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11 Brexit and rural social entrepreneurship in the UK

Artur Steiner, Kate Stephen and Sarah-Anne Munoz

Introduction

The European population is ageing: among European Union (EU) nations, including Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom (UK), the proportion of those aged 65 and over increased from 15.8 percent in 2001 to 19.7 percent in 2018. Due to an ageing characteristic of the EU countries, this figure is expected to grow further and reach 29.5 percent in 2050. Considering geographical issues, due to outmigration of young people who seek education and employment opportunities in cities and in-migration of retirees looking for a peaceful life in rural villages and towns, rural areas are characterised by an even higher proportion of older citizens. For instance, in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, one of the most sparsely populated areas in the EU, 22.5 percent of the local population was aged 65 and over in 2018, exceeding the UK national average by 4.3 percent (Eurostat, 2019).

In addition to the challenging socio-demographic context of Europe's ageing population, in recent years the continent has faced economic crisis, a prolonged period of economic recovery, austerity, and public spending cuts (Markantoni *et al.*, 2018), which in some ways have been more impactful in rural areas (Glass *et al.*, 2021). Small and widely dispersed populations result in high per capita costs for public service provision which, in many cases, have led to the closure of economically unviable services (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019; Steiner *et al.*, 2021a). For instance, in the last two decades, many healthcare services – particularly important to older people – have been moved to larger regional centres, leaving rural residents with no, or limited, health and care support (Farmer and Nimegeer, 2014). This and other challenges have been reinforced due to impacts of the Covid-19 global pandemic (Phillipson *et al.*, 2020).

The socio-economic and health challenges experienced internationally require an effective response to mitigate the negative consequences of specific moments of crisis. In Europe, the EU frequently acts as a body that supports collaboration between different nations to work and learn from each other, facilitate local development, and build community resilience (McAreevey, 2009). The European Commission sees the importance of “increased diversification, innovation and value added of products and services, both within and beyond the agricultural

sector ... to promote integrated and sustainable rural development” (Commission of the European Communities, 2005: 32). At a practical level, some EU funding streams, such as LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale, translated as Links between actions for the development of the rural economy) or NPP/NPA (Northern Periphery Programme/Northern Arctic Programme), aim to act as a catalyst for rural social change, entrepreneurship, and innovation (McAreavey and McDonagh, 2011; Muñoz, Steiner and Farmer, 2015).

In this chapter, we use evidence deriving from our EU-funded project called Older People for Older People (O4O) to comment on Brexit and rural social entrepreneurship in the UK. O4O was active between 2007 and 2011, and aimed to harness the energy, expertise, and capacity of older people to set up community social enterprises that would address the service needs experienced by other, more vulnerable, older people. The project is of interest as it enabled socially entrepreneurial solutions to be implemented and tested in rural settings. In particular, O4O allowed the translation of existing voluntarism into more formalised participation through a social enterprise model, embedding the concept of social entrepreneurship in rural communities. Aiming to overcome some of the common challenges associated with an ageing population and diminishing rural service provision, the project engaged a number of EU partners from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Finland, Sweden and Greenland. Here, we present information deriving from the Scottish component of this action research project, although the importance of international collaboration in stimulating rural social entrepreneurship is also discussed.

We draw on the lessons learnt from O4O to discuss outcomes and benefits of conducting O4O, and potential consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship. We use the word “potential” as the full impact of Brexit will be observable over a long-term period and only truly visible in years to come. Our discussion is supported by evidence presented in relevant publications from the O4O project (see, e.g., Docking *et al.*, 2015; Farmer *et al.*, 2011; Muñoz, Steiner and Farmer, 2015; Muñoz and Steinerowski, 2012; Steinerowski *et al.*, 2011). Finally, based on our findings, in our conclusions we debate the future of rural social entrepreneurship in the UK outside the EU, and highlight implications for future rural social entrepreneurship policy and practice. We indicate that EU funding for O4O was important in facilitating rural social entrepreneurship, gathering relevant stakeholders together, and for investment in capacity building. We also show a need for creating new mechanisms that enable rural social innovation to happen and to test risky socially entrepreneurial solutions in rural settings. We express concerns that rural social enterprises can struggle to make a case for the often high costs involved in supporting relatively small numbers of people and that the fragility of sparsely populated areas might not be recognised by the UK and devolved governments. We also call for assistance in international knowledge transfer of solutions facilitating rural social entrepreneurship and an alternative approach to service provision.

