Can social enterprise contribute to creating sustainable rural communities? – Using the lens of structuration theory to analyse the emergence of rural social enterprise.

Steinerowski Artur A, Rural Society Research Team Scottish Agricultural College, West Mains Rd, King’s Buildings, Edinburgh, EH9 3JG, Scotland
Tel: + 44 (0)131 535 4387
Email: artur.steinerowski@sac.ac.uk

Abstract

**Background/Introduction** Recent public policies increasingly emphasise the role of communities in service co-production. Collaboration between the state and the public is frequently associated with social enterprise activities. However, the assumption that social enterprises can be successfully built and developed in remote and rural areas might be faulty. Current policy does not recognise contextual factors relating to rural social enterprise development. **Aim(s)/Objective(s)** The aim of this paper is to verify whether social enterprise can contribute to creating sustainable rural communities by considering promoters and barriers to rural social enterprise development. **Methods** The paper draws on a qualitative study in the Highlands of Scotland and the analytical framework of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). **Results/Findings** This paper questions the role of social enterprise in crating sustainable rural communities; it presents promoters and barriers to rural social enterprise development. Using the lens of structuration theory the study indicates the importance of structural forces in the emergence and development of rural social enterprise. **Discussion** The study presents implications for policymakers, practitioners and researchers. The paper recognises that although rural communities do not control all the conditions that affect them, they have the ability to adapt to some of the structural features. This means that in spite of adversities associated with living and running a business in remote and rural areas (i.e.
social and economic challenges), rural communities might benefit from remote rural social enterprise through practising (what we call) ‘adaptive capacity’. **Conclusion** The paper contributes to the knowledge of rural social enterprise by presenting what affects its growth. It also introduces ‘adaptive structuration’ showing that there is no primacy of the structure over agency, and vice-versa. Finally, the paper summarises that social enterprise can contribute to building sustainable rural communities and suggests that to make it happen, contextual factors enabling and restraining social enterprise development need to be taken under consideration.

**Key words** Social enterprise, rural community, sustainability, structuration

**Introduction**

The UK government highlights the role of social enterprises in providing services to communities (DTI, 2002, 2006; The Conservative Party, 2010a, 2010b; Cabinet Office, 2010a, 2010b). Recent economic crises exhibit a need to introduce new approaches facilitating public sector service delivery and create more sustainable economic and social systems. A paternalistic dependence on the welfare state has been criticised and alternative ways towards citizens’ participation in the design and delivery of services started being promoted (The Conservative Party, 2010a, 2010b; Cabinet Office, 2010a, 2010b; Scottish Government, 2007, 2010). As the conventional model of service delivery does not address current social and economic challenges and fails to recognise service users’ strengths and assets, co-production could present a way of transforming public services addressing current challenges of public spending cuts, an ageing society and rising public expectations for personalised high quality services (Boyle et. al, 2010).
The delivery of services by non-state players (Reed and Stanley, 2005), including elements of social welfare (Milligan and Fyfe, 2004) is promoted and social enterprises are increasingly looked on to provide a proportion of social services. Recent policy advocates ‘a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control’ (The Conservative Party, 2010a). It is suggested that this will lead to the development of individual capacity, increased community confidence and social capital (Needham, 2007; Leadbeater, 2007; Boyle et. al, 2010). Moreover, it is believed that social enterprises can contribute to the improved delivery of services, stronger and more resilient communities, and empowered people collaborating with the state in order to achieve social, economic and environmental benefits. Claims are made indicating that through setting up and running social enterprises communities will engage in service co-production building sustainable communities. This suggests that people will take some responsibility for organising services traditionally delivered by the state.

Expectations towards communities are high. However, less attention is paid to implementing this idealistic approach indicating that communities will ‘do things for themselves’. For instance, the assumption that social enterprises can be successfully built and developed in remote and rural areas might be faulty. In spite of the fact that ‘rural social enterprises are a particular feature in Scotland delivering important services in remote communities, with 35 per cent of Scottish social enterprises being rural based’ (Scottish Executives, 2007:11-12), there are no policies specifically addressing the issues of remote and rural social enterprises; thus implying that there is no difference between setting up social enterprises in urban and rural areas. Limited understanding of how remote and rural social enterprise function might, therefore, weaken rural communities. To avoid the latter, it is necessary to investigate what drives development of rural social enterprises and what are the promoters and barriers to their growth.
As there is high enthusiasm at a policy level presenting social enterprises as a panacea to current social and economic challenges and as there is little research evidence on how social enterprises emerge in rural locations, this paper explores the question: Can social enterprise contribute to creating sustainable rural communities?

