of SEs that predominates in rural areas, i.e. Community-Based SEs (CBSEs). This paper presents two case studies of CBSEs that have been operating for more than 20 years in two European (peripheral) rural areas (i.e. Mid-West/Ballyhoura Country in Ireland and Baixo Alentejo/Concelho de Moura in Portugal). The cases are built from empirical evidence collected through interviews, field visits, secondary data and the (working) experience of the researchers within the organisations.

Our research shows how these CBSEs have fostered (simultaneously) economic, social and environmental development within their areas. Furthermore, the paper highlights how the combination of local embeddedness and external links have been key to these CBSEs, enhancing their potential to foster the “connectivity” of the territories where they operate. Finally, this paper also presents the challenge faced by CBSEs to accommodate their commitment to community led development while operating in, and being dependent upon, a top-down and siloed policy framework.

Keywords

Community Based Social Enterprises; Rural Areas; Inclusive Development; Sustainable Rural Development.

Bio

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Introduction

Within the European territories inequalities are increasing. In 2016, an estimated quarter of the population (119 million people) were deemed to be at risk of poverty and social exclusion, reflecting a rise since 2008 (Eurostat 2017). These inequalities are significant not only in terms of wealth but also in terms of access to basic services, education and employment (OECD 2017). Moreover, inequalities not only affect social groups but also territories, meaning that people living in European rural areas, especially in the periphery, are more affected by poverty and social exclusion than their urban counterparts (EU 2017). Rural areas are essential, not only as spaces that provide food, water, raw materials, energy sources and other environmental and economic benefits but also, as more than a quarter of the total EU-28 population (28%) live within rural areas (EU 2017). Among this, 25,5% are at risk of poverty and social exclusion (EU 2017). Different processes have fostered social exclusion within (some) European rural areas, e.g. high rates of unemployment, low productivity or seasonality, out-migration and high age dependency rates, isolation, lack of health and social services and public discourse related to the lack of future opportunities and the invisibility of poverty² (Bock, Kovacs and Shucksmith 2015; Christmann 2014; Commins 2004).

Against this background, a need for more inclusive development has been called for, essentially meaning development “that includes marginalized people, sectors and countries in social, political and economic processes for increased human well-being, social and environmental sustainability, and empowerment” (Gupta, Pouw and Ros-Tonen 2015, 546). Social and solidarity economy (SSE) initiatives (Coraggio 2011; Laville 2014) represent a means of fostering this way of inclusive development. These initiatives recognise other forms of economic transactions beyond the market, i.e. redistribution and reciprocity (Polanyi 1944). Moreover, the SSE promotes a more comprehensive development, integrating social, political, cultural and/or environmental dimensions of development in line with the multi-dimensionality embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2015).

Representing one of the types of SSE initiatives, social enterprises (SEs) have recently attracted great attention due to their ability to combine social, economic and/or environmental goals through entrepreneurial and innovative strategies (Defourny and Nyssens 2013). Hence, they are considered (potential) drivers of social and economic change towards more inclusive societies (Huysentruyt and Stephan 2017), contributing to community building and enhancing solidarity (O’Shaughnessy and O’ Hara 2016). In spite of their potential and strong presence in rural areas (CEIS 2017; Steiner and Teasdale 2017), much focus has been directed towards their study within urban settings. However, research on empirical evidence about the role of social enterprises in rural areas is critical to connect practitioners and policymakers more effectively (Mazzei and Roy 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how community-based social enterprises foster inclusive development in European peripheral rural areas and in turn contribute to the sustainable development goals (SDGs). In order to do so, in this paper we explore the types of services provided by two community based social enterprises operating in two peripheral European rural areas; Ballyhoura Country in the mid-west of Ireland and Concelho de Moura, Baixo Alentejo-Portugal). In particular, we identify some of the key factors that have both facilitated and hindered the delivery of these services to the local community. The paper is organised as follows. First, we present a definition of SEs and CBSEs and provide an overview of the current literature available on CBSEs in rural Europe. Second, we explain the methodology followed in this study (qualitative case studies). Third, we present the findings from our two cases. Finally, some conclusions, limitations and further research proposals are drawn.