Rurality and social entrepreneurship

Rural context

The geographical context of rurality offers both advantages and disadvantages to rural residents. Indeed, in addition to being close to nature, those living in rural areas can benefit from a high level of social cohesion, community embeddedness, commitment to self-help, and active civic participation (Farmer, Steinerowski and Jack, 2008). Strong mutual knowledge between rural residents frequently translates into a sense of community and high levels of trust (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). When facing a challenge, rural communities are willing to work collectively to address issues and support each other (Kelly *et al.*, 2019). Reciprocity, collective activity, and social capital help to create dense social networks (Richter, 2019) further strengthening social support circles. However, despite the many positive attributes of rural community living, there is a need for caution in “slipping into stereotypical notions regarding the constitution of rural space” (Philo, Parr and Burns, 2003: 259). Aspects such as geographical distance, social proximity, stoic cultures and “community gossip networks” (Parr and Philo, 2003: 412) contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how individuals experience being “cared for” within rural communities. The “complex socio-spatial dynamics of inclusion and exclusion” (Parr, Philo and Burns, 2004: 401) provide a context where individuals can feel simultaneously stigmatised and cared for. The phenomenon of “otherness”, not least from rural gentrification and the impact of “incomers” in a rural community can “shed light on the wider lifestyles and experiences of diverse rural populations” (Smith and Holt, 2005: 313). Furthermore, as Bollman and Reimer (2009: 132) stated, “the existence of social networks does not always imply that these networks are used” and it is important, therefore, not to make assumptions that all rural dwelling individuals benefit from rural support and connectedness.

Importantly, rural residents are not free from socio-economic challenges, many of which are specific to the geographical context (Steiner, Calò and Shucksmith, 2021). Small and widely dispersed populations make it difficult for private and public service providers to deliver services. For instance, commercial businesses cannot take advantage of economies of scale, limiting their profitability and willingness to invest in rural locations (Steiner and Atterton, 2014). High costs of service provision and challenges associated with recruitment and/or retention of qualified staff also lead to the withdrawal of many public services. Simultaneously, globalisation, technological advancements, and changing social behaviours lead to rapid changes in rural socio-economic life. For example, on-line shopping has replaced many local businesses with so called “cost-effective” solutions. Undeniably, this austerity phenomenon combined with a reshaping nature of rural communities has meant that, in recent decades, rural villages and towns in the UK experienced the closure of many village halls, churches, pubs, schools, libraries, shops, post offices, transport facilities, as well as health and care centres (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). Limited educational and employment opportunities lead to outmigration of young people and concentrations of older people (Christmann,

2016; O'Shaughnessy, Casey and Enright, 2011). It is likely that Brexit will have further negative impacts on rural communities due to a lack of working-age immigrants settling in, working, and delivering services in villages and rural towns. A combination of limited or non-existent services together with an influx of older residents, an ageing local population, and a decreased number of working-age people moving into rural areas can create a perfect storm, with older people lacking essential services, healthcare in particular. The latter became the focus of our O4O work in which we tested the concept of social entrepreneurship in rural settings.

Rural social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship can be understood as the process of developing social enterprise, with some studies focusing on individuals or collectives as social entrepreneurs (Steiner, Farmer and Bosworth, 2019). A broader view of social entrepreneurship defines it as an enterprise activity with social goals, generating profit for re-investment in the social venture (Mair and Marti, 2006). In other words, social entrepreneurship is about exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities for social change, social innovation, and improvement (Weerawardena and Mort, 2021), rather than personal profit maximisation (Nicholls, 2010). In the same way that Kirzner (1997) argues that entrepreneurship is a mechanism through which temporal and spatial inefficiencies in an economy are discovered and mitigated, social entrepreneurship could be understood as a process that recognises social inequalities and imperfections and addresses them in an entrepreneurial way (Steiner, Calò and Shucksmith, 2021). Importantly, engagement in social entrepreneurship frequently leads to the creation of social or community enterprises – organisations with primarily social objectives that use trading to tackle social and economic challenges (Farmer, Steinerowski and Jack, 2008).

Due to its characteristics and potential positive impacts on society, in many countries around the globe, policymakers attempt to foster social entrepreneurship in order to increase the self-reliance and sustainability of their communities (Vanderhoven *et al.*, 2020). Social entrepreneurship is promoted as an important feature of post-welfare responses to un/under-employment, low skills, individual and place-based disadvantage, and as a way to increase community capacity (Markantoni *et al.*, 2018) and even address public health and wellbeing challenges (Henderson *et al.*, 2020). This is premised on the proposed benefits arising from encouraging citizens to take responsibility for providing needed goods and services (Kelly *et al.*, 2019). As such, policy documents suggest that social entrepreneurship can lead to positive place-based transformations (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019), and the encouragement is targeted at individuals and communities to co-produce or run services that traditionally were provided by the state (Steiner *et al.*, 2021a). However, despite a well-developed social enterprise policy landscape and a support network stimulating social entrepreneurship in the UK (Mazzei and Steiner, 2021), little attention is paid to *rural* social enterprise and *rural* social entrepreneurship. For instance, while a third of all Scottish social enterprises are

located in rural areas, and the Social Enterprise Strategy 2016–2026 for Scotland states that social enterprises contribute to place and regional cohesion through establishing viable businesses where markets are underserved and local economies are small and fragile (Scottish Government, 2016), little social enterprise support is offered specifically in rural areas. This is surprising as there are suggestions indicating that rural citizens are more socially-oriented in their entrepreneurship than those living in urban locations and, therefore, more likely to engage in social entrepreneurship (Williams, 2007). Considering the importance of context (Steinerowski and Steienrowska-Streb, 2012) and the rural location of our O4O project, we build upon project findings presented in our other papers (Docking *et al.*, 2015; Farmer *et al.*, 2011; Muñoz *et al.*, 2011; Muñoz, Steiner and Farmer, 2015; Muñoz and Steinerowski, 2012; Steinerowski *et al.*, 2011) and comment on the potential impact of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship in the UK.

