Unlocking the power of rural social enterprise

11 ways in which policymakers can accelerate sustainable and enterprising rural communities.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE WORLD FORUM

ACRE
Thriving Rural Futures

Social enterprise is an effective model for many rural communities who are seeking to build localised economies that are resilient, inclusive and enterprising.

"Unlocking the power of rural social enterprise" serves as a strategic tool and comprehensive guide for policymakers to harness the power of social enterprise to drive sustainable development in rural communities.

There are already 10 million social enterprises globally, representing about 3% of all businesses.

The State of Social Enterprise: A Review of Global Data 2013–2023, World Economic Forum

Why is this manifesto needed?

The challenge

With 3.4 billion people residing in rural areas, the need for rural economic development is a pressing concern for both local and national governments. Extreme poverty and inequality are concentrated mainly in rural areas. An estimated 79% those experiencing poverty live in rural areas (World Bank, 2018). Rural populations generally have significantly reduced access to essential services, including education, healthcare and infrastructure (United Nations, 2021). In addition, many rural communities depend heavily on climate-sensitive livelihoods. However, across the globe, rural communities are disproportionately at the front line of an accelerating climate crisis (IPCC, 2023).

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2023). Climate Change 2023 Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers.
United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2021). World Social Report 2021: Reconsidering Rural Development.
World Bank Group. (2018). Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018: Piecing Together the Poverty Puzzle.

"Although rural areas contain most of the planet's natural capital, many people who live in rural communities face the reality of significantly poorer education and health outcomes, higher unemployment rates and growing digital disadvantage".

2021 World Social Report, published by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

"Social Enterprise World Forum is dedicated to supporting the transition of social enterprises from the informal to the formal economy in rural areas. This commitment aligns with the International Labour Organization's efforts to promote decent work and foster sustainable enterprises, all while contributing to the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals".

Gerry Higgins, Social Enterprise World Forum - SEWF (Scotland).

The opportunity

Deeply rooted in local communities, rural social enterprises play a pivotal role in addressing the unique challenges of rural communities including limited access to services, economic opportunities and infrastructure. Accelerating enterprising and sustainable rural communities is essential to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling the International Labour Organization's aspirations for human and labour rights. Through social enterprise, rural people create employment opportunities, ensure the provision of essential services, address environmental challenges, boost social cohesion and generate tourism revenue.

"It is essential to know the way rural communities operate and the traditional and ancestral management formats that already happen in order to give a formal framework to the management methods that have persisted for centuries, instead of developing new regulations created in cities or with little understanding of the rural context".

Jessica Oyarbide, EKHOS (Argentina).

"[We have to recognise] that social entrepreneurship, including cooperatives and social enterprises, can help to alleviate poverty and catalyse social transformation by strengthening the productive capacities of those in vulnerable situations and producing goods and services accessible to them".

2023 UN Resolution 77/281. Promoting the social and solidarity economy for sustainable development.

Collectively, social enterprises are generating over $2 trillion in annual revenues and creating 200 million jobs.

The State of Social Enterprise: A Review of Global Data 2013–2023, World Economic Forum

What is a social enterprise?

A social enterprise has a social and/or environmental mission and operates as a business selling a product and/or service. Unlike traditional businesses that focus on private profit, social enterprises are mission-locked, reinvesting in their mission.

Working in collaboration with partners around the world, Social Enterprise World Forum has identified five key characteristics of a social enterprise. These characteristics are used by People and Planet First for verification purposes.

- **Purpose:** Exists to solve a social and/or environmental problem.
- **Operations**: Prioritises purpose, people and planet over profit in operational and strategic decisions.
- **Revenue**: Has a self-sustaining revenue model.
- **Use of Surplus**: Reinvests the majority of any surplus towards its purpose.
- **Structure:** Chooses legal structures and financing that protect and lock in purpose long term.

Rural social enterprise spotlight:
<u>SAS Brazil</u>

SAS Brazil, co-founded in 2013 by Dr. Adriana Mallet, is a social enterprise dedicated to delivering specialised healthcare to underserved regions across Brazil. Initially providing in-person services through mobile units, SAS Brazil rapidly adapted to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 by expanding into telemedicine, reaching over 350 municipalities, including some of the most remote areas in the Amazon and Sertão regions.

