COLLABORATIVE PATTERNS OF LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY IN COMMUNITY SOCIAL ENTERPRISES: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

SUNNA KOVANEN [ID]

Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, IfL, Leipzig, Germany

ABSTRACT: The article presents results from a research on the relevance and challenges of collaboration for the long-term sustainability of rural community enterprises. The study relies on Communities of Practice and Degrowth theories. Methods include semi-standardised interviews and focused ethnography in two community enterprises in rural areas in Germany and Portugal. Main results confirm the relevance of collaborative relations with residents, public sector, peer organisations and within the teams for both stability and transformative power of the organisations' work. Respectful handling of privileges and balance in participation and professionalisation support sustainability, whereas institutional stagnation and involuntary degrowth may risk it.

Corresponding author: Sunna Kovanen, Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig, Schongauerstrasse 9, 04328 Leipzig, Germany; e-mail: s_kovanen@leibniz-ifl.de
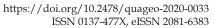
Introduction

Social entrepreneurship is considered an especially relevant solution to the challenges of rural development. Community social enterprises (CSEs), which engage rural residents in the production of services, are expected to empower citizens and succeed in providing services in conditions where market and public actors fail (Whitelaw, Hill 2013; von Friedrichs, Lundström 2016). Previous studies have focused commonly on the emergence of CSEs from local needs. However, it is unclear to what extent they can survive in conditions of decline in the long term and maintain their transformative social impact. Therefore, this article explores the possibilities of collaborative CSEs to both stabilise service provision and livelihoods in rural areas

and, simultaneously, facilitate transformation towards more just and sustainable local economies, in short, their long-term sustainability.

The CSEs are organisations that pursue social or ecological aims with producing and selling products and services in the market (Defourny, Nyssens 2012). Recent critique in the research field proposes shifting the focus from characters of individual visionary leaders to collaborative processes (De Bruin et al. 2017). Approaching rural social enterprises (SEs) in this way may provide answers to the call, because, according to van Twuijver et al. (2020), the most typical SEs in rural areas emerge from local community collaboration. These studies on CSEs point towards the challenge of stabilising the organisations' income and management in the long term without risking the informal participation typical of the early

stages (Borzaga, Galera 2016; Salemink et al. 2017). This economic and institutional sustainability has been claimed to become increasingly contradictory with the CSEs' transformative, political agency over time (Wallace 2005; Rossel 2015).

Therefore, collaboration seems to play a crucial role in balancing SEs aims in the long run. This article identifies context-specific and cross-regional collaborative patterns that are most relevant for the enterprises' long-term sustainability. This study aims, on the one hand, to enhance the understanding of the internal and contextual collaborative practices, with which community economies may (not) flourish in the context of involuntary degrowth. On the other hand, the article develops the theory of social entrepreneurship as a collaborative endeavour with the Communities of Practice (CoP) approach (Wenger 2010). It answers the following questions:

1. What kind of patterns and trajectories of collaboration can be identified in rural community entrepreneurship?
2. How do they enhance or hinder the stability and transformative power of the enterprises?

The study draws on the qualitative, internationally comparative case study of two CSEs in North-Eastern Brandenburg, Germany, and South-Eastern Alentejo in Portugal. The research was conducted during 2019 and early 2020 with semi-standardised interviews and focused ethnography as part of an international, EU-funded network project.

This research focuses on Communities of Practice instead of place (Wenger 2008), as the focus on 'community' collaboration in CSE studies has been criticised for its implicitly positive and spatially uniform connotation, often not applicable beyond the Anglophone contexts (Cebotari, Mihály 2018). The CoPs are constellations of shared identities, meanings and learning trajectories emerging from joint work in shared spaces, which can include practitioners both within and beyond formal organisational boundaries. According to Kovanen (*in press*), studying SEs as nodes of diverse CoPs enables to expand the critical, still marginal approach to social entrepreneurship as a collaborative endeavour. The CoP approach is used here as a lens to identify and analyse practices, experiences and power relations in collaboration, defined as joint work with a minimum amount of flexibility and negotiation. The

actual depth and means of 'local community' collaboration will be the question of empiric work.

Next, long-term sustainability and the CoP approach to collaboration in CSEs is discussed, followed by the presentation of materials and methods, and then by an overview of the results in line with the collaborative patterns identified in the cases. Finally, the results are summarised reflecting the contribution of a practice approach to the study field.