Rural policies and social entrepreneurship

For many years, the UK benefited from being part of the EU, its policies, interventions, and investments. Affecting over 50 percent of the EU population and approximately 90 percent of EU land, rural development has been an important EU policy area. Considering its importance, rural development is part of the common agricultural policy (CAP) aimed at strengthening the social, environmental, and economic sustainability of rural areas. The CAP's contribution to the EU's rural development objectives is supported by the European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD). Investments in this policy domain are substantial. For example, the EAFRD budget for 2021–2027 amounts to €95.5 billion – a fund that UK rural communities can no longer access (European Commission, 2021a).

EAFRD promotes economic and social development in rural areas through, for example, co-financing LEADER programmes. LEADER is a local development method which has been used for 30 years to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making, and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas. LEADER enables local actors, including public, private, and civil-society stakeholders, to develop an area by using its endogenous development potential. The LEADER approach aims to enlist the energy and resources of people and bodies that can contribute to the rural development process by giving both development strategy design and funding powers to the local level, decentralising power and facilitating community development. Importantly, the quest for innovation has been one of the most ground-breaking and important parts of the LEADER approach. Seeking out and fostering new and innovative solutions to local problems or taking advantage of existing resources has been a core part of LEADER. Here, innovation applies to what and how things are done, the types of activity supported, and the products or services developed. It is worth highlighting that EU policy recognises that not every innovation will succeed and a permissible level of risk is allowed when investments are made. By creating the right conditions and carefully cultivating new and fresh ideas, it is hoped that substantial and sustained changes and benefits will be brought to rural

communities (European Commission, 2021a). The latter enables experimentation with socially entrepreneurial ideas and implementation of projects that, although risky, can introduce social innovation.

Indeed, the European Commission's objective is to encourage market uptake of socially innovative solutions, and social innovation cuts across a range of the EU policy areas (for more information see European Commission, 2021b). Some commentators see these moves as reflecting a new approach to social policy-making whereby top-down, centralised, and bureaucratic welfare states are being phased out in favour of models that promote greater citizen involvement in designing solutions to seemingly intractable social problems (Steiner *et al.*, 2021b) – a concept that is closely related to social entrepreneurship. Here, it is worth noting that the O4O project described in this chapter received recognition from the European contest “RegioStars Awards” for supporting social innovators. More precisely, O4O received an award in the category of “Inclusive Growth: Strategies, initiatives or projects addressing the challenge of demographic change and supporting active ageing”. Considering this recognition and the fact that the project supported an innovative (at the time of conducting our work) concept of rural social entrepreneurship in rural service provision, we use O4O as an example of rural social entrepreneurship induced by the EU.

Methodological underpinnings

Older People for Older People project

Funded by the European Union, the O4O – Older People for Older People – project was conducted in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Finland, Sweden, and Greenland. O4O aimed to investigate whether and how it is possible to harness the energies of older people (defined as those aged 55 and over) in the development of community social enterprises that would provide older people's services. Project partners were united by common challenges associated with an ageing population and diminishing rural service provision. The notion of international collaborative work was used as a mechanism through which to discuss shared challenges and identify potential socially entrepreneurial solutions. At the time of our study, practical implementation of the social entrepreneurship concept was still very rare in the northern part of Europe. As such, the EU-funding supporting O4O offered a unique opportunity to test social entrepreneurship as a way of delivering rural services.

In this chapter, we focus on the O4O project component located within the remote and rural Highland region of Scotland. The area has a population of approximately 235,000, covers 25,656 square kilometers and, at the time of Britain's EU membership, was one of the most sparsely populated areas of the European Union. Economically, the region comprises a significant proportion of small and medium enterprises, with a dominance of micro businesses. Tourism and the public sector are the main employers whilst the primary sector is the largest by number of enterprises. More recently, the region started diversifying its

economic profile with a growing number of businesses being involved in energy, life sciences, food and drink, and creative industries. Interestingly, however, in the Brexit transition period, the Highlands and Islands 2019–2022 Strategy indicated that region's core industries – tourism, food and drink, as well as health and social care sectors – are particularly dependent on migrant workers, and labour availability and retention are becoming an increasing concern due to limited opportunities to attract labour and skills from EU countries (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2019).

Importantly, the number of older people in the area is rapidly growing; for example, between 1998 and 2018 the number of those aged 75 and over increased by 57.4 percent (Highland Council, 2018). This limits the proportion of the working age population and increases demand on public services. Simultaneously, during the same period, a number of public services – including health and care – were centralised as part of a policy movement aimed at increasing efficiency, limiting health and care service options, particularly in remote and rural places. In a peculiar way, these unfavourable circumstances created fertile ground to test our project ideas and harness the energy of older people to set up and run community social enterprises to fill in gaps in health and care service provision through social entrepreneurship.