[CB]SEs in Rural Europe

SEs are hybrid organisations that occupy an intermediate space between the state, the market and the civil society (Nyssens 2006). Moreover, they are characterised by combining multiple goals

² This list is not exhaustive.

(social, economic, political and/or environmental) and producing “quasi-collective” goods and services through the combination of a wide range of resources in innovative ways (Nyssens and Petrella 2015; Steyaert and Hjort 2006). Based on empirical research across Europe, the EMES network³ has established an ideal type of SEs comprised of nine indicators organised into three different dimensions: *economic and entrepreneurial*; *social and*; *participatory governance*. The aim of this ideal type is to provide a compass to select and study different SEs (Defourny and Nyssens 2016).

The indicators within the economic and entrepreneurial dimension are: a *continuous activity producing goods and/or selling services*, i.e. they have a productive activity; a *significant level of economic risk*, i.e. the financial viability depends on the resources secured by its members and workers and; a *minimum amount of paid work*, i.e. there are some employed workers although normally also volunteers. The social dimension indicators are: an *explicit aim to benefit the community*, i.e. the main mission is to serve the community or a specific group within it and promote social responsibility at local level; an *initiative launched by a group of citizens or civil society organisations*, i.e. results from collective dynamics that have to be maintained and; a *limited profit distribution*, i.e., there is non-distribution or constrained distribution of profits.

Finally, the participatory governance is composed of: a *high degree of autonomy*, i.e. governed by the people involved in it, not by public authorities or other organisations; a *decision-making power not based on capital ownership*, i.e. normally one member, one vote and a *participatory nature which involve various parties affected by the activity*, i.e. representation of user/customers and various stakeholders in decision-making (Borzaga and Defourny 2001; Defourny and Nyssens 2012).

SEs across Europe present a wide range of legal forms, business models and social aims (EC 2015). Two of the main fields of action for SEs include the integration of socially excluded people and local and community development, the two being usually intertwined (EC 2015). Hence, (some) SEs are directly involved in fostering inclusive development within a locality/area. Of special interest in this regard is one subtype of SE, i.e. Community-Based Social Enterprises (hereafter CBSEs), which are characterised by operating “in a defined geographical location or “community” and [by] giving a high priority to engaging local residents” (Bailey, Kleinhans and Lindbergh 2018, 13-4; see also Peredo and Chrismann 2006; Somerville and McElwee 2011).

Empirical studies have shown how rural CBSEs have emerged across Europe as providers of services, such as care (Farmer, Hill and Muñoz 2012; Munoz, Steiner and Farmer 2015; O’Shaughnessy and O’Hara 2016), transportation (Liddle, McElwee and Disney 2012; O’Shaughnessy, Casey and Enright 2011), housing (Healey 2015), shops and post offices (Perry and Alcock 2010). Besides the importance of CBSEs in delivering these (social) services, research has also shown their importance in job creation for disadvantage groups living in rural areas (O’Shaughnessy 2008; Róbert and Levente 2017), in supporting small scale farmers that promote sustainable agriculture (Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen 2013) and communities to manage their own energy and natural resources in sustainable ways (Berkes and Davidson-Hunt 2007; Okkonen and Lehtonen 2016; Vazquez, Camacho and García 2016). Due to the striving for multiple goals that characterise CBSEs, these organisations have the potential to promote *economic, social and environmental wellbeing* (Summers et al. 2014).

Furthermore, recent research has also pointed to the role that rural CBSEs play as “embedded intermediaries” (Richter 2017) between local and external (regional, national and international) actors and institutions/networks. Their embeddedness within the local community harnesses endogenous resources (McKeever, Jack and Anderson 2015), whereas their external connections can attract resources and re-contextualise innovations that already exist in other places (Richter, 2017; Vestrum, Rasmussen and Carter 2017). In addition, these external connections are key to enabling the expression of the voice of their communities beyond the local area, critical to negotiate appropriate institutional frameworks that foster the (inclusive) development of rural areas (Barth et al. 2015). Hence, research has shown the potential of CBSEs to foster the

³ EMES (Emergence des Entreprises Sociale en Europe) is a European based research network around topics including social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, social economy, solidarity economy and social innovation. For more information see: www.emes.net

socioeconomic and political connections, (i.e. the connectivity), of disadvantaged rural areas (Bock 2016). The key characteristics of CBSEs as described above are schematically represented in *Figure 1*.