Rural community enterprises from a degrowth perspective

Sustainability has often been approached in the SE literature as a purely economic phenomenon. Degrowth discussion, instead, reflects the possibilities of scaling up ethical community-led solutions as an alternative system to capitalism and its growth logic (Matthies et al. 2019; Paech et al. 2019), where economic, social and ecological sustainability are strongly intertwined. Accordingly, long-term sustainability is defined here as a balance between stability and transformation. According to Paech et al. (2019), reliable service provision requires a certain continuity in the resource basis and organisational coordination, say stability, whereas too strong a stagnation in organisational procedures hinders participation and innovation (Wenger 2008: 60–61)**.** Therefore, stability here relates to the CSEs' ability to provide basic services, cover the costs of the operation and ensure socially sustainable working relations for diverse participants. Transformation relates to their capacity to learn and challenge mainstream unsustainable policies and developments (Wallace 2005: 84).

In degrowth debate, transformation is often understood in ecological terms, but the studies commonly overlook transformative practices related to basic service provision in the conditions of the declining population and public infrastructure. First of all, CSEs benefit strongly from institutional and civic networks in their ability to provide services and influence on politics (Borzaga, Galera 2016). In many rural areas, such dynamic networks and affluent markets are far, and institutional partners may be weak. In Whitelaw and Hill's (2013) and Haunstein's (2019) studies, for example, the public sector provided start-up

support for citizen-led basic services, but could not step in for any long-term economic sustainability. The maintenance of the services remained an individual responsibility, resulting in social pressure and conflict. Capital-intensive and legally complex services require major skills and resources from participants, which are often equally rare in areas of strong depopulation. Salemink et al. (2017), for example, report on the risk of burn-out of the few strongly engaged members. Degrowth scholars usually define the desired transition as a democratic, voluntary process in opposition to the shrinking mentioned above due to austerity. However, observing community economies in actual processes of decline and slow growth may provide insights into the challenges to be tackled on the way towards just transition. To approach the challenges in more detail, this research turns to the practice approach on collaboration.

Practice approach to the long-term sustainability of community enterprises

While the majority of studies on collaboration have focused on institutional relations, networks and social structures, the CoP approach enables to attend to their actual practicing. The majority of CSE studies on internal collaboration, some also relying on a practice approach (Kumpulainen, Soini 2019), have usually portrayed a dual relationship between 'a leader' and 'the community' (Kovanen *in press*). A successful community is often seen as consisting of a tight social structure between residents, reliant on a leader who brokers between the localities and multi-scalar networks (Richter 2017; Noack, Federwisch 2019). Leaders often have skills and expertise from outside their villages, but they may also face challenges to mobilise the residents due to previous local conflicts and the lack of mutual trust (Kasabov 2016). Described from the CoP perspective, the different practitioners in a CSE have different meanings and experiences concerning their common work, which must be first recognised and negotiated before a mutual commitment is possible. In a CoP that is open for transformation, newcomers are able to follow an inclusive learning trajectory and become influential experts and leaders themselves. Such

transformative trajectories are not, however, universally accessible, but depend on the participants' capacities and institutional power to negotiate existing norms and make space for new practices (Roberts 2006: 627; Houtbeckers 2017).

Practitioners may also struggle in relation to the public sector and market competition. This can be approached with the concept of reified practices, resembling Vallance et al.'s (2011) conception of 'maintenance sustainability'. According to Kleinhans (2017), for example, the public sector discursively supported collaboration with CSEs, but as their actual governance and funding principles were reified and not adaptable to the CSEs' needs, they rather stagnated the dependence of the initiatives from powerful institutions. The CSEs aim at overcoming such reification by spreading and upscaling their innovative practices in their collaboration with established institutions. Here, this spreading is approached with the concept of patterns. Patterns are chains of practices, which spread out to different contexts and can be recognised in each, although the actual practices within them vary from context to context (Wenger 2008: 131–133). It helps to discover the spreading and upscaling of innovative practices not as quantitative growth but qualitative change, which resembles the development claimed to be more desirable for SEs (Wallace 2005).

Materials and methods

Relying on poststructuralist epistemology, the analytical focus of the research lies in relations and practices, from which identities and structures emerge (Geiselhardt et al. 2019). In a qualitative, comparative case study approach, repeating patterns in diverse contexts can be identified and those considered universal questioned (Lang 2018). Methods include focused ethnography, semi-standardised interviews[1] and document

---

[1] Interview partners were selected using a purposive sampling approach, with the aim to cover the most common roles of CSE collaboration based on previous literature. These include internally stable members and workers of the organisations, external partners from public, funding and civic organisations and more ad-hoc participants such as volunteers and freelance workers. The list of partners can be seen in Table

analysis (Knoblauch 2001; Flick 2006: 154–161). Informal interviews with regional development professionals and regional policy documents have also been analysed in both regions as a secondary data to enhance the researchers' knowledge of the contexts. Table 1 presents the amount of data and timeframe of the field work.