Methods

To implement and monitor impacts of the O4O project in Scotland, we used a mixed-method research approach that consisted of:

- *Participatory action research* – this process required O4O project managers to liaise with rural citizens as well as relevant stakeholders to identify local challenges and available resources, and to take feasible ideas forward. Although supported and guided by O4O project managers, O4O community members were actively involved in learning about social entrepreneurship and, thereafter, setting up and running O4O social enterprises. Working with, and for, local citizens ensured embeddedness in local settings which, in turn, developed trust between local community members and project managers. The latter offered an ethnographic experience in a continuous process of interaction with project participants as well as reflection on processes associated with establishing community social enterprises.
- *Qualitative data collection* – to identify what happened, why, with who, and with what impact(s), the O4O research team conducted qualitative face-to-face, in-depth interviews with project participants. In-depth interviews were carried out with 27 older people in the Highlands in order to understand the impacts of their involvement in O4O-type social enterprise development. Interviews with O4O project managers were carried out in order to identify the skills and resources required to develop O4O social enterprises.
- *Quantitative data collection* – a questionnaire sent by post from each community general practitioners' (GP) surgery to all registered patients aged 55 and

over ($n=2,462$; response rate 58 percent). The questionnaire included health and wellbeing-related questions originating from the SF12, the social capital module of the UK General Household Survey, and other specific questions for O4O (for more information, see Farmer *et al.*, 2011; Steinerowski *et al.*, 2011).

In this chapter, we undertake a reflexive thematic review based on the paradigm of interpretivism to better understand the experiences of participants (Bourdieu, 2003), to understand our own interpretations, and how these have changed as a result of Brexit (Byrne, 2021). We write about the project “beyond the simple description of the themes” (Campbell *et al.*, 2021); instead conducting “reflective and thoughtful engagement” with the data and analytical process (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594). Rather than referring to specific findings deriving from the activity reports, interviews, or questionnaire¹, we identify O4O outcomes, and summarise key lessons learnt. We do that from “a big picture perspective”, ten years after finishing the project, and at the beginning of a new journey for the UK outside the European Union. We argue that the time since we completed O4O helped us to develop an understanding of the project impact beyond the project lifetime; for instance, we are able to comment on issues associated with sustainability of the O4O social enterprises. Moreover, we recognise that the relationship between the UK and the EU has a long history which should be recognised when discussing the impacts of Brexit. Considering presented remarks, in the next section we reflect on benefits that O4O brought to participating communities from our perspective. We then use this reflection to discuss potential consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship.

Benefits of the O4O project and rural social entrepreneurship

The O4O participatory action research project generated positive impacts for older people living in some of Europe’s most remote and rural areas. Here, we cluster identified benefits into specific themes while emphasising the interconnectivity between them.

Enhanced connectivity

Communities involved in the O4O project were not only geographically isolated as a result of their rurality but also in their positioning in the Northern Periphery of Europe. Even urban centres of these peripheral regions can experience the “penalty of remoteness” (Diebolt and Hippe, 2018). This is further compounded by challenges associated with dispersed populations, geographical complexities, ageing populations, and variations in transport networks and information communication technology infrastructure (Roberts *et al.*, 2010). These aspects have a negative impact on human capital (Diebolt and Hippe, 2018), which impacts rural social entrepreneurship. For instance, a lack of connectivity and insufficient human resources can limit opportunities for integrated community action,

especially in relation to a form of service provision that is associated with a long-term commitment rather than one-off input from relevant stakeholders.

The O4O project connected participating dispersed, peripheral communities at two different levels including (i) citizens within local communities as well as (ii) wider international communities. As such, O4O provided a framework that acknowledged common challenges and helped to identify potential solutions to those challenges. As Borz, Brandenburg and Mendez (2018) found in their citizen survey, EU cohesion can help to develop a change in perspective from a sole identification with the peripheral region and home country to a wider awareness of the common experiences and shared identities with other peripheral regions in the EU. This observation applied to the O4O communities that, in addition to becoming united at a local level with individuals working collaboratively to run their local community enterprises, created international connections that facilitated joint learning as well as the exchange of ideas and experiences related to running social ventures.

It should be noted, however, that this cohesiveness and shared understanding neither represented nor promoted homogeneity amongst these communities. Each participating community was unique and distinct, including specific characteristics within and between countries. Individual characteristics of participating rural communities were presented as part of the O4O project, and shared and celebrated by project officers through, for example, the use of photographs of scenery and citizens. As such, communities could draw on each other's experience whilst maintaining their autonomy. Consequently, individual community factors, community connectedness, and the proportion of older people had an impact on the development of local community social enterprises (Menec *et al.*, 2015).

Enabling rural social entrepreneurship and viability of socially entrepreneurial ventures

As already indicated, rurality and remoteness, and an associated sense of isolation, can serve to force “people to come together to advocate for themselves, their community, and its most marginalized citizens” (McCrillis, Skinner and Colibaba, 2021: 4). In the case of the O4O project, we have seen evidence of individuals from participating communities harnessing an opportunity for collective advocacy for the needs of older people in rural communities. Funding from the NPP EU Programme enabled the introduction and facilitation of rural social entrepreneurship that drew on knowledge exchange between partners but also on the development of a shared sense of “rural identity”. Through participating in the O4O project, O4O communities recognised their shared “social and geographic connectedness” – a factor that contributes to the successful implementation and sustainability of “age-friendly” community developments, including, in our case, rural social enterprises (McCrillis, Skinner and Colibaba, 2021: 7). Moreover, the project helped to identify the types of support that older people, and rural communities more widely, may need in order to develop their own service delivery organisations.

