



2. EXPLORING THE SECTORIAL AND ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

2.3 RURAL COMMUNITY-LED BUSINESS MODELS

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Rural areas are hosts of natural resources and perform essential functions related to food production, housing, employment, and ecosystem services. However, these areas face significant challenges such as a low GDP per capita, lack of job opportunities, low wages, rapidly ageing population, lack of accessibility to goods and services (public transport, electricity, digital connectivity, health care services or schools, among others) and, because of all this, depopulation. Institutions like the European Union have taken up these risks and challenges and proposed a long-term Vision for rural areas that includes an EU Rural Action Plan and a Rural Pact to work towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas (COM, 2021).

"The community is an intermediate, mediating and moderating environment" (Hindle, 2010, p. 601). The community context profoundly influences the types of entrepreneurship initiatives and how they are carried out (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006), demonstrating the importance of the community context in entrepreneurship (Mezias & Kuperman, 2001).

Rural entrepreneurship is an activity that is part of the rural community, drawing on local resources to reconnect place to space (Korsgaard et al., 2015). It uses resources specific to the rural area where it takes place, builds on local knowledge and traditions, uses natural resources, takes advantage of the climate, and involves the community (as partners, workers or recipients). Rural entrepreneurship must consider the rural context's social, demographic or spatial specificities to find the most appropriate business models to address rural challenges. This socio-spatial lens could be a more fruitful way of understanding the holistic picture of rural entrepreneurship (Muñoz & Kimmitt, 2019).

For these reasons, rural entrepreneurship is not simply a new business activity in a rural area but also a social activity that creates value for the community (fixes population, provides resources and services to the community, maintains traditions and tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and creates employment opportunities) and environmental value (preserves biodiversity, maintains a circular economy, favours agriculture and livestock farming). The rural community becomes an essential stakeholder of rural entrepreneurship because the community acts as a social network that provides access to knowledge, funding, and new opportunities (Ratten & Welpé, 2011).

In community-led approaches, initiatives are not led by an organisation or other outsiders but by a communal process (Wessells, 2018, p. 19). A community-led approach uses the practices of empowerment, mutual learning and consensus building to create bottom-up, citizen-driven change (Kolosy, 2020). The community holds the power and makes the critical decisions. A broad and diverse number of community stakeholders are involved in supporting, acting and making decisions for the work done by the community, involving self-determination and autonomy (Wessells, 2018).

Community-led actions and strategies could successfully develop new business models to address challenges in rural areas, where the community's interests are closely linked to rural development, the concept of rurality and the preservation of the social capital and environment. Community-led business models in rural areas can provide new solutions to local needs of rural communities such as ageing populations, elderly care, lack of essential services, access to affordable housing or integration of vulnerable groups, developing opportunities in high potential sectors such as food and agriculture, new bio-based value chains and ecosystem services, among others.

On the other hand, social innovation is essential in designing new solutions focused on the local needs of rural communities because it adds new economic or social value to the community (Pato, 2020; Vercher et al., 2020; Ubels, Haartsen, & Bock, 2019). Rural communities need place-based and community-led innovation ecosystems to ensure access to physical and digital infrastructure, services, and better access to knowledge, advice, funding and support for developing new business models.

This session aims to attract academics to discuss their current research on rural community-led business models and rural entrepreneurship. We will focus our discussion on connecting and involving rural communities with entrepreneurs to boost rural development, including new challenges such as constructing stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas. We welcome articles from different methodological backgrounds, including literature reviews and theoretical, conceptual, empirical, and case studies. These articles may address one or more of the following topics, which is not an exhaustive list:

- What is a community-led business model in rural areas? What is a community-based business model in rural areas? Definitions, nuances, and differences.
- How do we design, test and upscale bottom-up community-led business, cooperation, and production models to face rural challenges in locally adapted ways?
- How do we engage local actors in rural community-led business models?
- What needs to change in rural communities and business models to make them more sustainable?
- How can we increase the competitiveness of rural business models from community collaborative structures?
- How do we fight against rural depopulation from community-led business models?
- Which farm and non-farm business models in rural areas generate synergies for rural community development?
- Which indicators best measure new business models' economic, social, and environmental impact in rural areas and communities?
- What is the role of social innovation in rural community-led business models?

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