The focused ethnography was conducted by participating in the daily work and network events of the cases (see Table 1 for duration). It is a suitable method for a practice approach, as the researcher can accompany the unfolding of collaboration in situated and embodied interaction with practitioners and spaces. Interviews, in turn, provide a more long-term perspective, limited to individual reflection. Observations were written in field diaries and the interviews were fully transcribed. All data types were analysed jointly with applied theoretical coding principle (Flick 2006: 296–302), starting with each case individually and, finally, comparing the two. Patterns of collaboration were identified in each case according to specific, connected practices related to sustainability in specific ways.

The case enterprises have been identified based on a listing of SEs in both regions conducted by the author, as:

– representatives of typical and elementary service providers in basic and civil education sectors in their region (registered association (e.V.) in Germany and IPSS, 'Private Institution of Social Solidarity' in Portugal) (Henriques 2013: 186, B1I6),
– independent, non-profit organisations with the aims of supporting their communities and regions (A1Do1; B1Do1),
– entrepreneurial actors combining public funding, private fees and donations with sales of services to the market,
– organisations engaging different users in the co-production of their services and projects, recognised for their innovativeness beyond the locations (B1Do9; A1Do8).

1. The specific partners in each case were identified with a snowball-method based on the first interviews with the leaders in both cases. The leaders are those addressed as leaders ('chef' or 'president') in the associations, who hold a formal, central position of authority and centrally co-ordinate the daily work and/ or external relations.

Youthwork in Brandenburg is a civic education centre founded in 1992. They employ 18 people and run cultural- and political education projects for young people and adults regionally and internationally. They engage local residents with volunteering and run the only grocery store and meeting space of the village. They also host diverse organisations on their premises, including a museum and archives, and sell catering and accommodation services for external groups.

Founded in 1934 to provide daycare services in a small town, *Daycare* in Alentejo now employs 40 people and cares for 200 children. They have gained national recognition with their projects, such as an experimental garden and an open library. Their aim is to develop participatory education methods and increase the families' interest in higher education and literature. Daycare also sells catering services to local public schools.

The cases are located in North-Eastern Brandenburg, Germany and South-Eastern Alentejo, Portugal, which have been chosen as border regions among the most rural in their countries (European Commission 2019a,b). The processes of involuntary degrowth are reflected in the long-term downward trends in the population, especially among young people, and the reduction of public infrastructure such as train services and public administration in both regions (Landesamt für Bauen und Verkehr 2015; Eurostat 2019; Landtag Brandenburg 2019: 82). However, North-Eastern Brandenburg is better accessible from Berlin with public transport than Alentejo from Lisbon, and the developments in the Berlin metropolitan area have turned the economic and demographic trends towards slow growth during the last few years. In Alentejo, in turn, the latest financial crisis has accelerated the declination (A1I12; Nunes Silva 2017). Germany is a federal state, where funding and governance responsibilities of educational services are divided between state and county councils. No independent county- or federal-level governance exists in Portugal, and funding for independent service providers is managed by the national ministry (European Commission 2019a,b). Furthermore, previous studies report about a relatively strong dependence on both national frameworks and informal family support among IPSSs (Campos Franco 2005). The SEs in Brandenburg, in turn, have

Table 1. The amount of data.

	Participants	Youthwork			Daycare		
		Abbr.	Date	Amount/ Respond	Abbr.	Date	Amount/ Respond
Interviews	Chair/Manager	B1I1	27/3/19	1	A1I2	8/5/19	1
	Vice-chair				A1I1	27/3/19	1
	Project worker	B1I2	23/7/19	1			
	Service workers				A1I4	28/5/19	3
	Coordinating service worker				A1I5	7/6/19	1
	Peer-organisation	B1I3	31/7/19	1	A1I8	21/6/20	1
	Freelance worker	B1I4	1/8/19	1			
	Local volunteer	B1I5	1/8/19	1			
	Service user and board				A1I3	13/5/19	1
	Service user				A1I7	11/11/19	1
	Funder	B1I6	29/8/19	1			
	Public administration	B1I7	21/9/19	1	A1I6	6/6/19	2
	Local development organisation	B118	28/11/19	1	A1I9	29/3/19	1
	Local politician				A1I10	25/5/19	1
	Network organisation of the municipalities				A1I11	16/4/19	2
	Social innovation hub				A1I12	17/4/20	1
Observations	Days, daily work	B1D1-15		15	A1D1-15		15
	Incl. public events			3			3
	Incl. meetings			2			2
	Incl. context						2
Documents	Statute	B1Do1			A1Do1		
	'Milestones' – publication for 25th anniversary	B1Do2					
	4-year plan 2014–2017				A1Do2		
	Minutes of strategy meetings	B1Do3, 4			A1Do3		
	Minutes of general assembly	B1Do4					
	Project report	B1Do5			A1Do4		
	Letter for customers	B1Do6			A1Do5		
	External coverage in media and national competitions	B1Do8-12		4	A1Do6-11		5

benefitted strongly from the myriad of private foundations and increased political attention, nationally and regionally, on rural civic engagement, social innovations and return migration, resulting in targeted competitions, funding and advisory programmes (Haunstein 2019; Landtag Brandenburg 147, 208). Alentejo saw its first social innovation incubation programme backed by EU funding only in 2018.