Funding provided by the EU was used to bring together relevant stakeholders to educate community members on how to run socially entrepreneurial ventures. The funding covered the cost of O4O project managers whose work was vital in building community capacity, resolving challenges associated with setting up a social enterprise, and negotiating, frequently complex, community relationships. O4O project managers acted as facilitators of socially entrepreneurial action and enabled a number of relevant actors including, for example, social enterprise support experts, employees from local authorities, and health and care service organisations, to come together and contribute to the project. Clearly, the cohesion that resulted from participation in the O4O project – bringing together citizens, project managers and a variety of stakeholders – contributed to the successful implementation and subsequently enhanced sustainability of the social enterprises developed. Consequently, in many cases, the work of project managers was perceived as providing a “learning curve” to local communities who, in the early stages of developing their community enterprises, needed guidance and support. Certainly, a number of services created during the project lifetime developed further without O4O support providing services to local rural residents (Wyper, Whittam and de Ruyter, 2016).

New rural services

The project underpinned the development of several older people’s services. In one community, there was an asset transfer from the local authority to a community social enterprise. The asset, a care centre for older people, had been threatened with closure for a number of years and a community-run service was the most feasible option to maintain existing services. Post-project, the community has continued to manage the building and deliver services for a range of people in the community, including older people. In addition, the community has established a community transport service, which offers a door-to-door service for older community residents to attend the centre. These services help older people in the area to stay in their own homes and live independently for longer. Interestingly, there is evidence of practical support from the wider community in recognition that the enterprise is a local effort, a response that was not elicited when the enterprise was managed by the local authority.

Another O4O community started out with the development of transport provision with the aim of providing door-to-door transport for local older people in sparsely populated remote areas. In the process, a more complex range of services has been developed: an informal lift-sharing scheme; a community car scheme; and demand-responsive transport which generates income. Better access to transport enabled improved access to services and social networks and, as a result, more independent lives for older people. Over the course of many years, including beyond the lifespan of the project, a range of community services expanded (Wyper, Whittam and de Ruyter, 2016). For instance, taking advantage of community asset transfer, the community enterprise adopted a community model care centre, similar to the previously mentioned O4O community. It is evident

that the success in one area gave people the confidence to incorporate and provide other community services.

Finally, in one rural location, O4O supported community members in developing and implementing a local heritage project. The project led to an enhanced community sense of place, identity, and confidence as well as the establishment of a new social enterprise company to run a village hall and business with the aim of generating income to support services in the village. Consequently, the services developed varied in format and spanned local history, resources, and the needs of local people. Indeed, identifying community needs and available resources to tackle these needs is associated with social bricolage and social value creation (Di Domenico, Haugh and Tracey, 2010) through social enterprise activities that we observed in O4O.

Health and wellbeing benefits

Benefits of the O4O project and rural social entrepreneurship went beyond securing existing or creating new services in the villages. In particular, we evidenced health and wellbeing benefits experienced at an individual as well as wider community level. O4O community members indicated that participation is “good for their community” making their localities better places to live. There appeared to be an acknowledgement that participation in community activities is good for their own and others’ health – this through remaining active and being connected. Positive impacts of community interactions initiated through rural social enterprises have been described in other studies (Kelly *et al.*, 2019). Also, community-run services continue to support those who are more vulnerable and in need, having a direct impact on their lives and ability to remain independent.

However, some of the individuals who took on leadership roles experienced additional stress that they would identify as being detrimental to their wellbeing. Much of the responsibility they held in a voluntary capacity was previously held by a local authority officer in a paid role, with management support. These tensions associated with running social enterprises are not uncommon and have been echoed in other studies describing social entrepreneurship (Millar *et al.*, 2020).

Decreased dependence on the state

Engagement of older people in O4O led to the creation of O4O community social enterprises supporting other, frequently more fragile, older citizens. Indeed, evidence from our project suggests that O4O services provide services that help to support the independent living of older people, reducing, as a consequence, dependence on the state as a provider. In addition, involvement in O4O social enterprises enhanced connectivity (see our earlier section), helped to create trust, and develop social networks. The latter led to increased community capacity and community resilience and, consequently, less reliance on the state. Participation in the O4O also helped older people to keep active for longer, bringing a positive

