RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT:

PROPOSING AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF RURAL STAKEHOLDER

NETWORK RELATIONSHIPS

'COMPETITIVE PAPER'

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally agriculture and farming activities have been synonymous with rural areas and have been to the fore of policies to develop the countryside. However, in the last number of years it has been acknowledged that the significance of agriculture to rural development is in decline (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). This is of particular importance to this research as Ireland's regions are predominantly rural. In recent years it has become increasingly recognised that one of the greatest challenges facing rural economies is the restructuring of the agriculture industry and this objective has been to the fore of many national policies (For example: Fuller-Love et al., 2006; Stathopoulou et al., 2004; Marsden et al., 2004; McQuaid, 1997; Wortman Jr., 1990). In Ireland, the central premise of these policies has been the diversification and growth of the non-farm rural economy in order to prevent the decline of Ireland's rural communities (Rural Development Programme, 2007-2013). Thus, Ireland's depleted rural economies represent a major, yet challenging, opportunity for the enhancement of the country's overall economic and social health, especially in light of the national and EU plans to advance the current economic platform to a knowledge-based one through rural inclusion policies (Government of Ireland, 2008; Rural Development Programme, 2007-2013; National Spatial Strategy, 2002; White Paper on Rural Development, 1999).

Rural or peripheral areas have often been regarded as being less favourable than their urban counterpart for regional development. Rural areas tend to be associated with more traditional industry or having standardised secondary businesses that support more innovative developed areas (Landabaso, 1999), often located in more vibrant urban areas. Murdoch (2000) further supports this argument as he postulates that rural space *is (once again) reconfigured by forces emanating from urban centres"* (p.408). Indeed, it has been acknowledged that governments of developed countries need to recognise and better understand rural

communities and the process of economic development that occurs (Brennan & Luloff, 2007) in order to address challenges in these areas. In this regard, much emphasis has been placed in recent years on collaborative relations between network partners' to aid the facilitation of rural development. It has been well-documented in the literature that inclusive rural stakeholder networks, involving third level institutions and public-private stakeholders, are considered pivotal to successful and sustainable rural development (Johnson et al., 2000). Yet, it is also acknowledged that significant gaps exist regarding the identification and precise nature of the roles and functions of stakeholders (Pezzini, 2001; McQuaid, 1997), and the content of network interactions and relationships (Jack, 2008), particularly in a rural environment (Murdoch, 2000). As articulated by Van der Ploeg et al. (2000): *"what we now need are new theories that adequately reflect these new networks, practices and identities"* (p.394).

Tourism, and its incumbent networks, is one such economic activity that has often been cited, in relation to rural economies, as a key strategy for regional development (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Saxena et al., 2007; Fleisher & Falenstein, 2000). In context, there is a growing consensus as to what actually constitutes rural development activities which has expanded to include nature conservation, region-specific products and rural tourism (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). Fleisher and Falenstein (2000: 1007) specifically state that *"the promotion of small scale tourism is intuitively perceived as a suitable form of economic development for rural areas"*. Rural tourism also fits well with the concept of rural development as it has strong linkages to rural resources, which focus on social networks and takes account of the complex linkages among regional stakeholders. This paper will, therefore, examine rural development through the medium of rural tourism networks. This research strategy is supported by several writers' recommendation to establish collaborative and networking activity on a regional or

geographic basis (see for example: Malewicki, 2005; Kaufman et al., 2000; NCOE, 2000), and answers Murdoch's (2000) call to use networks as a *"new paradigm"* for rural development.

This paper is structured as follows: the author begins by exploring the nature and content of the roles and functions of key stakeholders in a rural tourism network. Primary research encompassing a pilot case study is presented, and key findings relating to this research are proffered in relation to the ultimate research objective − *'To propose a model of rural stakeholder network relationships'*. The author goes on to present this model, and explains how these relationships shape collaborative regional network activity, in a rural tourism environment. The paper concludes with recommendations for further research in the area of rural stakeholder roles and relationships, and the further development of the integrated model.