The paper begins by providing information on social enterprise and the challenges of setting up and running such organisations in rural locations. Then, the research methodology is presented and underpinnings of structuration theory, which is used as a theoretical lens enriching data analysis and findings, are explained. Following, findings identifying the role of rural social enterprise in creating sustainable rural communities are described. The paper presents implications of the study for politicians, practitioners and researchers. The article comments on whether rural social enterprises can contribute to rural development. Finally, the paper concludes with contribution of the study in generating understanding of rural social enterprise and processes associated with its creation.

**Background**

**Notion of social enterprise**

Social enterprises are businesses that provide services, goods and trade for a social purpose and operate independently of the state (DTI, 2006). The focus of social enterprises is on generating social, environmental and economic benefits through enterprising activity. Social enterprises trade like mainstream businesses in order to build long-term sustainability. Earned income, therefore, has two functions: firstly, it supports fulfilling social objectives and, secondly, it represents a drive towards financial self-sufficiency (Dees, 1998; Dees et al., 2001; Anderson and Dees, 2002; Thompson, 2002; Peredo and McLean, 2006; Mair and Marti, 2006; Shaw and Carter, 2007; Parkinson and Howorth, 2008; Nicholls and Cho, 2008; Nichols, 2006, 2008). Thus, social enterprises possess a strong social mission that is characteristic of the third sector and the entrepreneurial skills of the private sector; they aim to
create sustainable and healthy communities and this is a key aspect in promoting social enterprises. In the current economic climate, when the UK governments attempt to find more sufficient and sustainable ways of service delivery, social enterprises present a potential solution bringing together business and social action, and combining needs of communities and the state (Kerlin, 2010).

Social enterprises in remote and rural contexts

Rural social enterprise research is underdeveloped. In relation to remote and rural communities, academic papers tend to focus on the wider third sector organisations including charities, voluntary organisations and local community initiatives; these often relate to, for example, rural governance, community empowerment, regeneration, difficulties with providing public services and not directly to challenges associated with setting up and running social enterprises in the rural context. This is surprising because remote and rural areas face a number of social and economic challenges and, as such, social enterprises could play an important role in enhancing sustainability of rural communities. While governments in the UK intermittently acknowledge that services are complex to provide in rural areas, they appear reluctant to write specific policy for rural social enterprises. However, the general environment and context in which social enterprises operate have an impact on the extent to which social enterprises are sustainable.

Production of services by communities might be successful. Rural citizens might draw upon traditional rural strengths – strong mutual knowledge, sense of community and social cohesion (Shucksmith et al., 1996). Social networks are denser in rural, as compared with urban, settings (Hofferth and Iceland, 1998), with resulting outcomes of high levels of trust and active civic participation (Dale and Onyx, 2005) – key components of the social capital associated with social enterprise development. The existence of co-dependence, reciprocity and collective activity would also imply rural areas appear to represent a perfect nurturing ground for social enterprises (Granovetter, 2005; Shucksmith et al., 1996, Kay, 2003). Those
living in remote areas display a greater propensity to engage in social rather than commercial entrepreneurship compared with those living in urban areas and this is because some marginalised groups often display a culture of entrepreneurship that is noticeably more socially orientated (Williams, 2007). Consequently, the role of social enterprise in rural service provision may be promising.

The benefits of social enterprises for rural areas described are that, by using a bottom-up approach, services provided will more appropriately meet local needs and, by doing this, satisfy the distinctive needs of local communities (Osborne et al., 2002; Kay, 2003; Budd, 2003; DTI, 2006; OECD, 2008). Working collectively creates social capital and builds confidence that can be applied to other community issues (Mandl et al., 2007). Rural social enterprises are able to build human capacity i.e. ‘cells of people’ forming a lobby that put pressure on council officers and members to find ways of continuing to support socially orientated projects.