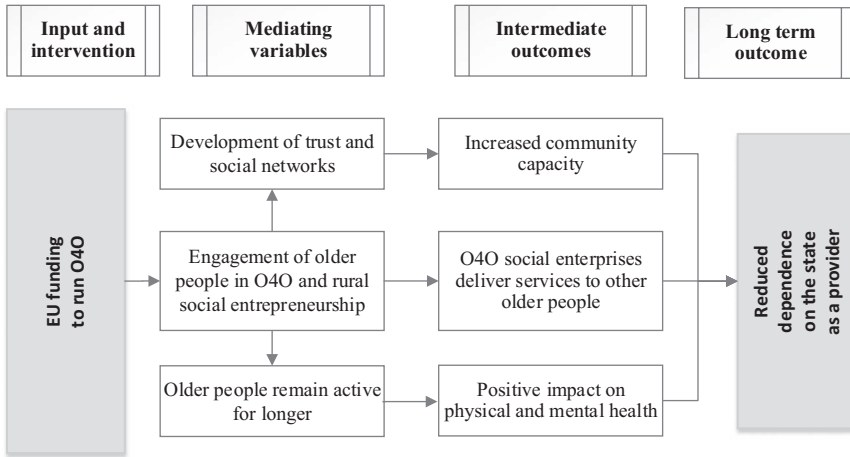


Figure 11.1 Impact of O4O on public service provision.

impact on their physical and mental health. Promoting active and healthier lives means that beneficiaries require less input from public health and care service providers. Thus, through rural social entrepreneurship, O4O contributed to creating communities that are less dependent on public service providers (Figure 11.1).

In addition to reduced dependence on the state (Figure 11.1), local projects generated employment opportunities for local people. The latter can be particularly important when the retention of working-age people is low due to a lack of local jobs and high unemployment levels. Consequently, we observed that the project generated added value associated with indirect impacts. In fact, both direct and indirect impacts of the O4O project need to be considered in informing our discussion about the potential consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship.

Changing perception of older people

The project helped to shift perceptions of older people as a burden on society and towards recognition of the value they can bring to their communities as well as their potential to be involved in service design and delivery. Whilst it is inarguably true that a proportion of older people require and depend on public and community services, the project promoted older people as assets of rural communities, challenging stereotypes about older people being purely “in need” of services. In O4O, the value of older people as volunteers was demonstrated in quantitative and qualitative data collected and in the participatory action research outcomes, with evidence of successful community development being driven by the dedication, enthusiasm, and skill of older citizens. Moreover, the contribution to changing perceptions of older people generated by O4O was noted by the European Commission, which acknowledged that the project assisted in addressing the

challenge of demographic change and supporting active aging. As a winner of the Regiostars Award, the project was praised for offering an alternative approach to the “problem” of ageing communities and, instead, promoting older people as a socially entrepreneurial asset and a key part of the solution.

In the next section, we consider the implications of Brexit in the context of rural social entrepreneurship. Then, to conclude, we highlight key messages, including implications for policy and practice deriving from the presented study.

Consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship

Using our reflections on the O4O project, we now turn to consider the potential consequences of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship in the UK. We do this by analysing the benefits of the O4O project, assuming that those benefits would not have occurred without EU support.

Engagement, support, and entrepreneurial capabilities

O4O enabled engagement in social entrepreneurship in remote and rural areas. Our experience of the O4O process suggests that the project provided a source of external support to community members to develop skills and confidence in their own abilities and set up social enterprises. For example, we evidenced that remote and rural communities need to be able to draw on certain entrepreneurial capabilities in order to develop social enterprises (Muñoz, Steiner and Farmer, 2015). Drawing on the skills of “external experts”, O4O assisted in developing skills within communities, enabling “things to happen”. Engagement and support that acted as an essential component of instigating rural social entrepreneurship would not have happened without EU funds, which brought a variety of relevant community stakeholders together and enabled the creation of rural social enterprises. At the same time, we note that O4O represents only one example of an EU project that supported socially entrepreneurial capabilities. Indeed, the cumulative impact of hundreds or thousands of EU-funded rural projects across the UK has been significant and a lack of relevant substitutes to energise the capabilities of rural communities may lead to lost opportunities to embed socially entrepreneurial solutions in local settings as well as decreased social engagement.

Funding

O4O has shown that, within rural areas, public sector funding is particularly important in initiating community entrepreneurship. O4O was funded by the EU and this kind of support needs to continue in one form or another. Without the financial support that we received to run the project, the rural social entrepreneurship projects described in this chapter would not have been created. More importantly, the social innovation associated with inspiring communities to address their own challenges would not have taken place. Since the project finished, we have evidenced a positive “domino effect”, with neighbourhood rural

communities adapting and harnessing social entrepreneurship as a viable solution to local problems.

We also note a need for mixed-income streams. As rural social enterprises are faced with the perennial challenges of increased costs associated with sparsity and low levels of demand in areas with small populations, there is a need for income from service delivery and trading to be supplemented with grant income. The EU was, and for its members continues to be, a source of such income, targeted at sparsely populated areas, e.g., the European Structural Investment Funds (LEADER, NPP/NPA, Cohesion Fund, European Regional Development Fund, and the European Social Fund). In the UK, Brexit means that the ongoing sustainability of rural social enterprises could be challenged, unless alternative funding for sparsely populated areas is provided. So far, EU funds like LEADER or NPP/NPA, supporting socio-economic development of rural places, including aspects of *rural* social entrepreneurship and *rural* social innovation, have not been replaced by the UK governments. Existing funding streams are largely centralised and they fail to take account of the specificity of place and local needs. Frequently, the priority is placed on large-scale economic investments as well as urban development; without a doubt, since leaving the EU, UK policymakers have paid little attention to supporting *rural* social entrepreneurship, with no mechanisms being in place to support cohesion and sustainable development of rural communities. The effects of the latter are yet to be seen but, considering challenges deriving from the Covid-19 pandemic, the need to create sustainable socio-economic solutions supporting rural citizens is, arguably, greater than ever before. It is questionable, however, whether limited public funding in the UK post-Covid-19 environment will consider the financial needs of sparsely populated rural communities, favouring cheaper *per capita* investments in urban locations. A lack of ring-fenced funding for rural socio-economic development might therefore become an increasing issue affecting those residing in rural areas.