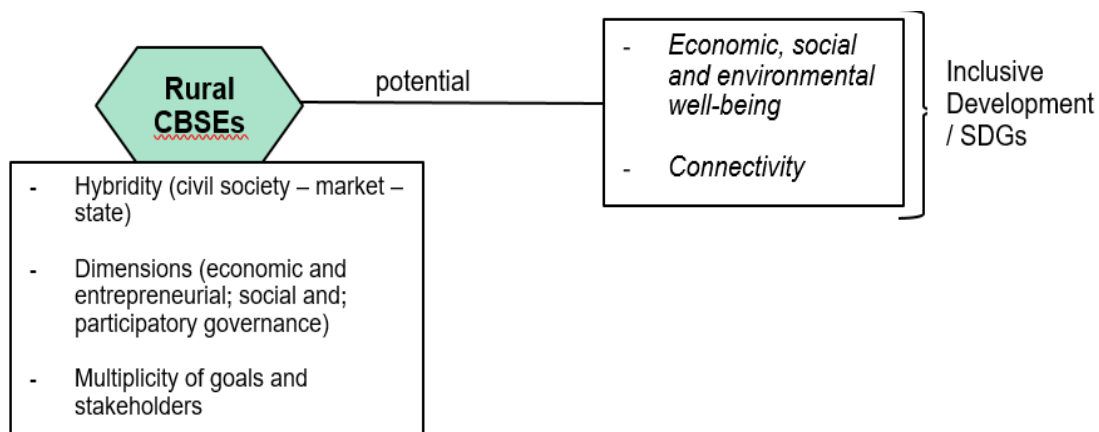


Figure 1. Characteristics and potential of CBSEs in Rural Areas
Own elaboration

This potential situates CBSEs as actors that embrace the ethos of the SDGs (in which economic goals are intertwined with social and environmental objectives) through the processes by which they develop and deliver a range of community-based services.

Methodology

Two case studies have been developed in order to explore the role of rural CBSEs in fostering inclusive development. The importance of studying CBSEs within their own specific contexts, together with the under researched status of the topic, make the case study the most suitable method for this study (Hartley 2004). A case study permits an in-depth approach to the phenomenon researched (Yin 2009). The cases are exploratory in nature due to the scarce previous research on the topic with the aim of trying to establish a deeper understanding of the role of these rural CBSEs in fostering an inclusive process of development in two peripheral rural areas.

The cases selected are not statistically representative of all SEs present in each region but they have been selected due to their potential to add knowledge to the phenomenon studied, thus a purposeful selection of the sample has been followed (Maxwell 2005)⁴, allowing the cases to be illustrative (Perri 6 and Bellamy 2012, 112) of CBSEs working in European rural areas. The cases have been built from data gathered through different techniques. Eight semi-structured interviews, lasting from 50 to 80 minutes, with different stakeholders of the two CBSEs (staff, users and volunteers) were conducted. Some were audio recorded, while for others handwritten notes were taken⁵. Moreover, the researchers participated in, and observed at, meetings and activities held by the CBSEs such as community planning meetings, workshops and seminars, staff meetings and

⁴ The criteria established to select the cases were the following: they fulfil the definition followed in this study of CBSEs (checked against the EMES indicators); they are based and operate within a peripheral rural region of the EU; they are established organizations, i.e. they have been in operation for more than 5 years and; they have within their goals the development of the locality/area and the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

⁵ Five were audio-recorded whereas in three cases hand-write notes were taken as the participants asked not to be recorded.

regional networking activities⁶. Furthermore, secondary sources such as national statistics, previous research reports and presentations were gathered. Most of the material used is qualitative, although some quantitative statistical data was used to enrich the case studies. Our data has been triangulated by the use of different techniques and by the incorporation of different perspectives (such as users, staff, volunteers) into the construction of these two cases. The data was collected over the period January 2018 to January 2019. A thematic analysis of the data (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2014) was employed through the use of the NVivo (12) software.