Conversely, there are elements of culture, human capacity and the legal and financial context that might mitigate against the involvement of local rural residents in service provision through social enterprises. Given their already diminished experience of service provision, they may resent the imposition of further service provision onto themselves. The community involvement is also questionable i.e. rural community involvement depends on: physical geography and local environment; the extent and complexity of regeneration programmes and agencies in the area; the nature of human and social capital and social exclusion; the strength of the local voluntary and community infrastructure; and the nature of local political relationships (Osborne et al., 2004). Rural communities might demand professional help provided by the state – associating social enterprise provision with erosion of rural services. Those involved in informal reciprocal ‘favour-giving’ might be suspicious of receiving services from, and hesitant to contribute work to, organisations such as social enterprises which might be perceived to run
formal ‘entrepreneurial’ activity. Rural places are comprised of contesting groups whose positions and conspicuousness is heightened by small populations living in proximity in isolation. Connections between community members may encourage differential experiences of support (Munro and Carlisle, 1998). In addition, there may be a limited number of people in rural communities with appropriate skills and willingness to participate (OECD, 2008).

It has been noted that only a small number of rural social enterprises are able to achieve financial sustainability from trading (Clark et al., 2007). Wariness that social enterprises substitute unsuccessful state or local authority provision of rural services has been noted (Zografos, 2007). There is a mismatch between policy expectations and the lived reality of community-based social entrepreneurship, as the majority of social enterprises - especially those engaged in community development and those located in areas of disadvantage - are not, and are unlikely ever to be, financially sustainable. The financial stability of rural social enterprises is debatable; in order to survive the organisations frequently need matched funding (Farmer et al., 2008; Steinerowski et al., 2008). An ‘authentic’ civil society movement rather than institutionally ‘manufactured’ rural social enterprises by local development agencies is questioned (Hodgson, 2004; Steinerowski et al., 2010). The problematic historical and geographical context of some rural communities (e.g. lack of cooperation) might damage rural social enterprise creation (Clark et al., 2007). As such, sustainability of rural social enterprises and their ability to build sustainable rural communities might be questioned.

Given these conducive and non-conducive factors affecting the development of social enterprise in rural service provision, the courses of development processes and the degree of success of rural social enterprise is hard to predict. The question of the feasibility of producing sustainable social enterprises in rural areas may also be pertinent and has not been addressed in policy. Research evidence exploring how
social enterprises operate in remote and rural areas is limited. Assuming that social enterprise is ‘a good thing’, a question whether it can develop and contribute to creating sustainable rural communities, remains.

*Theoretical underpinnings - applying structuration theory*

It is arguable that the appearance of social enterprise is closely related to forces existing in ‘the structure’. Nicholls (2008) identifies ‘market failures’ and simultaneous ‘social challenges’ addressed by social entrepreneurs; one of them relates to the political context and the failure to provide sufficient public goods; this is an element of the context which is associated with the rise of social enterprise. The socially entrepreneurial reaction to market failure and perceived social failure has been expressed within and outside government. In one way, in many countries there has been a movement towards ‘reinventing’ government (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Weerawardena and Mort, 2006). This involves instilling more entrepreneurial ways of thinking into the public sector in order to enhance its efficiency and impact. On the other hand, as some governments have increasingly retreated from their traditional role as providers of public services, new ways of service provision have emerged. These, as noted by Nicholls (2008), have frequently taken the form of organisations that mix public and private agendas. In the UK, for example, the movement has been characterised by the ‘Third Way’ and later by the ‘Big Society’ (Giddens, 1998, 2000, 2002; The Conservative Party, 2010a, 2010b; Cabinet Office, 2010a, 2010b). So, this ‘political failure’ could be seen as a factor influencing the rise of social enterprise.

Thus, the current policy climate nurtures and promotes the concept of social enterprise and there is an undeniable link between the development of policy and the emergence of social enterprises. Yet, standardised policy interventions are not effective; rather, ‘success’ is seen as a product of a range of place-specific factors (Amin et al., 2002). This would suggest that particular ‘success factors’ are strictly
associated with a particular place. Still, the policy encourages entrepreneurs; simultaneously, their emergence encourages others and shapes the structural conditions (for example, legal and financial) and societal conditions (for example, the extent to which people come to accept social enterprise as a legitimate form of service provision) for the development of further social enterprise. In other words, there is the potential for a duality, where the agent and the structure co-construct.