Results

The results are presented below in line with five collaborative patterns, which were identified during the analysis as central to the long-term sustainability of both cases. The first section discusses mainly external and multi-scalar collaboration in strategic networks with public institutions and peer organisations. It supports the CSEs with legitimacy and grant funding and helps the practitioners to spread innovative practices and challenge powerful institutions. However, two case-specific patterns of different collaborative relations in both regions were identified. The second section describes one, cross-regional pattern focused on the CSEs' physical spaces but crossing the formal, organisational boundaries. The practices include maintaining the infrastructure and local embeddedness. The third section describes the mainly internal collaboration and co-ordination in two case-specific patterns, highlighting how different practitioners support and challenge one another and coordinate the organisation as a whole.

Patterns of collaboration in strategic leadership and multi-scalar networks

The first pattern connects the CSE to the wider civil society, public institutions, and professional and funding partners. The practitioners develop innovative projects and practices in these networks, pass them to further initiatives, secure public- and project funding and attempt to cultivate horizontal dialogue in public governance. The practitioners are mainly project- and freelance workers, board members and managers with commonly a previous learning trajectory in higher education and urban areas. In Youthwork, many also continue to live in Berlin. There are, however, major differences in the extent of stability the collaboration provides in each case. Youthwork has had tight relations to different scales of local, county and state governments since their founding. Public representatives are, for example, board members and contribute to project development, as an official from the county council highlighted:

> This spring again thanks to the close partnership with the regional government, the whole cabinet of the ministry of Brandenburg held their meeting here (at Youthwork). […] It's recognition of the work done, right, because many ministers had already been here because of their involvement in grants, but that all are here together it's... something special (B1I7, 00:07:23).

Frequent informal exchange with different public representatives guarantees economic and institutional stability of Youthwork, based on which they can diversify their finances with further grants (B1I1, B1I6, B1I7). Daycare, similar to many other IPSSs in Portugal, has, instead, very few other funding sources than the gradually decreasing national funding (A1I2, A1I3; Henriques 2013: 187, 190–191). Here, reified, non-collaborative relations to the capital and the retreat of public bodies from the region, partly as a result of austerity measures, leave Daycare with only one public partner, the local city council. Economic instability has, however, not prevented them from pushing for political change. Daycare's vice-chair has helped to replace an 'authoritarian' educational councillor and provoked jealousy among local politicians, as reflected in the quote below. The fear of political rivalries among

elected leaders in the Alentejan town seemed to create a rather frustrating environment for collaboration compared to the frequent, consensus-oriented dialogue by Youthwork with all political parties from local to international scales (A1I9, A1I0, A1D2).

> Personal relationships overlap institutional relationships. So, I have friends that belong to the [governing] Communist Party. They are my friends, but they […] are always trying to devalue the work you do […] I would say that I feel this from informal conversations and reactions, when I say we have these achievements in the Daycare centre. We were awarded the prize. 'OK. But the previous municipality has done this, this and this'... always in a competition (A1I1, 00:39:01).

Both transformation and stability are also fostered in both CSEs' relations with other peer organisations. The main example of Youthwork's transformative collaboration with their regional civic partners has been to co-found a participatory education network for rural civil society. The network connects old and new residents around the state to learn from one another on project development and lobbying, fostering empowering learning trajectories, as quoted by the network co-ordinator below (B1I2, B1D14).

> In the opening conference there were many people… who needed a forum to express their frustration. And now it's changing greatly, it's going strongly towards the direction… that we can change something if we are well prepared, if we perform with confidence, we will be heard (in the politics) (B1I2, 00:48:04).

Daycare, again, has found only one active partner with which to develop their educational practices. All partners involved in Daycare's networking complained about disinterest and conservative attitudes among the public schools in town (A1I1, A1I6, A1D11). Whereas Youthwork enhances transformative learning by supporting and respecting local activists in what they already do, Daycare's board rather wished to replace current, so-called 'old-fashioned' practices altogether with innovative ones from outside (A1I1). This, in turn, has mounted another, strongly destabilising boundary between the mainly local service workers and the board, to which I will return to when describing the third section.