Findings

Presentation of the cases.

- Case 1 – Ballyhoura Development CLG (rural Ireland)

Ballyhoura Development CLG (hereafter BD) is a non-profit, community-led local development company with charitable status⁷. The organisation was established in 1991, although its roots can be traced back to a development association that was set up in a local village in 1964. With this strong community link throughout its whole existence, BD is focused on creating empowered and inclusive communities and a diversified local economy, “thereby making the Ballyhoura area an attractive location in which to live, do business, and visit” (Ballyhoura Development 2018). It does so through a focus on six themes: community and family support work; education and training; community development; enterprise development; tourism and the environment. In 2018, BD employed around 61 FTE⁸, working from offices in 5 towns/villages across a defined geographic area. Its governance structure is made up of a board of directors of 22 volunteers representing different sectoral interests of the local community, including the voluntary sector, public representatives and social partners. Throughout the years, BD has been supported by national and international funding programmes, including among others national activation labour market schemes (Tús and RSS⁹) and the EU rural development LEADER funding.

The organisation is focused on the Ballyhoura Region, a predominantly rural area in the Mid-West of Ireland (Bertolini and Peragine 2009; O’Hara and O’Shaughnessy 2016). The Ballyhoura Region includes two administrative regions, namely South-East Limerick and North-East Cork. With 83,5% of the population living outside towns, the area is characterized by many dispersed villages and settlements (Meredith 2018). Agriculture is a traditionally strong sector in the region. However, restructuring in this sector over the past decades has proved challenging for the region. In addition to this, the region also faces other challenges such as a lack of infrastructure, inadequate access to services, social isolation, the outmigration of young people and lack of broadband.

- Case 2 – ADC Moura (rural Portugal)

ADC Moura (hereafter ADC), is a non-profit organisation founded in 1993 by a voluntary group of people¹⁰. The main goals of ADC are to contribute to the economic competitiveness and innovation of rural and vulnerable territories; to conserve and to value natural and cultural assets; to raise environment awareness through education; to defend the equal access of all to social,

⁶ It should be noted that one of the authors is employed by one of the case organisations and both organisations are part of a European research consortium of which all researchers are members as well (see www.ruraction.eu and “Funding/Acknowledgments”), which ensured easy access to both organisations.

⁷ Its legal form is a “Company limited by guarantee, CLG”

⁸ Besides these fulltime FTEs, BD employed 137 people on a part time basis through employment activation/rural social scheme programmes.

⁹ Tús: a community work placement scheme providing short-term working opportunities for unemployed people.

RSS: Rural Social Scheme

¹⁰ Legally an “association”.

educational, health and cultural services; to push for social cohesion and citizen's participation. By 2018, the organisation had a total of five staff. Nine volunteers form the governing bodies, these are elected every two years by the general assembly, in which every of the 150 members that formed ADC can participate, each member having one vote. The funding sources of ADC have evolved since its establishment to include grant projects, fundraising activities, sale of services, membership fees and donations. For the year 2017, 60% of its income came from projects (grants), whereas 30% came from selling services and around 10% from other activities (donations, renting spaces).

The target area of ADC is Concelho de Moura, a sub-region of Baixo Alentejo, an interior region situated in south-east Portugal, and classified as 'predominantly rural-remote' (Bertolini and Peragine 2009). A declining and low-density population, high levels of age dependency, high unemployment, low employment rates and seasonality due to high levels of employment in the primary and tourism sector, and low education levels (including high illiteracy) are some of the major challenges that the region faces.

Type of services – combining economic, social and environmental development.

An analysis of the different services delivered by BD and ADC¹¹ demonstrates the intertwining of different types goals, i.e. economic, social and environmental.

In regard to economic development both organisations deliver different services that support entrepreneurial processes such as mentoring businesses in their nascent stages, establishing community enterprise centres and supporting apprenticeships linking local youngsters with local businesses. Moreover, both CBSEs facilitate entrepreneurial networks of disadvantage stakeholders, such as rural entrepreneurial women in the case of BD and small scale organic farmers in the case of ADC.