APPLYING THE NETWORK APPROACH IN RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

From a research perspective, the networking approach is not new and in fact its foundation can be traced back to its theoretical roots in sociology, psychology, anthropology and mathematics (Jack, 2008; Parkhe et al., 2006). Since the turn of the century, the network concept has seen a dramatic rise in the number of studies concentrated in the area (Jack, 2008; Parkhe et al., 2006; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Bengtsson & Kock, 2000) as this concept has become a popular subject among academics and practitioners at both the organisational and individual level (Jack & Anderson, 2002). It has been acknowledged by contemporary authors that the term 'network' is vague (Alison et al., 2004; O' Donnell et al., 2001) and can in fact vary according to the context of use (Murdoch, 2000). Hoang and Antoncic (2003:167) broadly define a network as *"a set of actors with some set of relationships linking them"* while in extant literature much emphasis has been placed on this notion of *"ties linking several actors"* (Nelson, 1988: 40). In other words, a network is

simply a structure where nodes (actors) are connected to each other through specific threads (ties) (Håkansson & Ford, 2000).

Seminal work by Granovetter (1973, 1983) examined the nature of these ties between dyadic relations. He argued that strong ties will primarily consist of family and friends and the information gained from this type of relationship may become redundant over time, while weak ties can provide access to important information and resources from distant parts of the actors social system (Granovetter, 1983). This has profound implications for organisations that do not have access to a larger social system of relationships, such as that which may be present in rural areas, and this needs to be addressed in the context of this research. An important point of note from Granovetter's work is the linking of a network to that of a social system. This is a sentiment shared by others who describe a network as a social structure that exists only in so far as the actors recognise it to be and use it accordingly (Chell & Baines, 2000; Johannisson, 1995; Monstead, 1995).

Thus, this field of research has moved from a mainly dyadic perspective to one focusing on the dynamic nature of networks and the web of relationships that this can encompass. This perspective is built around and highlights the importance of the relational element of networks (Coviello, 2005; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Hite & Hesterly, 2001; Uzzi, 1997), where the emphasis is on the building of commitment, trust and co-operation between actors. In particular, factors such as trust, mutuality, respect and reciprocity have been highlighted in the literature as critical dimensions of network relationships (Koch et al., 2006; Malewicki, 2005; Murdoch, 2000). As Murdoch (2000) has stressed, *"it is not the networks themselves that are so important but the objects and relations that flow through them"* (p.417). It is these

ties and the nature of the relations that flow between stakeholders within a rural network that concerns this research.

There is broad agreement, among both industry and academic personnel, that networks have a central role in contributing to economic development (Rural Development Programme, 2007-2013; Doring & Schnellenbach, 2006; Pezzini; 2001). In fact the existence of networks are a critical factor for a community's social and economic development (Doring & Schnellenbach, 2006; Stathopoulou et al., 2004; Haugh & Pardy, 1999), thereby supporting the need for rural network research. Additionally, there has been a shift in focus from what has been termed the 'modernisation paradigm' to the development of a *new paradigm of rural development*" (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000: 391). This shift has cemented the focus which is now firmly on social networks and the relationships that sustain them, promoting the establishment of a more integrated approach to rural development activities. Although networks have been acknowledged as a key driver of competitiveness in rural firms (Rural Development Programme, 2007-2013; CAP 2007-2013), few research agendas have addressed this issue in any real depth, offering further capacity for this study to contribute to rural development theory. Having provided a brief synopsis of the literature, a number of key themes have been tabulated in Table 1:

Key Themes	Description	Authors
Characteristics of the Rural Environment	• Rural development/restructuring • Rural inclusion policies • Traditional Industry • Less innovative firms • Low employment	Anderson (2000); CAP 2007-2013; Fuller-Love et al. (2006); Government of Ireland Report (2008); Landabaso (1999); Marsden et al. (2004);McAdam et al. (2004); Murdoch (2000); National Spatial Strategy (2002); Rural Development Programme 2007-2013; Stathopoulou et al. (2004); Van der Ploeg et al. (2000); White Paper on Rural Development (1999); Wortman Jr. (1990)
Network Impact	• Networks "a new paradigm for rural development" • Rural Tourism • Stakeholder Theory • Network as a social structure • Competitive advantage • Types of networks (Learning; Innovation; Inter-organisational)	Cawley & Gillmor (2008); Chell & Baines (2000); Fleisher & Falenstein (2000); Freeman, (1979); Gulati (1998); Haugh & Pardy (1999) ; Hoang & Antoncic (2003); Jack (2008); Jack & Anderson (2002); Johannisson (1995); Johnson et al. (2000); Kaufman et al. (2000); Malewicki (2005); McQuaid (1997); Murdoch (2000); NCOE (2000); Pezzini (2001); Porter (1998); Saxena et al. (2007); Van der Ploeg et al. (2000)
Relational exchange variables	• Trust • Commitment • Co-operation • Communication • Reciprocity • Transparency	Anderson & Jack (2002); Chell & Baines (2000); Coviello (2005); Floren & Tell (2004); Hite & Hesterly (2001); Hoang & Antoncic (2003); Kautonen & Koch (2005); Koch et al. (2006); Landabaso (1999); Malewicki (2005); Morgan & Hunt (1994): Murdoch (2000); Stathopoulou et al. (2004); Uzzi (1997)
Social Capital	• Relational capital • Embeddedness/context • Strong/weak ties • Structural holes	Anderson & Jack (2002); Brennan & Luloff (2007); Burt (1992); Granovetter (1973, 1983); Håkansson & Ford (2002); Jack (2008); Johannisson et al. (2002); Johannisson & Raimìrez-Pasillas (2002); Larson (1992); Larson & Starr (1993)

Table 1: Key Themes from the Literature Review

In summary, it has been highlighted that networks may provide another way for rural communities to develop organically (Murdoch, 2000), offering the potential to leverage social capital and resources in these environments. This 'local' element in rural environments provides a competitive advantage in an increasingly globalised economy (Pezzini, 2001; Porter, 1998), and offers scope for sustainable rural regional development through networks. Furthermore, the notion of trust and reciprocity and their link to cooperation and collaboration are cited as key aspects relating to the realisation of a network's potential (Koch et al., 2006; Landabaso, 1999). Despite a number of calls to study relationships within networks, these interactions have not been studied to date in a rural setting to the best of the author's knowledge, a challenge this paper seeks to address.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The purpose of this study is to analyse the impact of the roles and relationships between regional stakeholders in a rural tourism environment and to consider the impact that these rural stakeholder network relationships may have on collaborative regional network activity. Pursuit of this overarching research aim is the exploration and analysis of the nature of the roles and functions of regional stakeholders in a rural tourism network. Thus, the associated objectives are to:

- Identify the key stakeholders in a rural tourism environment and preliminary investigate the factors that affect collaborative regional network activity.

- Identify the inhibitors and facilitators of stakeholder interaction within a rural tourism network.

- Propose an initial model of rural stakeholder network relationships based on the learning's from this pilot and initial stakeholder interaction.

The approach utilised, in pursuit of this overarching aim, consists of an ongoing pilot case study[1], which commenced in the South-east region of Ireland in November 2008 and involves key regional stakeholders in the rural tourism sector, identified, logged, verified and mapped by the author in the initial stages of the research study. The case study method has previously been used in the network context in numerous instances (cf Brennan & Luloff, 2007; Morrison et al., 2004; Anderson et al., 1994), while several writers cite that theory building in the field of networking would benefit from more qualitative and longitudinal studies (Jack, 2008; Coviello, 2005; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; O'Donnell et al., 2001). These stakeholders have been engaged with through a process of investigation, incorporating a number of

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[1] It is anticipated that this pilot study will continue for a further 12 months.

techniques, including semi-structured interviews, round-table discussions, observational methods and in-situ face-to-face in-depth interviews, as advised by Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2003) and highlighted in the data collection protocol [Table 2].