Operating across all 26 states, the organisation focuses on critical areas such as maternal and child care, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and women's health. SAS Brazil has impacted over 1 million people nationwide and conducted 400,000 consultations, both in-person and remotely. Their work has significantly improved health outcomes for vulnerable populations, addressing critical healthcare gaps across Brazil.

Rural social enterprise spotlight:
<u>Javara Indigenous Indonesia</u>

Javara Indigenous Indonesia, founded by Helianti Hilman in 2008, is a social enterprise dedicated to preserving Indonesia's rich food heritage by partnering with over 52,000 smallholder farmers across the archipelago. Producing and marketing more than 700 organic and artisanal food products, Javara blends traditional farming practices with modern market access, exporting 85% of its products to over 25 countries. Through initiatives like the Javara Academy, which has trained over 1,000 young food entrepreneurs, Javara also preserves more than 50 endangered indigenous crops. Javara Indonesia has improved livelihoods and earned international acclaim, including recognition from the World Economic Forum, showcasing the power of tradition and innovation to drive social and economic change.

Rural social enterprise spotlight:
<u>Beyond the Gorillas Experience- Rwanda</u>

Beyond the Gorillas Experience (BGE), founded by Nzabonimpa Theodore in 2010, is a social enterprise near Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda, with a mission that extends far beyond just gorilla trekking. BGE aims to use tourism as a tool for social transformation, creating sustainable economic opportunities for rural communities who are often left out of mainstream consideration. By offering experiences like village tours, bird watching and agri-tourism, BGE reinvests 30% of its profits into local development. It employs 30 young people full-time, supports 250 beneficiaries and has provided scholarships for 50 students, mattresses to 92 families and livestock to 72 families. BGE's goal is to create 500 permanent jobs, driving economic empowerment and social change in the region through community-driven tourism.

| 1 NO POVERTY | 4 QUALITY EDUCATION | 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES | 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION | 15 LIFE ON LAND |

The signatories

This Manifesto was developed with the support and guidance of experienced practitioners and policymakers based in 35 countries across the globe. More than 100 organisations who work with and represent rural social enterprise contributed to development of "Unlocking the power of rural social enterprise". The development and consultation process was stewarded by Social Enterprise World Forum and the Australian Centre for Rural Entrepreneurship (ACRE).

March 2022

Inception of Rural Social Enterprise Manifesto in regional Victoria, Australia.

October 2022

Rural social enterprise knowledge sharing at the Rural Gathering in association with SEWF 2022 in collaboration with ACRE in regional Victoria, Australia.

October 2023

Launch of Manifesto "Unlocking the Power of Rural" at SEWF23.

April - September 2024

Adaptation of Manifesto to include contributions from 35 countries.

23 October 2024

Launch of the revised Manifesto "Unlocking the Power of Rural Social Enterprise" at SEWF Policy Forum.

11 ways in which policymakers can accelerate enterprising and sustainable rural communities

This Manifesto outlines three key principles for working alongside rural populations to identify and build out new opportunities to accelerate enterprising and sustainable rural communities. It subsequently presents eight actionable policy recommendations to advance social enterprise in rural areas to deliver economic, cultural, environmental and social value.
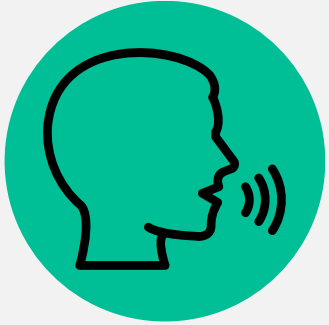
Principle 1

Build trust first

In rural areas, change happens at the speed of trust. Building trust is foundational in working with and in rural communities, where relationships and local networks play a significant role in the success of any initiative. When trust is established, community members are more likely to engage, collaborate and support new policies or programmes. Trust can be built through regular engagement and consultations. Respecting the pace of rural communities and investing in authentic relationships demonstrates commitment and respect, which in turn fosters a positive environment for cooperation. Taking time to build trust first leads to more effective implementation and helps to create long-term, sustainable partnerships. By prioritising trust, policymakers lay a strong foundation for more inclusive, effective and enduring solutions that genuinely meet the needs of rural populations.