Closely related is the creation of local employment, not only directly through the organisations but also indirectly through some of the afore mentioned services. For example, since 2015 the mentoring programme of ADC has directly supported the creation of 22 small businesses which employ 32 people and has provided technical support to local organisations in the development of their services, e.g. Centro Social e Comunitario Safara, a community centre that provides day care and home services to elder population which currently employs 20 local women.

The employment created by these organisations is usually dependent on public funding. However, this employment generally targets individuals within vulnerable groups such as long-term unemployed, youngsters, women without high formal education or Roma communities. In relation to the SDGs, these services mainly contribute to SDG 8 which focus on sustainable and inclusive economic growth, employment and decent work. More specifically, indicators 8.3 that relates with entrepreneurship and 8.5 that relates with decent work for vulnerable populations are targeted. Moreover, they contribute to the indicator 1.2 of SDG 1, that refers to the alleviation of poverty according to national standards.

Furthermore, these rural CBSEs have fostered the valorisation of natural and cultural resources and heritage, combining the economic exploitation of these resources with the sustainability and respect for the environment. As an example of the former, BD has actively promoted sustainable tourism within the region, especially through biking trails, hiking and locally produced food branding. More recently, the organisation has started to build and facilitate the cultivation of new innovative industries within the area. An example of the latter is their work in the renewable gas industry; together with different local and national partners, BD tries to shape this industry and the necessary infrastructure, in order to bring new income and new jobs into the area and positively impact agricultural decarbonisation. Although a source of economic growth (SDG 8), these services contribute to the SDG 11 that promotes more inclusive and sustainable communities and in the latest example to SDG 7 that promotes affordable and clean energy.

By intertwining social and economic goals both rural CBSEs implement socio-economic planning processes with the communities where they work. They do so in partnerships with other local

¹¹The services correspond to those active during the years 2017-8.

organisations. This is an important foundation of the work of both organisations since it facilitates and supports communities in articulating their needs and priorities and provides support in implementing these priorities through different community participation and planning methodologies. These processes promote the participation, engagement and active citizenship of the population, in line with SDG 11 and more specifically indicator 11.3 that relate to the participatory planning and management of communities. According to staff of ADC, these public meetings are,

“moments in which the local community is invited to get together to talk about diverse topics... local communities realised that this was a different way of participating in the (political) life of the village different from voting, the concept of citizenship was widening.” (ADC, staff 1)

It is important to note that these processes are formalised in specific action plans that typically are used by communities as legitimate guidelines to implement their projects.

Beyond conducting these processes of participatory community planning, both rural CBSEs services have focused on capacity building, especially of individuals within vulnerable groups, as a way of fostering social inclusion. This is represented by the services developed by ADC which promote digital skills, including some projects that specifically target the local Roma community and by the recently developed community inclusion toolkit by BD, which targets broad-based community groups to reflect on the ways in which they can include more people in their activities. The toolkit is developed in close cooperation with local community groups. This close cooperation with the groups to identify needs and build capacity is exemplar of the way in which BD strives to foster an inclusive process of local development. According to staff from BD,

“We’re working with disadvantaged communities and disadvantaged families and disadvantaged individuals, but we’re also working with the broad-based community groups and we feel it’s important to work with those groups on social inclusion as well” (BD, staff 4)

Moreover, both rural CBSEs are certified training centres that deliver a diverse range of courses including courses on sustainable agriculture and tourism, business creation, online marketing, digital skills and literacy.

The capacity building services of these rural CBSEs closely relates to SDG 4, i.e. quality education, and more specifically to the indicator 4.4 which refers to skills development. Moreover, they contribute to reduce inequalities, i.e. SDG 10, promoting the inclusion of all, irrespective of their sex, age, ethnicity or economic status (indicator 10.2).

As a third dimension of development, these rural CBSEs also deliver services that promote environmental objectives (some of them have already been mentioned when explaining the economic development). An important aspect developed by these rural CBSEs is their focus on environmental education. For example through facilitating outdoor class rooms for schools and the organisation of workshops around biodiversity. They also work at the maintenance of local natural resources and work with different local professionals (e.g. shepherds, farmers, biologists, historians) in developing resources that educate especially the local young people about the potential of their own territory.