In summary, the collaborative pattern (1) of informal and constructive dialogue with the public sector and civil society on diverse scales has been essential for Youthwork's economic and institutional stability. Transformation is enhanced simultaneously by introducing participatory methods of citizen dialogue with public officials. In Daycare, in turn, the collaborative pattern (2) of more radical transformation such as refusing to collaborate with certain political leaders, has contributed to frustration and the quitting of central forces. Therefore, it seems, that negative experiences with stagnated institutional practices can be balanced with both supportive and innovative collaboration in peer networks. However, whereas North-Eastern Brandenburg has recently witnessed a mushrooming be dynamic, networks of ex-Berliners coupled with public re-migration support, no such development can be observed in the poorly accessible Alentejan county. Even though austerity rhetoric and the retreat of public infrastructure have also been documented in German peripheries (Haunstein 2019), in comparison with Alentejo the public governance and private funding basis seems to have been stronger from the start and suffered less during the latest crises. The involuntary degrowth of institutions, demography and markets to date, especially in Alentejo, produce spatially unequal risks, which the CSEs cannot fully overcome even with multi-scalar collaboration.

Patterns of collaboration in service work and volunteering

The third collaborative pattern ensures both organisations local respect and reciprocal, non-monetary resources and learning relations, while increasing the complexity and instability in coordination. Practices include selling and coordinating different services, organising public events and celebrations and, particulary in Youthwork, voluntary maintenance of the organisations' buildings and spaces, such as a public park (3). The practitioners are volunteers and service workers, usually with lower formal education levels and a background in the region. Serving elderly residents was not part of Youthwork's original aim, but the first sporadic volunteer groups have gradually developed into a committed core, whose work saves both

the organisation and the county major resources. This, in turn, has contributed strongly to their political support (B1I1, B1I7). Daycare, instead, is not being supported by its public partner to apply for EU funding for maintenance investments and can only rely on small material donations (A1I2, A1I3). Therefore, they attempt to save through other collaborations by replacing paid positions with subsidised employees and negotiating food donations with local supermarkets (A1I2, A1I5).

In both cases, however, residents' active involvement and openness of the spaces to the public stabilises the CSEs' local relations. It helps to convince the residents of their progressive educational practices (A1I5, A1I7) and reduce jealousy locally (B1I7, B1D13, A1D12), which is highlighted in the following volunteer's comment. Regarding Youthwork, also external tenant organisations bring further dynamism and visibility to the SE with their networks and expertise, resulting in new projects (B1D3, B1D14).

> *We have something to show. […] Look, nowadays there are more people walking around in the park. Also, those villagers who do not come and help. They say: "Ooh you can actually walk around here! This is well cared for! Then I will take my relatives and show it to them, too." And even if they don't come [to help]. No big deal!* (B1I5, 00:15:43)

Like network- and public sector collaboration, also volunteering is simultaneously stabilising and transformative practice. Disadvantaged youth volunteer or do subsidised work together with professionals and elderly locals in both SEs, which provides learning- and a possibly empowering trajectory for all sides (B1D10, A1D3). However, complexifying working relations go together with instability as well. Heterogeneous teams often have to deal with different legal entities and diverse legislation from youth- to heritage protection governing their spaces and practices. (B1D11, B1D14). Volunteers in Youthwork claimed that the municipality owning the public park takes advantage of their free labour without supporting them and responding to their requests (B1I4, B1D5). The extent and quality demands for service have been increasing in both organisations faster than the number of staff (A1I2, B1D12).

In summary, collaboration with volunteers locally and cross-regionally provides transformative learning trajectories for disadvantaged participants side by side with professionals. Despite complaints about co-ordination especially in the German case, this transformative pattern has not threatened their stability so far. Quite on the contrary, diverse income and usage of the spaces, especially by engaging the residents and fulfilling their needs, enhances the CSEs' local impact and resource bases with collaborative, non-monetary relations. In addition, Youthwork can benefit from its accessibility to Berlin and the strong support for cross-border networks by the state ministries in accessing pools of funds and paying customers among cultural groups from Berlin and Poland. In Alentejo, in turn, the reciprocal relations alone are not quite enough to maintain the old building in a less supportive institutional framework. Finally, the complexifying working conditions in both cases do bare the risk of overburden, if the risk is overlooked and the reified institutionalised relations do not allow negotiation about the conditions of engagement.

Co-ordinating patterns of the whole enterprise

Two final contextually differing patterns, which bring the different practices and practitioners together and structure the organisations as a whole, are discussed here. In Youthwork, daily, diverse collaboration between project- and gig workers, network partners, volunteers and service rely on professional co-ordination and clear delegation (4). The management of Daycare is completely voluntary, even though the complexity of the tasks requires full-time presence. In both cases, exchange across the diverse, fluid CoPs is informal and generally very supportive, but in Daycare, the non-reflected discrepancy, especially between the board and the service workers' responsibilities, remuneration and expectations for standards (5), has built a boundary of disrespect between the teams, risking the CSE's future.