Date	Data Collection Technique	Description	Outcome
Nov'08-Jan'09	Desk-based research; literature review	- Review of relevant literature - Stakeholder identification	-Insight into research area -Preliminary categorization of stakeholder organisations in the region
Jan-Mar '09	Desk based research / personal enquiries	Stakeholder liaison	Established contact with stakeholder groups.
27th Mar '09	Round Table Event (record supported by observation)	-Negotiated stakeholder attendance at round table event - Event content established through literature review - Created greater awareness of project	- Wide range of perspectives synthesised - Themes documented for further investigation - General consensus obtained from group for inclusion in further research
April – Sept '09	Semi-structured Interviews	Engaged with stakeholders in their own environment on a one-to-one basis (context specific)	- Individual stakeholder insight - Potential to engage with stakeholders' incumbent sub-clusters

Table 2: Data Collection Protocol

As can be seen from the above table, secondary research has been utilised to allow the theoretical background to the topic to be explored and has comprised the main source of information for both the literature review and research programme. Subsequently, the primary research undertaken is employing a phased approach (as recommended by Hannon et al., 2000). Theory building in this study is empirical as the nature of the study is concerned with developing theoretical understanding of the roles and relationships of a rural network rather than testing or extending existing theory. Having identified the relevant stakeholders, the author progressed with the engagement of key rural stakeholders in a round table event to 'launch' the research study. Individuals were contacted personally over a period of

approximately two to three weeks. This resulted in seventy-five potential attendees. Additionally, these phone calls allowed the researcher to address the value of the research to the organisations and certify a preliminary buy-in from the participants. In total twenty stakeholders agreed to be involved in the workshop and on the day there was sixteen attendees. However, there were approximately ten representatives from organisations, who were unable to attend on the day, but who stressed their interest in the research premise and who were agreeable to be contacted in the future during the individual stakeholder insight phase.

The sixteen attendees were divided into two groups and a number of tentative themes, derived from the literature, were chosen to be discussed. These themes were primarily concerned with the relational capital of the stakeholders and any barriers that promoted/hinder relationships, how embedded the stakeholders were in their networks and communities, the knowledge transfer process, the elements necessary for successful communication and rural/regional development issues. Additionally, a handout was pre-prepared which aided the participants depict their current networks. The purpose of this handout was twofold; the primary focus was to gauge the level of network activity of the participants, i.e. the level, breadth and depth of interaction and secondly to focus the participants and enable them to graphically depict their networks in terms of their connections to key stakeholders in the region. The workshop event comprised of three sessions which were recorded and transcribed by the author, with the permission of the participants. Codes were then assigned to each participant for the purpose of the research. A flip chart was used in each of the group sessions which allowed for issues and themes that arose to be documented. The main outcomes from these sessions were then converted to bullet format and used as a discussion guide for the participants who were reassembled as a single group at the end of the session. This information was also compiled to confirm

accuracy and to ensure that all salient information had been captured in the two group sessions.

At the conclusion of the workshop event, a general consensus was obtained from the participants that they were interested in being involved in the current study and that they would be agreeable to be contacted for a more in-depth one-to-one interview. Willing participants, including those who did not attend the workshop but expressed an interest in the research programme, were then contacted by email followed up with personal calls. At the beginning of each interview the researcher addressed the issues of anonymity and received consent (or not in some instances) to record the interview. In cases where recording was not allowed the interviewer had to rely on handwritten notes and on memory. It was also indicated that this was a pilot study and any insight that they could offer as feedback would be taken into account in future case studies. This technique was chosen as the stakeholders' network is embedded in the social and economic context of the rural community (Murdoch, 2000; Johannisson & Ramírez-Pasillas, 2002) and as such it needs to be reviewed and studied in that context. It also allows for network analysis to be time sensitive to allow for the evolutionary processes and dynamic nature of networks (Coviello, 2005; Jack, 2008), thus facilitating a rich understanding of stakeholder roles and relationships in collaborative rural tourism networks.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Key themes emerged as the research progressed, as highlighted in Table 3. It is important to acknowledge that this is a pilot for this research, therefore, the data presented in this paper is based on preliminary findings and should be viewed as such (for synopsis of findings refer to Table 3).