Consistent also with structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), the agent can be simultaneously enabled and constrained by the structure, so it is pertinent to look at what is there, within the context, that acts as a promoter and a barrier to the development of rural social enterprises. Now, the study presented here accepts the concept of structuration theory, rather than testing it. Structuration theory is used to consider the role of structure and agency in the emergence, development and sustainability of rural social enterprise.

Methodology

Sample and research techniques

The research was carried out in the Highlands and Islands; the area has a population of 373,000, covers 39,050 square kilometres and is one of the most sparsely populated areas of the European Union (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2011). To explore the field under investigation, a qualitative approach to data collection was adopted. A range of views and perspectives from social enterprise stakeholders (including politicians/policymakers; social entrepreneurs; service providers; and social enterprise managers/employees and volunteers) were obtained using snowball sampling. The use of snowball sampling is particularly appropriate when it is difficult to identify members of the desired population or when the population is inaccessible (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Saunders et al., 2003); such was the case with this study. Snowball sampling enabled identification of respondents who were hard to locate.
In the first stage of the study, thirty five individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted providing initial findings; these were verified, confirmed and extended in the second stage of the study using three focus group discussions. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed; all transcripts were initially read by a key investigator and samples were also, independently, read by two other researchers. Emerging themes were discussed and consensus reached on an initial coding schedule. This was used as a basis for systematic analysis of transcripts using N-Vivo qualitative data analysis software. Further iterations of analysis using N-Vivo occurred following feedback on initial coding.

Giddens’ theory (1984)

A key feature of Giddens' structuration theory is that structure is not static and definitive but forming and formative. It argues that agency is not only shaped by the structure but also that, over time, agency is able to reconstruct the structure. Agents continue to possess freedom within the structure which enables them to modify it (Giddens, 1984). As a result, changes occur. In other words, structures are produced, and then reproduced, through interaction with agents. Agents bring change and are implicated in creating other new structures and agents (Giddens, 1984; Jack and Anderson, 2002).

Structuration theory works on the basis of attempting to resolve a basic (but fundamentally irresolvable) debate relating to the relationship between structure and agency. An understanding of structuration theory is that there is a relationship between individual choices and structural, contextual social forces. Considering findings through the lens of structuration theory may help to predict whether social enterprise itself is a sustainable concept, what needs to be done to help sustain it, or the extent to which social enterprise is a ‘hothouse flower’ bred by governments.
Findings

This section presents findings of the study. Initially, empirical findings describing promoters and barriers to rural social enterprise development are considered. After this, structuration theory is used to take another perspective of rural social enterprise.

Promoters to rural social enterprises

The study findings identified that remote and rural settings, usually perceived as antagonistic and harsh to business, offer some beneficial conditions on which social enterprises might draw; these include:

Market context - small numbers of clients sparsely located deter commercial enterprise and present difficulties for public sector providers, leaving market gaps for needed services; these can be provided by social enterprises which do not have to face strong competitors. This might create opportunities for delivering new services through social enterprises which may not have been previously available. It was argued that by creating new products/services, a social enterprise can gain support from both the community and local authorities: ‘You can easily find things that are missing (...) People are grateful for having a new shop or something else open that is a service for them. Whereas in the city they have more choice’ (volunteer 25).

A culture of self-help - social enterprise resonates with rural people’s tendency to problem-solving and willingness to help each other out. Service availability in remote areas tends to be less adequate than in urban areas. Although this is not itself positive, it engenders rural attitudes of independence and willingness to respond to a challenge. Respondents claimed that in remote and rural areas people look after themselves and that ‘there’s a real feeling of community’ (social enterprise manager 7). It was stressed that ‘rural ethos’ and self-help gathers people together, and this is advantageous as it is in the spirit of social enterprise: ‘in rural areas, people have got more interest in working together to solve..."
things collectively whereas in cities someone else can always do it, because there’s enough people around. In rural communities, people have to solve more of their own problems” (social entrepreneur 11).

Respondents also argued that in rural areas people are more used to the idea of providing their own services because they have much more of a tradition of fending for themselves. Thus, according to some interviewees, it is not difficult to persuade rural communities that social enterprise is a good model. They highlighted that, because of the small scale and low population density, people tend to know each other and, if generally supported, the model can be more quickly accepted than it would be in an urban area.