Translating informal help into community entrepreneurship

O4O enabled the translation of existing voluntarism into more formalised participation through a social enterprise model, with facilitated community meetings embedding the legitimacy of the concept of social entrepreneurship. The latter involved processes of community dialogue where the project manager and community members discussed the idea of service design and delivery. Without these opportunities for citizens to explore the concept of service co-production, services created by O4O would not exist. Importantly, as presented in Figure 11.1, these socially entrepreneurial services can reduce dependence on the state. As such, it could be argued that EU investment in rural communities provided added value benefits that go beyond the rural domain and support the activities of wider UK service provision.

Considering O4O, we evidenced that, in a remote and rural context, developing new solutions and presenting success in other communities is needed to legitimise ideas of co-design and co-production. Embedding this legitimacy within the

community is needed to catalyse the community action model which, thereafter, can be “franchised” in other rural locations. These lessons should not be forgotten but taken forward in the post-Brexit context.

Limited knowledge exchange and cooperative working

The increased sense of cohesion and collective advocacy that was facilitated by the O4O project had a positive influence on the implementation and sustainability of social enterprise development. Post-Brexit, opportunities to support these components of rural social entrepreneurship through funding from the EU are significantly limited. Without this support, there is a risk that peripheral rural communities in the UK nations and other locations at the edge of Europe will become more remote and have less of a collective voice. For instance, NPP/NPA funding is no longer available to rural communities from the UK (European Union, 2021), making it challenging for UK partners to initiate new international projects or continue existing collaborations. Importantly, rural areas need not only a replacement for these funds but also continued access to knowledge exchange and cooperative working mechanisms across European rural and remote areas. The question is whether the UK government recognises the value of these activities which, although beneficial, might be difficult to financially quantify despite increasing popularity of tools measuring social value, such as the Social Return on Investment (NEF, 2022) or Social Value Engine (RSN, 2022). Although useful, these kinds of tools might be too time-consuming or costly, and therefore impractical, when assessing impacts of rural, frequently small in scale, projects.

Labour and movement of people

Rural social enterprises in the O4O model, often in care-type services, rely on labour from outside those rural areas and often outside the UK. Indeed, challenges in recruiting a rural health and social care workforce in the UK had been identified even prior to Brexit, with individuals from the EU helping to fill the gap (De Lima and Wright, 2009). As social care workers are not exempt from the UK’s points-based immigration system, severe shortages are predicted (Holmes, 2021). For social enterprises such as those developed through the O4O project, which depend on social care workers, a sustainable future is under threat. We note, however, that the challenge goes beyond the healthcare sector. In many rural places, immigrants from the EU helped to change local demographics, bringing more working-age citizens and providing labour to local businesses, including social enterprises (De Lima and Wright, 2009). As such, current progress in revitalising UK rural locations may suffer.

Recruitment and workforce management

The O4O project focused on sustainability in the development of social enterprises. A key aspect of this was to build the capacity of management committees

and boards and to facilitate autonomy of decision-making. Recruitment and management of staff were skills and responsibilities of which many participants had no previous experience. Local people commonly criticised the decisions previously made by external agencies (such as the local authority or health board) in relation to recruitment and management, especially when external candidates were appointed to new posts and local applicants were overlooked. Interestingly, when the locus of control was more local, decisions made by local groups also favoured the most qualified candidate as opposed to the local applicant.

However, dealing with issues around workforce management can be problematic. When an employee is also a local resident and potentially a personal friend of members of a rural social enterprise management committee or board, there can be added pressure in responding to situations that involve a verbal or written warning or dismissal. Long-standing relationships can be broken as a result of the difficulty in separating professional and personal interactions in rural communities.

External support is invaluable in supporting rural social enterprises with recruitment and staff management when the scale and availability of local skills are limited. In the Scottish Highlands and Islands, this aspect of support continues to be provided through organisations such as the Highlands and Islands Social Enterprise Zone, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Social Enterprise Academy. It is essential for rural social enterprises in the UK that this type of support is provided and sustained.