ADC promotes environmental goals fostering organic farming at small scale within their social-community garden, facilitating short economic circuits and coordinating networks in which small scale organic farmers can meet other stakeholders (research centres/universities, local authorities, other farmers and industry) to develop their activities. BD has developed projects around sustainable energy communities, in which local communities are stimulated and facilitated to create energy charters and sustainable energy plans. They also support numerous local Tidy Town groups. These are voluntary community groups that undertake initiatives to clean and improve their local environment. The environmentally focused services of these rural CBSEs contribute to different SDGs such as SDG 2, specifically to the indicator 2.3 that supports small-scale farming and their access to different resources; SDG 12, i.e. responsible consumption and production, more specifically to the indicator 12.2 that relates to the more efficient use of natural resources and reducing carbon footprint. But also to SDG 11, as their main goal is to contribute to sustainable communities.

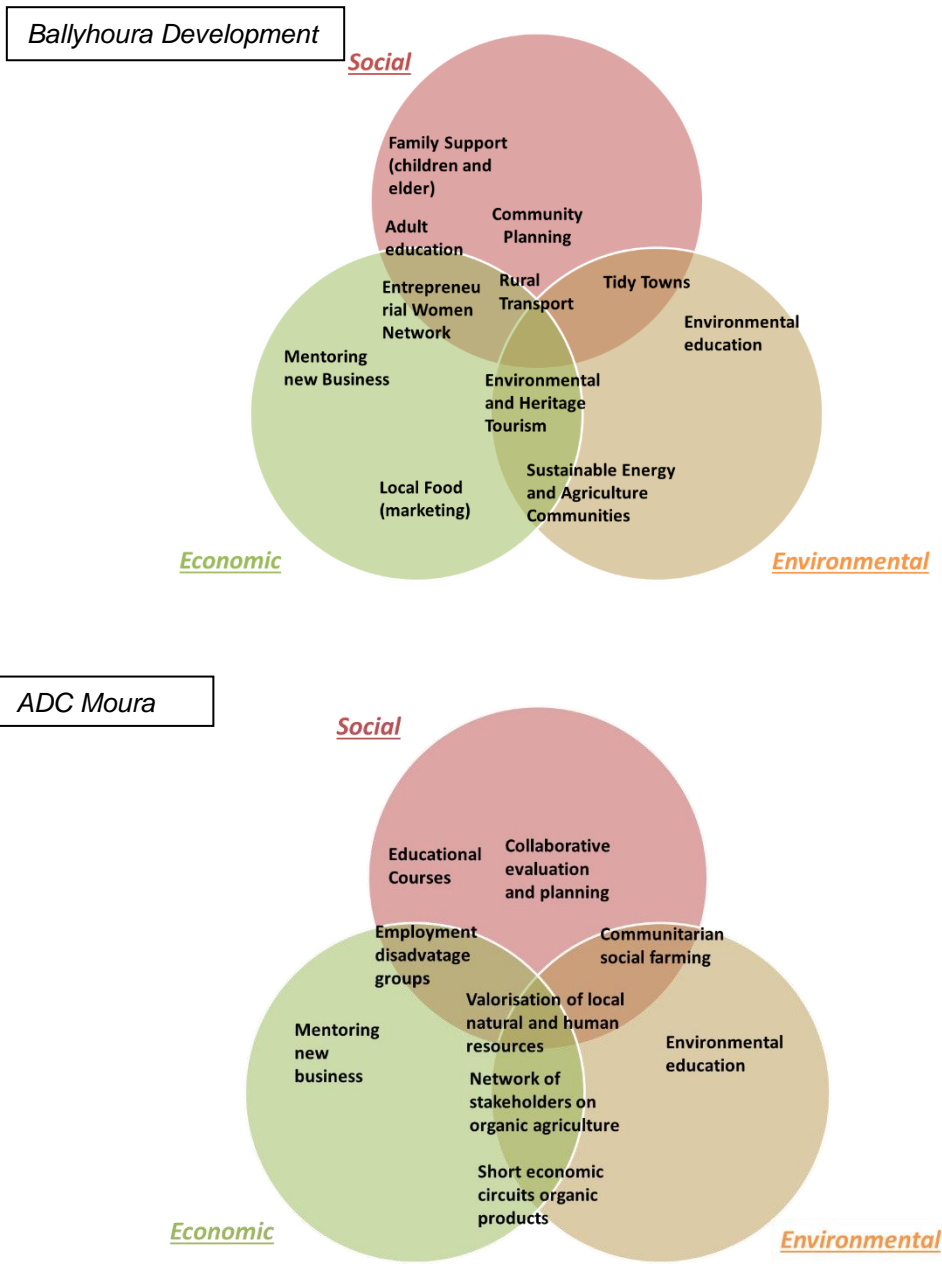


Figure 2. BD and ADC services and development dimensions.

Although presented in two different sections, i.e. economic, social and environmental, the services delivered by the two rural CBSEs studied are usually difficult to classify within a single unit due to their overlap in pursuing different goals (see Figure 2). Hence, these CBSEs are characterised by their contribution to a multidimensional (local) development.

Key aspects in the implementation of services.

- Local embeddedness and external links

An important aspect of the rural CBSEs studied is their close connection to different stakeholders from the communities in which they operate, thus the local embeddedness of these CBSEs. Moreover, this is combined with the development of external links that facilitates the attraction of resources and implementation of their services.

In the case of BD, the organisation plays an important part in aligning different needs and possible solutions within the area. BD develops formal widespread consultations in which different stakeholders, ranging from local communities and local businesses, to sectoral agencies and national governmental bodies, are asked for input around their priorities for local development within the region. The organisation plays a key role in fostering vertical and horizontal connections across these stakeholders and facilitates a two-way process of communication. This is achieved through the hosting of networking events and encouraging participation in regional, national and international networks.

Furthermore, the personal networks of employees of this CBSE also play an important part.