"First empower local governments to be able to connect at a particular level with rural communities, policy making is dependent on ideas from the grassroots and not from top to bottom".
Fouad Bajwa, Digital Dera Climate Resilient Smart Villages Network Pakistan by Agriculture Republic Pakistan (Pakistan)

Principle 2

Let those nearest the issue have the say

Decisions are best made by those affected. When working with a rural community, policymakers should take time to identify and recognise existing skills and knowledge within the community and find ways to enable these. By doing so, policymakers can move forth with support from a motivated community, build a deep and genuine understanding of the complex challenges faced by rural communities and gain support for co-creation of solutions that reflect local needs and aspirations. This way of working is inclusive and strengthens the legitimacy of policies.
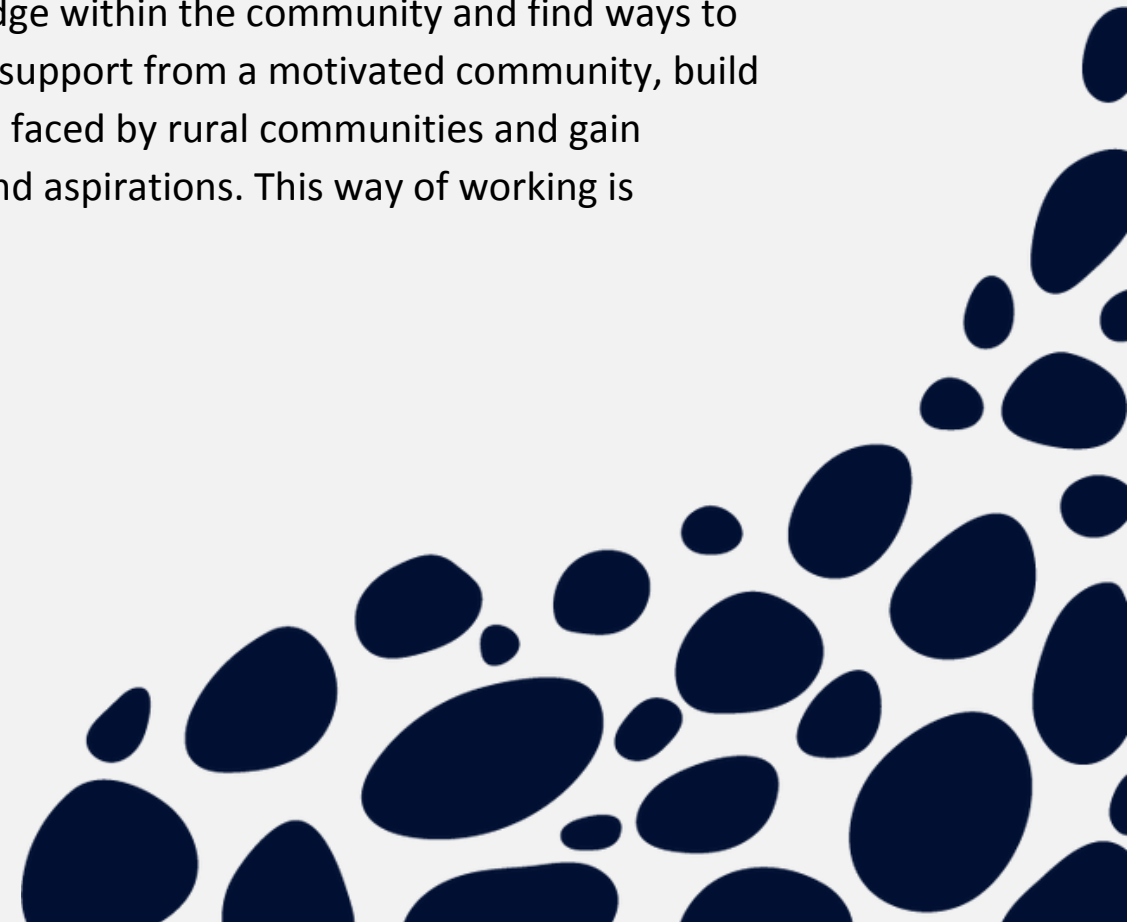
Principle 3