**Support from local communities** - which quickly recognise establishment of a new organisation and appreciate a new service/product provider (this relates to lack of, or an insufficient level of, services that social enterprises target): ‘People understand that you can’t separate out your social needs and the economy and the services. Everything has to come together because the communities are so small’ (social enterprise employee 2). Respondents noted that some social enterprises have been initiated by local people who wanted to support their neighbours. It was suggested that rural people are more capable of identifying their local needs than people from outside the area. Having an appropriate business idea was seen to be important. Interviewees claimed that rural social enterprises, due to the small scale of the market, can more easily build up their business through good reputation and be widely recognised in the community in which they operate.

**Small size of a social enterprise** (which frequently stays small due to a low number of customers) - means that an organisation remains flexible and is capable to quickly adapt to the changing environment. The small market might make it easier to introduce an innovative product or service which gains acceptance of a particular community. According to respondents, rural communities are receptive to innovation (which may be more difficult to introduce in an urban setting); this is because, in rural areas, there is a real need to make changes and/or deliver a service or product that is currently unavailable: ‘This village
is a rural area where transport is a real issue. They [community members] set up a transport scheme where volunteer drivers would take people shopping, doctors, that sort of stuff’ (volunteer 19). As noted by respondents, in rural areas, businesses need to remain flexible and open to delivering a range of needed products and services. In addition it was noted that those with saleable products can use alternative ways of selling (through using the internet, for example) to access a wider market.

**Barriers for rural social enterprises**

While there are advantages associated with rural settings that social enterprises can utilise and benefit from, respondents highlighted also a number of barriers for developing social enterprises in remote areas including geographical conditions, workforce issues, small size of the market (and, as such, small size of social enterprises) and, finally, inadequate support for rural social enterprises. It was emphasised that there are different challenges between rural and urban areas. Barriers to rural social enterprise include:

**Challenges of geography** - the geography of rural areas makes it difficult to create financially viable social enterprises. Delivering products and services and working with isolated communities is highly challenging: ‘The geographic distances are immense. Highland represents two thirds of the land mass of Scotland so actually trying to get people to or take things to people in the rural areas is much more difficult in terms of social enterprise’ (social enterprise employee 23). Sparsely populated areas with large distances between communities impose high costs of running a business; for example, costs of transport are higher than in urban areas.

**Access to workforce** - lack of skilled people leaves businesses without expertise that may be essential for development of rural social enterprises. Respondents claimed that a capable workforce is essential to social enterprise success: ‘That’s the most obvious difficulty that they don’t primarily have in the central belt or in big cities: is that you don’t have a variety of people living in an area that actually could provide
or could join a social enterprise’ (health and care professional 20). Finding skilled employees willing to travel long distances to work is difficult; according to the respondents, the more remote a place, the harder it is to find numbers of capable employees. Due to limited workforce capacity, rural social enterprises are not able to take on big projects and develop.

**Market size** - a number of respondents were concerned about market size and long-term sustainability of rural social enterprises. Respondents said that in the remote and rural areas there are a limited number of potential customers and, consequently, limited opportunities for ongoing development: ‘There is a problem in rural areas. Social enterprises behave like any enterprise in that they have to grow... let’s say, for instance, in the Fort William area you have a social enterprise that’s set up to help blind people. Well there may only be 80 blind people in Fort William, so you set your social enterprise and you’re very good at it and you set up a service that caters well for 80 blind people. So what do you do once you’re catering for all the 80 blind people, you’re banging against your ceiling?’ (politician 33). Due to low demand and small customer base, it is difficult to develop a viable business – even a social enterprise.

Also, setting up an enterprise in a rural area is difficult as entrepreneurs have to be careful to avoid affecting neighbouring businesses; new social enterprises need to provide something unique. They need to deliver a service or product that does not exist yet in a community. ‘Copying’ the services provided by an existing business could threaten it and such a move would not be supported by local people. Thus, there are ‘ethical’ rules that need to be considered when developing a new social enterprise: ‘If you’re choosing a business it’s particularly difficult because you don’t want to step on any local competitor, it’s such a small place. So whatever business you undertake either you have to go into local partnership with someone or you look at the business which doesn’t substitute anybody else’s business (...) we don’t want to step on other people’s toes. Whereas in Edinburgh or Glasgow, I would have no second thoughts about opening a café or opening a clothes shop or something’ (social entrepreneur 15). As it is difficult to grow
and develop, rural social enterprises remain small. Consequently, business opportunities are also limited (e.g. it is difficult for a small organisation to tender for public contracts).