“Sometimes it's just about taking the phone, so it's more informal because sometimes if it's formal it can put people off. Whereas if it's informal, people tend to be more open and you can sit down and just chat on what we do.” (BD, Staff 3)

BD adopts a diversity of roles in achieving this, ranging from facilitation, to brokering, to managing, depending on the project, the situation, the community capacity and the partners involved. This role fluidity is an important characteristic of BD. Working in partnership with, and connecting, different groups, agencies and institutional bodies is a notable feature of the way in which BD operates.

“It's us connecting with what the communities want and with everything else that is going on above us. And trying to be the conduit to bring resources and knowledge and supports down.” (BD, Staff 4).

In the case of ADC, their way of working through partnerships with local communities, schools, voluntary associations, local authorities and business has allowed the organisation to be viewed as a legitimate body with a capacity to implement projects in different villages across the region.

“ADC Moura always works with partners, usually associations, that are already established and relevant within the localities or neighbourhoods where the services or projects are going to be implemented” (ADC, staff 1)

ADC has developed regional, national and international connections that have brought resources to the area. Through partnerships in projects ADC has developed links which have been proven beneficial not only for the organisation but to local actors as well. This is the case with EPAM¹, a network of (small scale) producers/farmers, research, industry and public bodies coordinated by ADC which promote entrepreneurship within the aromatic and medicinal plant sector. The network is built from a collaborative approach among different stakeholders who share their knowledge, experiences and (in some occasions) tools and capital. This is organised through local, regional, national and international seminars, events and online tools. This multiple networking ecosystem has enhanced the participation and empowerment of small-scale farmers and other stakeholders within the sector. Recently, the European Commission has recognised this as a good practice of rural social innovation and the Portuguese government has promoted the creation of a more formalised structure for the network.

- Challenging position between local led (bottom-up) and top downs goals

Both of the rural CBSEs studied for this paper demonstrate a great dependence on public support, especially in regard to funding. This, has positioned these organisations in a challenging position between the implementations of local led (bottom-up) goals and the implementation of the goals of policies and regulations coming from regional, national and/or international institutions.