Co-develop metrics of success

Rural people often know a great deal about issues affecting their communities. When working in a rural community, engage people in the development of success metrics for policy. This approach will help to build understanding about the intended outcomes of government policy intervention in a rural context and ensure fair and equitable policy outcomes for rural areas. In rural communities, depth is more important than breadth. They thrive when cultural and creative capital is woven into the fabric of everyday life, serving as a thread that connects past, present and future. Recognise that scale is not always possible in rural communities due to limited resources and capacity. A greater focus should be placed on determining the impact of initiatives, measured through social inclusion, environmental protection and economic value. This will assist in achieving a framework of success that is achievable and helpful in the context of a rural community.
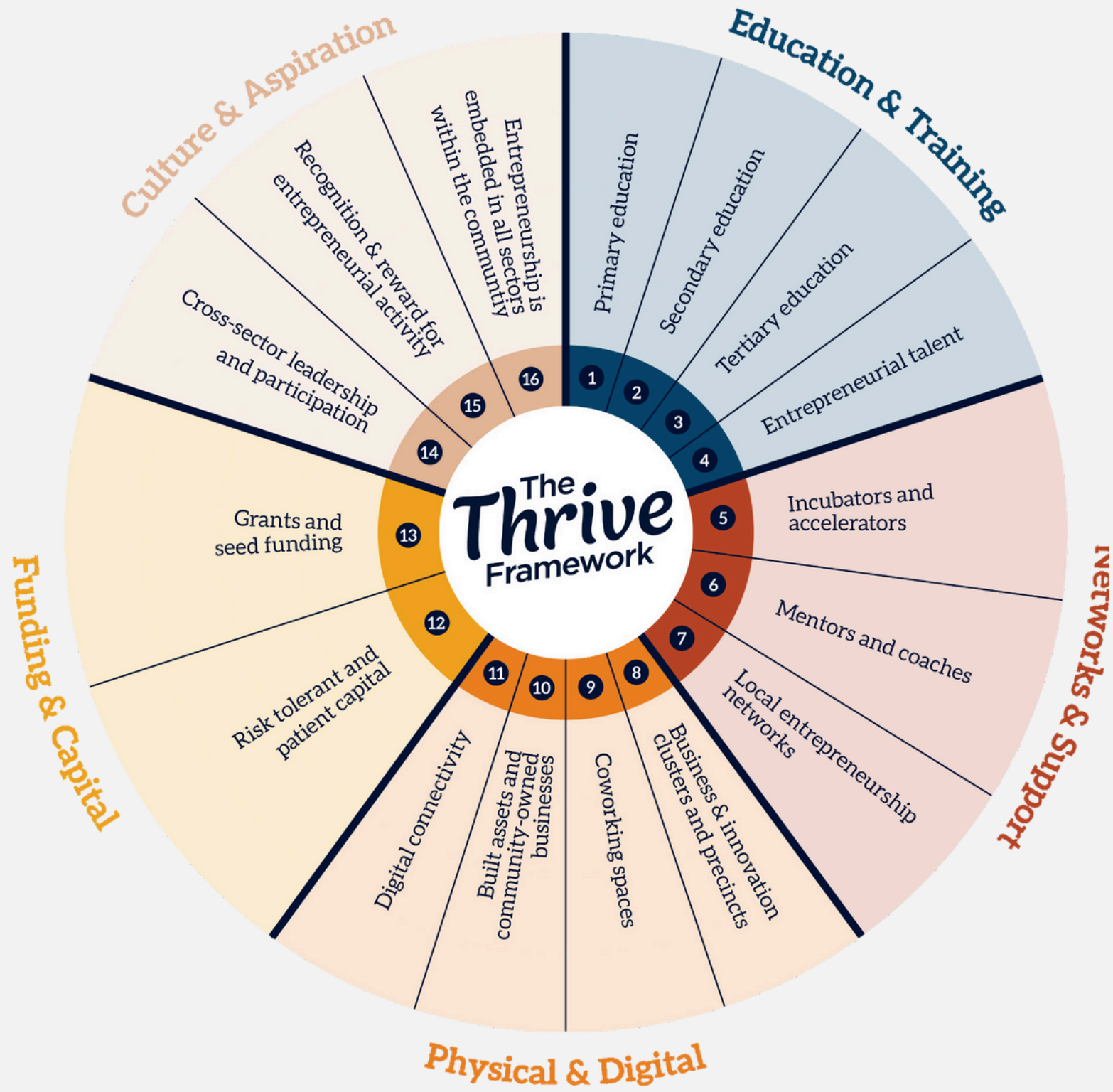
Social Enterprise Tool:
The Thrive Framework