Round table discussions	One to one interviews	Emergent Themes	Literature	
	12		Reinforces	Outside
• To be successful all stakeholders must contribute information	• Information must be shared.... and sharing is both ways it's not just the transfer of knowledge	All stakeholders must share (reciprocity)	X	
• .....must contribute information to an honest broker such as WIT	• WIT can facilitate more in-depth meaningful collaboration • Academia is hugely important for bridging the gap and getting the information out there	Facilitation of knowledge transfer	X	
• Information must be standardised, it must be practically gathered and it must be active across the country • I'd like to know where I could go for information • In particular it would be useful as an information sharing source	• Local networks need to feed into some structure that could make a difference • Ideally one organisation would act as an umbrella and hold information for the region	Need for aggregated information	X	
• Well I go to enough meetings without going to anymore meetings • I hope it's not just another network • Those with the information, don't mind sharing	• Each county has to market itself and the region just has to do its best • Information share between agencies is a problem • Distance between counties is a factor	Barriers to Interaction: Limited Resources; Time; Spatial Dispersion; Culture; Attitudes towards sharing	X	X
• I'm in one of those silos where I know very little about what goes on around me • The industry is disjointed & people don't have the information • A network will stay a network until it talks to another network	• Academic research has to be shared with practitioners • Dissemination of information is very important • Need to look at how we disseminate our knowledge much better	Dissemination of information	X	
N/A	• We need to know what's best practice internationally because we don't have all the answers • Participants can benefit from the expertise in WIT to aid tourism development	Sharing of Best Practice	X	
N/A	• Local networks are most important • 'Parish politics' • People are not from the South-east, they are primarily from their county/province	Culture	X	X
N/A	• This theme was primarily implied and related to the stakeholder's organisation e.g. 'We have everybody involved that needs to be involved' • How do you manage the ego without infringing on its territory	Identity	X	X
N/A	• Common purpose and pulling common objectives together should be done at the start to avoid conflicting expectations • Common consensus always prevails • Focus on the shared goals rather than the differences to overcome barriers	Common Vision	X	X