**Insufficient support in rural areas** - long distances make it difficult for rural social enterprises to access help, build collaborations and networks. Lack of a tailored support was noted. Also, a shortage of financial support (which should be enhanced due to contextual factors i.e. high cost of running a social enterprise and the importance of rural social enterprises providing lacking services) was identified. It was argued that on-going funding is required to ensure that social businesses survive and develop. A need for local support agencies was expressed by respondents who claimed that, because of local characteristics, tailored support should be delivered to rural social enterprises: ‘People are different up here, everything is a lot different’ (social entrepreneur 28). Some interviewees expressed their concern about the applicability of national social enterprise policy to the local rural context.

**Structural factors associated with rural social enterprise development**

This section picks out the structural characteristics associated with running rural social enterprise. Giddens (1984) suggests that structure consists of rules (i.e. patterns people follow in social life) and resources (i.e. things created by human action; they are not given by nature) organised as properties of social systems (the rules, resources, and social relationships are produced and reproduced in social interaction). Here, earlier presented promoters and barriers are presented alongside those structural elements. Table 1 indicates conducive and non-conducive elements of structure relating to remote and rural social enterprise.
Table 1 Conducive and non-conducive elements of structure relating to remote and rural social enterprise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of structure relating to remote and rural social enterprise</th>
<th>Analytical ‘story’</th>
<th>Example data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conducive elements of structure</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social system</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Legitimation</td>
<td>Societal norms, values, and standards ‘adapted’ to local environment via naturalisation i.e. ability to cope with challenges associated with rurality ‘Internal’ understanding of community resources, rules and powers</td>
<td>People understand that you can’t separate out your social needs and the economy and the services. Everything has to come together because the communities are so small (social enterprise employee 2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Domination</td>
<td></td>
<td>In small rural areas they know an awful lot more about what counts in the community, they operate at grass roots level (volunteer 19)</td>
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<td><strong>Rules</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Procedural</td>
<td>The practice is performed in a creative way Social action is community orientated</td>
<td>Rural areas can be very creative (social enterprise employee 34) People are grateful for having a new... service (volunteer 25)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
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<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-human</td>
<td>Utilising available non-human resources to solve community problems Collaborative human action</td>
<td>Load of community projects (social entrepreneur 16) People have got more interest in working together to solve things collectively (social entrepreneur 11)</td>
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<td>Human</td>
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<td><strong>Non-conducive elements of structure relating to remote and rural social enterprise</strong></td>
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<td>Legitimation</td>
<td>A moral order and societal norms characteristic for rural social enterprise impose a specific social action</td>
<td>Whatever business you undertake either you have to go into local partnership with someone or you look at the business which doesn’t substitute anybody else’s business (social entrepreneur 15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Domination</td>
<td>Limited power of rural social enterprises leaves them with limited access to support</td>
<td>A lot of the [support] agencies are based in the central belt (social entrepreneur 28)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rules</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Procedural</td>
<td>Challenges associated with geographical impose the way how the practice is performed e.g. difficulties in running social enterprises Appropriate social enactment might limit business options</td>
<td>Trying to get people to or take things to people in the rural areas is much more difficult (social enterprise employee 23) You don’t want to step on any local competitor, it’s such a small place (social entrepreneur 15)</td>
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<td>Moral</td>
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<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-human</td>
<td>Geographical conditions impose high costs of running a business Limited skills of local people</td>
<td>Transport is a real issue (volunteer 19) You don’t have a variety of people living in an area that actually could provide ... a social enterprise (health &amp; care professional 20)</td>
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<td>Human</td>
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Table 1 considers elements of structure influencing social enterprise activities in remote and rural areas. As shown, structure is enacted by practices that are informed by: procedural rules (i.e. ‘rules’ about how the practice is performed), moral rules (i.e. ‘rules’ about appropriate forms of enactment of social action), non-human resources (allocation of resources among activities and members of society), and resources of human (i.e. formal organisations, legitimacy and authority) (Giddens 1984; Sewell, 1992). All structures are formed and informed by practices and enacted human conduct which maintains and reproduces these structures.