Transformative education practices in Daycare have been imposed previously by a visionary leader (A1I3). At the time of the study, the board members had tried to involve service workers in the development of innovative projects, but they had not acknowledged the underlining conflictive

trajectory (A1I1, A1I2). Some board members simply did not have enough time available aside from their paid work to be present at the institution and cultivate adequate mutual understanding across the different teams. Thus, what meant joint commitment for ambitious development for the highly educated board members was experienced by the majority of the service workers as a demand from above to work even more extra hours than they already do (A1I1, A1I4). Therefore, to counteract the board's strategic and discursive power, the service workers have used their democratic majority in the association to refuse negotiations and block board's suggestions for reforms, including a proposal to pay the chairperson for professional management. The board members felt their brokering had failed, as can be read from previous chairperson's quote below:

> I think here […] each one makes their work or little work and it's okay. Afterwards he goes home and […] nobody wants to work more. Nobody wants to give to the institution. Okay, but I've already done my part. […] And the thing is not just because I'm a volunteer. It's also because what I feel is that my work is not changing things. What I see is when I do, things happen/when I don't do things don't happen (A1I2, 00:48:09).

In Youthwork, in turn, each volunteer group is supported by paid staff members and a manager. The board advises management in legal responsibilities and all different tenants and stakeholders meet regularly to discuss strategic development. The service workers and ad hoc volunteers do not participate in strategic meetings, but they did not voice an explicit wish for that, either. Instead, the placing of major strategic and legal responsibility on volunteers' shoulders alone is the main source for overburden in both CSEs. Therefore, reasonable reification in the co-ordination of collaboration, coupled with minimum material security and room to negotiate about one's own responsibilities seems to reduce the risks of conflict and quitting greatly. Daycare faces a difficult challenge in finding new, skilled leaders in their peripheral location (A1I8). Nevertheless, a gradual learning trajectory towards adopting innovative practices and understanding the complexity of their leadership was observed among many service workers and this has not yet been fully recognised by the management.

Discussion

In this article, I identified fourfold context-specific and one cross-regional collaborative patterns, which mostly contribute to but also challenge the long-term sustainability of both CSEs. No strong duality between social and economic aims could be discovered but stability and transformation were intertwined in all relations. The way in which the practitioners succeeded in combining critical learning trajectories, provision of livelihoods and basic services convinced their partners of their work. It enabled the CSEs, especially in Brandenburg, to create long-term funding and support relations as well as a physical node of transformative public-civic learning. However, both CSEs neglected ecological sustainability to maintain their services as economically inclusive.

Both CSEs brought together participants with geographically and institutionally different trajectories. Simultaneously, transformative and stabilising internal collaboration was based foremost on respectful and frequent learning and negotiation between the practitioners. In the Portuguese case, however, the unreflected privileges and exclusive 'predispositions' (Roberts 2006, 626) of the practitioners towards the more unfamiliar trajectories turned the joint working into a struggle over decision-making power, risking the future of the CSE. In the German case, instead, different meanings of work were understood widely and discussed frequently with constructive critique. Diverse participants were able to reach both responsible and materially secure positions, enhancing the decentralised responsibility and commitment of the teams. Exploring such contested practises in heterogeneous teams can enhance critical understanding about rural community economies. Thus, the study provides a timely conribution to both CSE- and practise theories.

The CSEs' long-term sustainability is, however, also related to the extent of both stability and openness for change among their institutional partners. Too reified national funding, the lack of resources and stagnation of competitive practices in the regional public sector, combined with limited access from the periphery to more dynamic partners, private funding sources and customers was a risk to the Portuguese CSE. Therefore, if service SEs are to expand the sphere of more-than-capitalist economics in such strongly degrowing conditions, there is a need to strengthen decentralised and participatory public institutions, which acknowledge the value of reciprocal, non-market collaboration and labour for basic needs (Hirvilammi, Joutsenvirta 2019). However, institutional stagnation in Portugal did provoke stronger resistance and more radical changes in public institutions than the stable, resourceful context in Germany.

Approaching the collaboration with practice perspective has enabled to observe the major relevance of collaborative relations in social entrepreneurship, thus broadening the narrow and overly positive discourse on heroic social entrepreneurs. It has highlighted the transformative potential of peer-learning in civic, urban–rural networks, where actors both challenge their authorities by strengthening grassroots lobbying and mobilisation as well as benefit from the mobility and support infrastructure that the public sector facilitates. However, the analysis reflects researchers' interpretations about the observations and by no means the whole diversity of realities in the case organisations. Ethnographic participation assisted in grasping some crucial practices and developments, which would have remained invisible when focusing on strategic and innovative aspects only. However, the emphasis may have also been more on the internal organising than necessary, and due to the language skills, the observational data in Portugal had less depth than in Germany. This was balanced with keeping contact and re-checking interpretations with the cases after the ethnographic phase as well. A relational, participatory approach would deserve further applications to grasp the lived complexity of leadership, care and resource relations entangled in institutions, resources and spaces, which transformative rural livelihoods rely and flourish upon.