The Thrive Framework is a measurement tool and methodology for understanding the potential of a community's entrepreneurial ecosystem and tracking progress over time. Developed by the Australian Centre for Rural Entrepreneurship (ACRE), the Thrive Framework utilises a systems and place-based approach to harness the power of social enterprise and entrepreneurship to create opportunities and solve local issues.

Using a maturity assessment, Thrive empowers communities to unlock insights, identify entrepreneurial capability and leverage their strengths to drive action across five key domains: education and training, networks and support, infrastructure, funding and capital, and culture and aspiration.

In 2020, ACRE partnered with local leaders from the bushfire-affected community of Mallacoota to baseline the entrepreneurial ecosystem and identify opportunities to build an agile, inclusive and enterprising local economy. This led to the creation of the Wilderness Collective, an anchor organisation working across sectors and generations to realise their vision for "a life fully lived" in Mallacoota.

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The Thrive Framework

Education & Training
1. Primary education
2. Secondary education
3. Tertiary education
4. Entrepreneurial talent

Networks & Support
5. Incubators and accelerators
6. Mentors and coaches
7. Local entrepreneurship networks
8. Business & innovation clusters and precincts

Physical & Digital
9. Coworking spaces
10. Built assets and community-owned businesses
11. Digital connectivity

Funding & Capital
12. Risk tolerant and patient capital
13. Grants and seed funding

Culture & Aspiration
14. Cross-sector leadership and participation
15. Recognition & reward for entrepreneurial activity
16. Entrepreneurship is embedded in all sectors within the community

Policy Recommendations

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Provide rural social enterprise with a seat at the table.

Adopt models of social financing and investment that are appropriate for rural communities.

Engage the next generation as agents of positive change.

Foster networks and create business support structures in rural communities.

Democratise access to technology in rural areas.

Integrate social inclusion and environmental protection criteria in procurement processes.

Create incentives for local community asset ownership in rural policy.

Leverage the role of social enterprises to retain and attract people to rural communities.

1.

Provide rural social enterprise with a seat at the table

Rural areas have distinct needs and priorities that may not be fully understood or appreciated by policymakers operating from urban centres. Rural social enterprises, deeply rooted in local communities, play a pivotal role in addressing communities' unique challenges. Ensuring representation in decision-making processes enables rural social enterprises to share their on-the-ground insights and innovative solutions. Policymakers can establish formal mechanisms, such as advisory councils or stakeholder committees, where rural social enterprises can actively participate and influence policy outcomes.

Photo: Impact Hub Syunik

"Unfortunately, communities are often not taken into account in the creation of policies, laws or agreements, they are usually created by people who are unaware of the different needs and demands of the communities and therefore universal policies are created that do not fit the different contexts of the communities. It is essential to understand the context and know that it is important to implement dialogue between the government and the population in order to define the strategic lines to promote community social development".

Everilda Pérez, Poder y Luz Maya (Guatemala)

Policy case study:

Micro and Small Enterprises Policy in Kenya

The Kenyan Government through the Ministry of Industrialisation, Trade and Enterprise Development integrated rural social enterprises into the advisory groups and stakeholder committees during the development of their MSE policy. These enterprises provided crucial insights into rural challenges, such as limited market access and infrastructure. The government also adopted a Public Participation Framework, ensuring rural voices were heard and initiated capacity-building programmes to empower rural participants. This inclusive approach resulted in policies that addressed specific rural needs, such as improved access to finance and infrastructure, leading to more equitable and effective support for rural entrepreneurs.

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2.

Adopt models of social financing and investment that are appropriate for rural communities

Refocus conventional investment and timeframes when considering financing for rural development. Investment timeframes need to be appropriate to the community, which often requires patient capital. Governments can de-risk private sector investment in rural social enterprise through blended finance. Governments can also establish dedicated funds for social entrepreneurs.