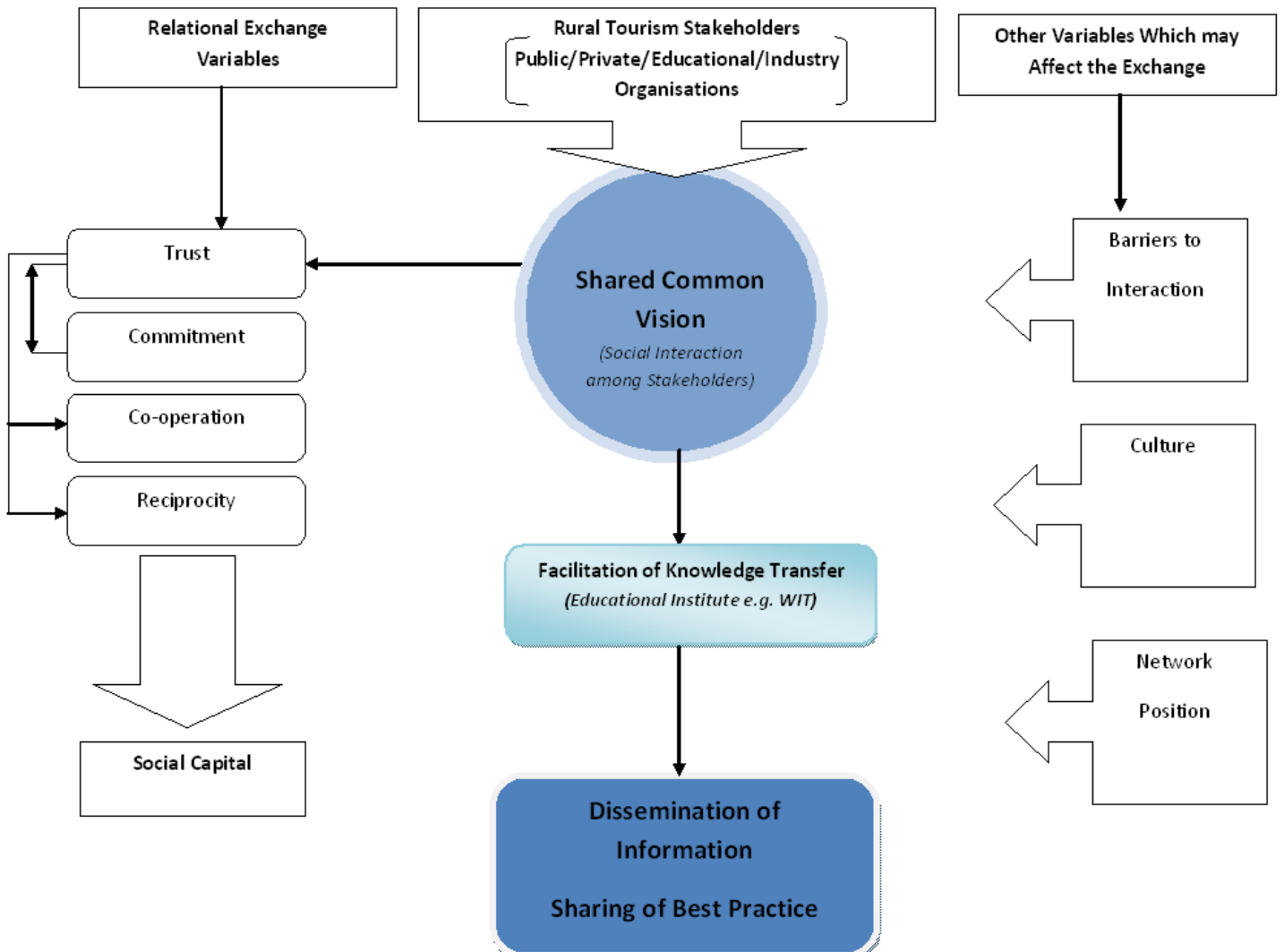**Table 3: Primary Research Outcomes**

The previous table synthesises some of the most important themes to emerge from the round table discussion and the one-to-one interviews. The table is designed to show how this author progressed from documenting key findings to identifying emergent themes. As the table highlights the majority of these themes support extant literature, however, there are a number of themes which relate primarily to the research findings rather than to the literature review. Notably, these themes include culture, identity, specific barriers and the notion of a common vision. These research outcomes form the basis for the proposed model of rural stakeholder network relationships presented in the next section.

PROPOSING AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF RURAL STAKEHOLDER NETWORK RELATIONSHIPS

In response to the identified research gap in extant literature and the emergent themes identified in the pilot study, this paper seeks to identify and explain the nature and content of the roles and functions of key stakeholders in a rural tourism network. This author will, thus, propose an initial model of stakeholder network relationships in a rural tourism milieu as the primary outcome of this study.

By combining the recurrent themes from the literature (Table 1 above), and the primary research outcomes (see Table 3), a preliminary model of rural stakeholder network relationships is proposed.