Acknowledgments

References

Borzaga C., Galera G., 2016. Innovating the provision of welfare services through collective action: The case of Italian social cooperatives. *International Review of Sociology* 26: 31–47. DOI 10.1080/03906701.2016.1148336.

Campos Franco R., 2005. Defining the nonprofit sector: Portugal. Working Papers of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project. No. 43. The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, Baltimore.

Cebotari S., Mihály M., 2018. Towards a progressive local development approach: Insights from local community initiatives in Hungary and Romania. In: Görmar F., Lang T. (eds), *Regional and local development in times of polarisation*. Palgrave Macmillan, Berlin Heidelberg, New York: 253–285.

De Bruin A., Shaw E., Lewis K.V., 2017. The collaborative dynamic in social entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 29: 575–585. DOI 10.1080/08985626.2017.1328902.

Defourny J., Nyssens M., 2012. The EMES approach of social enterprise in a comparative perspective. EMES Working Papers no. 12/03. DOI 10.4324/9780203487747-11.

European Commission, 2019a. *Regional innovation monitor plus.* Alentejo region of Portugal. Online: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/regional-innovation-monitor/base-profile/alentejo-region-portugal (accessed: 2 July 2020).

European Commission, 2019b. *Regional innovation monitor plus.* Brandenburg. Online: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/regional-innovation-monitor/base-profile/brandenburg (accessed: 2 July 2020).

Eurostat, 2019. *Rural development data.* Online: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/rural-development/data (accessed: 2 July 2019).

Flick U., 2006. *An introduction to qualitative research,* 3rd Ed. Sage Publications, London; Thousand Oaks, California.

Geiselhardt K., Hoppe-Seyler A., Werner C., 2019. Vom Absetzen theoretischer Brillen und der Öffnung des eigenen Blicks – Reflexionen über praxeologische Methodologien (On removing theoretical lenses and opening the sight – reflections about praxeological methodologies). In: Schäfer S., Everts J. (eds), *Handbuch Praktiken Und Raum: Humangeographie Nach Dem Practice Turn* (Handbook practices and space: Human geography after the practice turn). Transcript, Bielefeld: 361–390.

Haunstein S., 2019. Bürgerschaftliche Verantwortungsübernahme in ländlich-peripheren Räumen. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung am Beispiel genossenschaftliche Dorfläden (Citizen responsibility in rural-peripheral spaces. A critical debate based on the example of co-operative village shops). In: Mießner M., Naumann M. (eds), *Kritische Geographien Ländlicher Entwicklung: Globale Transformationen und lokale Herausforderungen* (Critical geographies of rural development: Global transformations and local challenges). Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster: 266–278.

Henriques J.A., 2013. *Os sistemas de financiamento das IPSS e a sua relação com o Estado Providência em Portugal* (Financing systems of IPSS´ and their relation to the welfare state in Portugal). PhD thesis, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa. Online: https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/handle/10071/7659 (accessed: 12 July 2020).

Hirvilammi T., Joutsenvirta M., 2019. Diverse work practices and the role of welfare institutions. In: Eskelinen T., Venäläinen J., Hirvilammi T. (eds), *Enacting community economies within a welfare state.* Mayfly Books: 47–71.

Houtbeckers E., 2017. The everyday experiences of a sustainable entrepreneur: Brokering for social innovation at the intersection of networks of practice. In: Nicolopoulou K., Karataş-Özkan M., Janssen F. (eds), *Sustainable entrepreneurship and social innovation.* Routledge, London; New York: 320–337

Kasabov E., 2016. Investigating difficulties and failure in early-stage rural cooperatives through a social capital lens. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 23: 895–916. DOI 10.1177/0969776415587121.

Kleinhans R., 2017. False promises of co-production in neighbourhood regeneration: The case of Dutch community enterprises. *Public Management Review* 19: 1500–1518. DOI 10.1080/14719037.2017.1287941.

Knoblauch H., 2001. Fokussierte Ethnographie: Soziologie, Ethnologie und die neue Welle der Ethnographie (Focused ethnography: Sociology, ethnology and the new wave of ethnography). *Sozialer Sinn* 1(2): 123–141. DOI 10.1515/sosi-2001-0105.

Kovanen S., *in press.* Social entrepreneurship as a collaborative practice: Literature review and research agenda. *Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Innovation.*

Kumpulainen K., Soini K., 2019. How do community development activities affect the construction of rural places? A case study from Finland. *Sociologia Ruralis* 59: 294–313. DOI 10.1111/soru.12234.