As indicated, there are different types/elements of structures in social systems including: legitimation that produces a moral order via naturalization in societal norms, values, and standards; and domination that produces (and is an exercise of) power, originating from the control of resources. The components of structure could be compared to the outcomes of structured practices; the structures can sign (telling/showing people what to do); for instance, they can indicate what is considered to be legitimate behaviour and practice. These concepts were explored in relation to the study findings (Table 1).

Data analysis revealed that a specific context of structure imposes a number of specific rules, resources and social systems. The most important difference between ‘general’ structure and ‘rural’ microstructure are geographical conditions and consequences of those (see Table 1). In fact, it could be argued that geographical conditions, which present non-human resources, influence other non-human resources (e.g. transport issues), human resources (e.g. lack of skilled staff), procedural rules (e.g. community collaboration), moral issues (e.g. community support and help-giving) and social systems which are ‘adopted’ to local environment (e.g. people understand that to survive they need to work together; they possess the ‘local power’ associated with living in a particular area). Thus, structuration presents
‘adaptive’ capability of agents who need to understand micro-structural forces and co-construct with them.

**Discussion**

The paper considered contextual factors including promoters and barriers to remote and rural social enterprise. Aspects of rural context were often noted as being simultaneously opportunities and threats; specifically, market context and the embedded nature of business relations, the latter implying that, if a niche can be found, an enterprise might meet with considerable supportive resources. Evidence of a strong ethos of solidarity was found, with examples given of high engagement in informal and formal help-giving. To grow, rural social enterprises need to develop a unique business idea that does not threaten neighbouring businesses. The study showed that empowerment is really occurring from within communities. The evidence suggests flourishing rural social enterprise needs specifically rural sources of finance and advice.

Looking through the lens of structuration theory, a summary of the foregoing analysis indicates that the remote and rural context presents microstructure which exposes social enterprises to specific promoters and barriers. The study identified that rural microstructure is largely influenced by geographical conditions and consequences of those e.g. transport issues, sparsely populated areas with a limited number of potential experienced employees, community cohesion/collaboration and ‘traditional’ dependence on community support and help-giving. Structural factors associated with remote and rural areas might be difficult or even impossible to ‘modify’. However, the study shows how, for example, agents adapt to local environment. Thus, rather than attempting to change structure, the study findings highlight the adaptive capability of agents who need to understand micro-structural forces and co-construct with them. This means that barriers to remote and rural social enterprise development require a unique ‘adaptive approach’ enabling social enterprise to work alongside the structural challenges. Also,
remote and rural characteristics present unique promoters which should be harnessed for social enterprise to succeed.

Structuration theory provided a framework for looking at descriptive data about processes influencing rural social enterprise development indicating how social enterprise emerge and what influences growth of rural social enterprise. Presented barriers to rural social enterprise development relate to many structural factors which can not be changed – this suggests primacy of structure over the agents. Yet, the study observes ‘adaptive structuralism’ i.e. as the agents are unable to change some of the structural features (e.g. geographical context), they modify their behaviours showing adaptive capacity. As such, the agents are neither supreme nor purely determined by structure.

So what does it all mean? Firstly, for politicians this study emphasised the importance of tailored rural social enterprise policies. Specific structural features do influence agents and how they act and policymakers should be aware of those. Secondly, the paper sends a message to practitioners indicating that, to succeed, rural social enterprises require adaptive and flexible approach drawing on specific rural features such as culture of self-help. Thirdly, for researchers this study adds to knowledge about rural social enterprise presenting the novelty and relevance of looking at rural social enterprise development through the lens of structuration theory.

Conclusions

The remote and rural context presents a ‘microstructure’ which exposes social enterprises to different structural factors; these create specific promoters and barriers which are different to promoters and barriers found in a ‘general’ structure. These issues raise a point i.e. there are specific rules in different contexts. For instance, in case of this study geographical context imposes ‘adaptive capacity’ on agents.
Hence, the way that agents act depends on the particular context in which they are immersed e.g. remote and rural areas (geographical context) imply high costs of running a business and this issue cannot be easily overcome. Instead, those living in remote and rural locations might draw on local characteristics and modify their behaviour in order to function well. Thus, what is perceived here is what we call ‘adaptive structuralism’.

Findings indicate that social enterprises might contribute to creating sustainable rural communities but to do that, they need to be sustainable themselves. Thus, it may be that rural areas would benefit from specific and targeted rural social enterprise policy initiatives that would consider structural features helping to develop stronger and more resilient communities.

References