In the case of BD, the organisation operates in a defined geographical region that covers two specific administrative regions (counties). Funding, contracts and administration are often handled at the level of the administrative region, thus causing BD to have to put in double the effort on many administrative tasks. Furthermore, the organisation has noted a growing trend in short-term, often fragmented statutory support and more pressure on the organisation to enter into competitive public tendering procurement processes. This makes medium and long-term planning for staff, resources and programmes more complicated for the CBSE. This, not only, has an

impact on the administrative costs of the organisation with the consequence that many individual employees spend a great amount of time on these issues that is usually at the expense of their direct contact with local communities. Moreover, the siloed approach of many funding bodies also causes challenges for the organisation to communicate its wider impact.

“We always try to widen the impact, but most of the time the funder is just interested in what happened with that bit of funding that we give you to do that specific piece of work.” (BDL, Staff 4).

In the case of ADC, the organisation has been changing, from delivering projects and services in which they define their own objectives, to being contractors that deliver some of the services that the state considers important. Greater levels of this external predetermination and control has reduced the margins of creativity and innovation for the CBSEs. Moreover, it has created difficulties with the evaluation of the impact of certain projects, due to the difficulty of expressing these results numerically. As a consequence the services with clear economic goals and measurable outcomes have been maintained whereas those more innovative, with less tangible and measurable immediate outcomes have been reduced.

Conclusions, limitations and further research

The cases presented in this paper are two examples of how CBSEs have fostered inclusive development within two peripheral European rural areas. Our cases support the findings of Jacuniak-Suda and Mose (2014, 37) who state that the contribution of (CB)SEs to rural development is “not only limited to one aspect (economic, social or environmental) but covers mainly two or three dimensions concurrently”. Intertwining these different goals, CBSEs position themselves as actors that contribute to a more multidimensional development (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose and Tomaney 2017), promoting the development of SDGs (UN 2015) particularly related to: access to basic services and poverty reduction (SDG 1); food security and small-scale farming (SDG 2); capacity building, skills for employment and entrepreneurship (SDG 4); affordable and clean energy (SDG 7); sustainable and inclusive economic growth and decent work (SDG 8); social, political and economic inclusion of vulnerable groups, thus reducing inequalities (SDG 10); contributing to the construction of sustainable communities (SDG 11) and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12).

Furthermore, the analysed CBSEs also play an important role as intermediaries between individuals and organisations within their regions, trying to connect disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged groups. Their embeddedness within the local communities has facilitated the links between these groups and has facilitated the harnessing of local resources to deliver their projects (Vestrum 2014). In addition, as demonstrated by other studies of (CB)SEs in rural areas (Barraket et al. 2018; Richter 2017), our findings reinforce the role of these well-established CBSEs as linkers of their communities to external actors and institutions. This role is important to both the acquisition of resources that cannot be found within their own regions and to highlight the problems faced within these areas to higher institutional levels, thus enhancing the *connectivity* of territories and groups living within the area (Bock 2016; Lang and Fink 2018). Finally, our analysis stresses the challenging position that rural CBSEs face in regard to maintaining their flexibility to facilitate a bottom-up community led development approach while operating in, and being reliant on, a wider top down, siloed and sometimes rigid policy framework. Thus potentially challenging their autonomy and social innovation capacity (Moulaert et al. 2013).

Our study demonstrates the potential of rural CBSEs to contribute to the development of disadvantage groups and territories. However, due to the vulnerability of their target groups and territories we see the potential of these organisations as complementary partners of the state-government rather than a substitute in service delivery (Barth et al. 2015), thus the necessity of an enabling not absent state that provides long-term, comprehensive and spatially sensitive support to rural CBSEs (Shucksmith 2013).

This paper considers rural CBSEs as organisations embedded within their historical, political and socio-economic structures (Granter 2014). However, a more detailed study of the relation (interplay) over time between rural CBSEs, as potential agents of change, and the structures that set the frameworks in which they act is needed in order to further explain the potential role of

these organisations to make a contribution to inclusive development of, and within, rural areas. Furthermore, although this study has included the vision of different stakeholders, a further in-depth inclusion of these in future research is needed in order to strengthen research in this promising field. Notwithstanding, this study shows how rural CBSEs have the potential to contribute to the implementation of the SDGs through their capacity to foster inclusive development and connectivity within peripheral European rural areas¹².

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