Lang T., 2018. Learning by doing. Herausforderungen und Methoden transnational vergleichender Forschung (Learning by doing. Challenges and methods of transnational comparative research). In: Meyer F., Miggelbrink J., Beurskens K. (eds), *Ins Feld und zurück – Praktische Probleme qualitativer Forschung in der Sozialgeographie* (To the field and back – practical challenges of qualitative research in social geography). Springer, Berlin: 45–53. DOI 10.1007/978-3-662-55198-1_6.

Landesamt für Bauen und Verkehr, 2015. Kreisprofil Märkisch-Oderland 2015. *Berichte der Raumbeobachtung.* Landesamt für Bauen und Verkehr, Hoppegarten (County profile Märkisch-Oderland 2015. *Reports of spatial observation.* State office for construction and traffic) Online: https://lbv.brandenburg.de/dateien/stadt_wohnen/_KP17_64_MOL.pdf (accessed: 1 October 2020).

Landtag Brandenburg, 2019. Abschlussbericht der Enquete-Kommission 6/1. *Schriften des Landtages Brandenburg Heft 2/2019* (Final report of the Enquete-commission 6/1. Publications of the state parliament of Brandenburg, issue 2/2019). Landtag Brandenburg, Potsdam. Online: https://www.dvgw.de/medien/dvgw/regional/bb/pdf/News/Abschlussbericht_Enquete-Kommission_6_1_Finalfassung.pdf (accessed: 1 October 2020).

Matthies A.-L., Stamm I., Hirvilammi T., Närhi K., 2019. Ecosocial innovations and their capacity to integrate ecological, economic and social sustainability transition. *Sustainability* 11: 2107. DOI 10.3390/su11072107.

Noack A., Federwisch T., 2019. Social innovation in rural regions: Urban impulses and cross-border constellations of actors. *Sociologia Ruralis* 59: 92–112. DOI 10.1111/soru.12216.

Nunes Silva C., 2017. Political and administrative decentralization in Portugal: Four decades of democratic local government. In: Nunes Silva C., Buček J. (eds), *Local government and urban governance in Europe.* Springer International Publishing, Cham: 9–32.

Paech N., Rommel M., Sperling C., 2019. Transformatives Größenmanagement. Wie lassen sich transformative Wirtschaftsformen wirtschaftlich und sozial stabilisieren? (Transformative growth management. How can transformative enterprise forms become socially and economically stable?) In: Antoni-Komar I., Kropp C., Paech N., Pfriem R. (eds), *Transformative Unternehmen und die Wende in der Ernährungswirtschaft.* (Transformative enterprises and the transformation in the food industry). Metropolis, Marburg: 129–157.

Richter R., 2017. Rural social enterprises as embedded intermediaries: The innovative power of connecting rural communities with supra-regional networks. *Journal of Rural Studies* 70: 179–187. DOI 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.12.005.

Roberts J., 2006. Limits to communities of practice. *Journal of Management Studies* 43: 623–639. DOI 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2006.00618.x.

Rossel C., 2015. State and SSE partnerships in social policy and welfare regimes: The case of Uruguay. In: Utting P. (ed.), *Social and solidarity economy beyond the fringe*. Zed Books, London: 236–249.

Salemink K., Strijker D., Bosworth G., 2017. The community reclaims control? Learning experiences from rural broadband initiatives in the Netherlands. *Sociologia Ruralis* 57: 555–575. DOI 10.1111/soru.12150.

von Friedrichs Y., Lundström A., 2016. Social entrepreneurship as collaborative processes in rural Sweden. In: Lundgaard Andersen L., Gawell M., Spear R. (eds), *Social entrepreneurship and social enterprises: Nordic perspectives.* Routledge, New York: 158–177.

Wallace B., 2005. Exploring the meaning(s) of sustainability for community-based social entrepreneurs. *Social Enterprise Journal* 1: 78–89. DOI 10.1108/17508610580000708.

Vallance S., Perkins H.C., Dixon J.E., 2011. What is social sustainability? A clarification of concepts. *Geoforum* 42: 342–348. DOI 10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.01.002.

van Twuijver M.W., Olmedo L., O'Shaughnessy, M., Hennessy T., 2020. Rural social enterprises in Europe: A systematic literature review. *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit* 35: 121–142. DOI 10.1177/0269094220907024.

Wenger E., 2010. Communities of practice and social learning systems: The career of a concept. In: Blackmore C. (ed.), *Social learning systems and communities of practice*. Springer, London: 179–198. DOI 10.1007/978-1-84996-133-2_7.

Wenger E., 2008. *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*, 16th pr. Ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Whitelaw S., Hill C., 2013. Achieving sustainable social enterprises for older people: Evidence from a European project. *Social Enterprise Journal* 9: 269–292. DOI 10.1108/SEJ-05-2012-0016.