Framework 1: AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF RURAL STAKEHOLDER NETWORK RELATIONSHIPS (Proposed Model)

Relational Exchange Variables

Rural Tourism Stakeholders
Public/Private/Educational/Industry Organisations

Other Variables Which may Affect the Exchange

Trust

Commitment

Co-operation

Reciprocity

Social Capital

Shared Common Vision
(Social Interaction among Stakeholders)

Facilitation of Knowledge Transfer
(Educational Institute e.g. WIT)

Dissemination of Information

Sharing of Best Practice

Barriers to Interaction

Culture

Network Position

Social Capital:

The main premise of networking revolves around the interactions among actors in a social structure. As already discussed in this paper, networks are primarily based on ties and connections, and the relationships that may form as a result of these interactions, between actors (organisations/groups/individuals), in a social community. This research ascertained that while there are numerous interactions between stakeholders in the South-east these are at

county, or even local level, rather than at a regional level. However, it was also found from the interview phase that the majority of stakeholders are keen to develop deeper relations with certain organisations to provide a more integrated, sustainable approach to the region. These relationships between network members and the assets that they bring with them, such as trust, comprise the relational dimension of social capital (Tsai & Goshal, 1998). The importance of trust and other relational variables, which comprise social capital, will be highlighted in the following section.

However, while social capital has been identified as the glue which forms the structure of the network it has also seen as acting as the lubricant which allows the network to function (Anderson & Jack, 2002). The respondents at the round table discussion and the interviews recognised the importance of the leveraging these relationships, however, they also maintained that there are barriers to interaction in this region. For example one respondent mentioned geographical distance being a specific barrier in the context of the rural environment. In summary social capital, in inter-firm networks, enables stakeholders to utilise relationships by allowing the organisations access to critical resources and information, thus providing a competitive advantage (Love & Thomas, 2004; Gulati, 1998).

This is an extremely important characteristic for rural tourism stakeholders, who have identified the need for aggregated information and dissemination of best practice as critical outputs from any of their relational exchanges. In fact at the round table event numerous stakeholders stressed that there has to be value to their organisations if they are to partake in this research. These findings reinforce the importance of the inclusion of social capital in the proposed model. Lee et al. (2005: 271) provide the best description of social capital and networks in rural development when they state that *"...... it is only through social*

*relationships, **networks** of social actors, that social capital can be mobilised and utilised*"
(emphasis in original quote).

Trust:

According to Miles and Tully (2007) trust and reciprocity within and between social groups, which are generated as a result of personal contacts and social networks, are the basis for co-operation and collective action. In particular, trust can be viewed as a condition of, and antecedent to, successful collective action (cited in Anderson & Jack, 2002) In view of this much of the discussion at the round table event centred on networking and cooperation and numerous suggestions were provided of where successful collaboration was occurring between groups, who know each other, in the region. However, an element of fear with regards to the sharing information was quite obvious from the stakeholders who attended this event. This could be due to the fact that the majority of these stakeholders did not interact with each other on a regular basis and did not 'network' in the same circles, thus, trust was lacking between some of the individuals present. These findings support the view that trust acts as the social glue between relationships and in fact without this element networking may not occur at all (Chell and Baines, 2000). Additionally it was quite evident from the interviews conducted in this pilot that trust was an important variable for all stakeholders; for example one interviewee believed that because many of their interactions were long standing they had built up very strong relationships and that as a result of this their county had a very 'can do' attitude (PP3). In a supportive capacity there appears, implicitly, to be a lack of trust and co-operation between some organisations in the region (PP1, PP2, and PP3) and this has led in some cases to competitive rather than co-operative behaviours. It was repeatedly cited, however, that trust can be built through having a common vision and repeated interaction between stakeholders.

Commitment:

Trust and commitment have been recognised as being important mediating variables in relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994); their role has also been recognised in literature on network organizations (cf Malewicki, 2005). Morgan and Hunt (1995) defined relationship commitment as an exchange, between committed parties, where maximum effort is applied so as to ensure that the relationship has longevity. Malewicki (2005) on the other hand describes it as a psychological attachment to another actor in the network.