Bureaucracy

Despite bringing a variety of benefits, staff and participants in the O4O project commonly criticised the level of bureaucracy that was associated with EU funding. Indeed, this finding is not unique but has been found in other European Union funding streams including, for example, LEADER (Steiner, 2016). Bureaucracy as well as administratively heavy and complex funding rules acted to quash enthusiasm and reduce the confidence of social entrepreneurs who simply wanted to put their energies into developing and managing the social enterprise. We believe that it is important to stress that despite numerous negative impacts of Brexit on rural social entrepreneurship, there are opportunities for future funding provision to be less bureaucratic. If replaced, flexible, straightforward, and easy-to-use local funding streams and tailored support can add value to rural social entrepreneurship, enhancing rural citizens' ability to further develop more social enterprises and reach wider groups of community members. Importantly, there are examples of policy initiatives supporting the work of communities; for instance, in Scotland, the government encourages a democratic process in which citizens decide directly how to spend part of a public budget through so-called "Participatory Budgeting" and its Community Choices Fund (Scottish Government, 2022). Although introduced years before Brexit and not tailored to address specifics of rural communities or to support rural social entrepreneurship, these kinds of policies and funds could evolve to fill in a funding gap created by Brexit and to target the needs of rural citizens.

Conclusions

Through reflecting on the O4O project, we have shown the importance of EU funding in facilitating rural social entrepreneurship. The funding was essential for gathering relevant stakeholders together and for investment in capacity building. Indeed, O4O has introduced social entrepreneurship in the O4O communities which, at the time of running our project, was perceived as a novel concept. The project has shown that external facilitation of rural community entrepreneurship might be essential for change to happen. O4O led to rural social innovation and assisted in legitimatising the concept of rural social entrepreneurship within rural communities and local service providers. But will new funding streams support O4O-type projects? In our case study, O4O created a movement, inspired people to co-produce services, and created skills enabling rural social entrepreneurship.

This chapter recognises the importance of policymakers in being proactive in replicating some of the EU initiatives supporting rural development. After all, Brexit was a political move and UK policy needs to adapt to the new socio-political circumstances deriving from it. For example, there is a need to create programmes with a specific focus on peripheral rural communities and for funding to support rural social entrepreneurship. However, because funding providers tend to measure impact using the number of people who have benefited from funded projects, rural social enterprises can struggle to make a case for the often high costs involved in supporting relatively small numbers of people. The EU identifies the fragility of sparsely populated areas and recognises the need for support. A cynical view of national governments is that they tend to prioritise funding to areas where impact is demonstrable and electoral success may follow. If there is no political will to replace the EU funding that was targeted at sparsely populated areas and supported rural social entrepreneurship, these areas will be more likely to decline.

Importantly, in addition to the targeted funding supporting social entrepreneurship, the benefits of being part of the EU were not purely monetary. Financial means triggered a series of events and activities that enabled rural social entrepreneurship to thrive. Being part of the EU brought community cohesion within specific regions as well as internationally, activating frequently “inactive” rural social networks (Bollman and Reimer, 2009). Individuals in sparsely populated rural communities on the periphery of Europe were able to discover commonalities and feel more connected. EU funding provided a mechanism for knowledge transfer of solutions to the challenges of an ageing, rural population and of an alternative approach to service provision. Hearing about rural social enterprises that had been established by other older Europeans helped to inspire and give confidence to the older people who participated in the project. Instead of just looking inward, the project gave a broader perspective which made some participants realise that they were not alone in the challenges they faced. Undoubtedly, learning from others is probably one of the most important aspects of the international EU collaboration from which Britain benefitted for many years.

Considering social entrepreneurship, we also note that although support for social enterprises exists, UK policy gives little attention to *rural* social enterprise. A lack of appropriate policy support to build the capacity of rural communities may lead to lost opportunities to embed socially entrepreneurial solutions in rural settings. Indeed, EU funding allowed for a level of risk to take place, enabling social innovation. Moving forward, UK policies should take a similar approach and allow elements of risk to be incorporated into public investments to facilitate rural social entrepreneurship.

In the EU and the UK, challenges associated with an ageing population will only increase, compounding the need for ongoing investment, especially in rural areas. Nonetheless, there is a need to challenge “doom and gloom” attitudes to demographic challenges and to recognise the opportunities that rural communities have to run sustainable social enterprises in which older people are part of the solution. Rural social entrepreneurship can be an efficient way to engage older people in social entrepreneurship. Without EU policy and funding, none of the O4O project outcomes would have come to fruition and many other projects in rural parts of the UK would not exist. To counteract this, we need to invest in rural social entrepreneurship to identify local resources to tackle local problems and enable the testing of potentially risky rural social innovation. It is necessary to create national funding streams that are targeted specifically at sparsely populated areas and that create opportunities for knowledge transfer about social entrepreneurship models to isolated communities. Additionally, policymakers should facilitate international collaboration beyond traditional commercial entrepreneurship and recognise the value of international social entrepreneurship – this to inspire communities with alternative service provision solutions and sustainable rural community development. In time, as evidenced in the O4O project, the latter can lead to reduced dependence on the state – an issue that is discussed by many policymakers in the face of growing financial pressures associated with socio-political challenges. To achieve this, however, investment is needed. Importantly, as communities are not keen on the bureaucracy associated with EU funding streams, we call for less bureaucratic support for rural social entrepreneurship.

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Note

- 1 Specific findings of this study relating to different components of our data collection were published in other papers referenced in this chapter. For more information, please read the referenced papers.

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