In a rural community commitment can be particularly strong among certain organisations while local politics may affect this variable in other cases. This is supported by the current research where it was noted by PP2 that 'parish politics' can affect co-operation between stakeholders. This respondent acknowledged that many counties have a very myopic view and, lack strategic vision by focusing on the county rather than on the region. This was also a theme which was recorded at the round table discussion where it was noted that one county in particularly displays high levels of co-operation within the county but not outside it, in fact one commentator referred to it as the 'Republic of X'. This ties in very much with the culture variable which is discussed later in this section. It was also interesting that PP3 stated that in some cases her relationships lack a long term focus and the relationship is only employed to fulfil a particular short term goal.

Reciprocity:

It has been postulated in extant literature that the building and maintaining of trust, will in turn lead to forms of reciprocity, commitment and receptive relationships (Floren & Tell, 2004). Findings from the current study show that rural tourism stakeholders stressed that relationships must involve reciprocal action, it was explicitly stated that all stakeholders must share information if they wanted it to receive information in return i.e. reciprocal action. This

confirms Kautonen and Koch (2005) view that network benefits must exceed the costs if successful cooperation is to be attained in the network on a continuous basis.

Co-operation:

While co-operation is most often viewed as an outcome of social capital, it is the view of this author that co-operative behaviour is necessary to build social capital and is a critical part of the current model. This was most evident in an example given by one of the respondents when their organisation stepped in at the last moment to facilitate an exchange with a stakeholder organisation which they wished to develop a deeper relationship with. Without the co-operation of one partner this collaboration would not have been a success.

Other Variables:

A shared vision common to all stakeholders was cited by respondents as a way of overcoming negative perceptions or to overcome conflict in a network environment. Thus, this sentiment is one that is shared by academics and practitioners alike. In the literature a shared vision has been recognised as a term that incorporates collective goals and aspiration of network members. (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Tsai & Goshal, 1998) According to Tsai and Goshal (1998) a shared vision can aid the process of expectations and exchange, between organisations, by acting as a bonding mechanism. From the research it would appear that a shared common vision may be a starting point from which to develop a sustainable model of rural tourism network relationships.

An interesting theme which has come through the research so far, and which is related in a sense to shared norms, is culture. Inkpen and Tsang (2005; 153) refer to culture as *"norms which govern relationships",* in informal networks these norms are not always stated explicitly and are rather just understood (Gulati et al., 2000). While culture can play an

important role within many disciplines it would appear to be quite significant within the context of the current research. In a regional network such as the one under investigation culture has an impact in the form of parochialism. This theme will have to be explored further before its role can be fully defined; however its inclusion in the model is justified.

The position that stakeholders hold within a network can significantly contribute to the role they fill and to the relationships they have with others in the network. Peer interaction is an important determinant for knowledge to be transferred and for learning to occur (Foley et al., 2007). This would have a significant impact if there is an organisation which is being 'left out of the loop'.

Finally, considering the reviewed literature and the feedback received, barriers to effective interaction in the South-east may include; lack of time, limited resources, the geographical dispersion of stakeholders, culture, stakeholders attitudes towards sharing knowledge and the structure of the region itself. These barriers were identified by the stakeholders themselves and have critical importance for a region which is primarily rural.

CONCLUSION

This research concentrated on the relationships within/between regional stakeholders and by identifying rural stakeholders and gaining an understanding of the inhibitors and facilitators to regional/rural collaboration this research may provide some assistance in providing a competitive advantage for rural communities in the South-east, such as that attained in the Emilia Romagna district of Italy. This exploratory study also addresses important rural development and tourism literature gaps, and seeks to contribute to academic and practitioner knowledge by developing a rural stakeholder network relationship model. Indeed this ongoing research will by viewing networks from a social perspective, and utilising

structuration theory, attempt to advance our understanding of the complex relationships within a rural network environment. Following this phase of the research study, the proposed model will be applied in a number of practical settings, a process involving the exploration and analysis of the nature of the roles and functions of regional stakeholders in the South-east region of Ireland. An underlying objective of this research will be to identify the inhibitors and facilitators of stakeholder interaction within a rural network, while model refinement will be pursued through multiple case study analysis, to allow for research legitimacy to be strengthened.

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