Photo: The Hungry Spirit

Policy case study:

The European Regional Development Fund in Spain

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) seeks to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU by correcting imbalances between its regions. Support is predominantly provided through grants but also through financial instruments. Backed by ERDF funding, the Valencian Institute of Finance (IVF) has created a line of credit through which participative loans are offered to support the growth and development of start-ups in the Spanish autonomous community of Valencia. Priority is given to companies demonstrating a high degree of social innovation. A beneficiary of these loans is FoodRation4All. Its main project is "Nadie sin su ración diaria" (No one without their daily ration), which consists of a digital system that makes donations to food banks easier.

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3.

Engage the next generation as agents of positive change

Young people are critical to the future of the rural communities they live in. Integrating entrepreneurial skills and community development in the core curriculum equips the next generation with the tools to develop projects and businesses in response to the needs of their broader community. Also, engage people in decision-making from an early age. It fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their community, empowering them to become active participants in shaping their future.

"Working with youth and including them in the decision-making will matter the most. For this, it's first essential to educate them and inspire them to be changemakers".
Charu Gupta, EnviroVision2050 (India)

Intermediary case study:

Social Enterprise Schools in Australia, Egypt, England, Malawi, Malaysia, Scotland and South Africa

The Social Enterprise Schools programme is a hands-on, student-led initiative designed to develop citizenship and enterprise capabilities in the next generation. Created by the Social Enterprise Academy Scotland and expanded globally in partnership with the Australian Centre for Rural Entrepreneurship (ACRE), the programme has engaged over 100,000 students across Scotland, Australia, Egypt, England, Malawi, Malaysia and South Africa.

With their classmates, students cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets, skills and behaviours while engaging with their communities and addressing issues they care about. Over the course of a year, students identify a cause, develop a business and sell their product or service through marketplaces.

By fostering confidence, agency and critical and creative thinking, Social Enterprise Schools encourages young people to become job creators rather than job seekers, while finding solutions to the challenges facing their communities and the world.

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Photo: ACRE

4.

Foster networks and create business support structures in rural communities

In rural areas where (human) resources and market reach may be limited, social enterprise networks and business development structures provide access to valuable information, offer peer support and facilitate partnerships. These services help entrepreneurs refine their business models, provide technical assistance and access to financing opportunities. Policymakers can provide financial support to networks and business development support structures, which manifest in many forms, including co-working spaces and impact networks.

Policy case study:

Nodes for the Promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy in Mexico

In 2019, the National Institute for the Social Economy in Mexico launched Nodes for the Promotion of the Social and Solidarity Economy (NODESS). This programme supports the development of territorial alliances made up of at least three different actors: academic institutions, local governments and social economy organisations. Since its creation, more than 400 actors from all over the country have designed, implemented and promoted strategic actions ranging from the incubation of new social enterprises and providing technical assistance to existing social economy organisations.

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Intermediary case study:

The Latvian National Rural Network (NRN)

The Latvian National Rural Network (NRN), managed by the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre, is a vital government-supported initiative aimed at empowering rural communities across Latvia. Since its inception in 2008, the NRN has played a crucial role in bridging the gap between rural entrepreneurs and the resources they need to thrive. Operating through 26 regional offices, the NRN offers comprehensive support, including access to information, peer networks and financing opportunities. By fostering collaboration among farmers, local action groups and rural communities, the NRN addresses the unique challenges of rural Latvia, promoting sustainable development and social entrepreneurship. Their efforts have significantly strengthened local communities and enhanced cooperation, contributing to the growth and resilience of rural enterprises across the country.

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5.

Democratise access to technology in rural areas

With digitalisation driving the economy, access to technology is a prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable development in rural communities. To ensure rural social enterprises can participate and thrive in the digital economy, it is essential to invest in robust infrastructure, such as broadband networks and mobile connectivity. Besides access to basic digital infrastructure, education and training on the responsible adoption of new technology solutions can streamline operations and accelerate market reach.

Policy case study:

Sabah Creative Economy and Innovation Centre (SCENIC) in Malaysia

Sabah Creative Economy and Innovation Centre (SCENIC), established in August 2019 in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation functions as a rural social enterprise hub. SCENIC was created to accelerate industries in Sabah through technology, innovation and creativity. Their state-of-the-art facility, launched in 2022, is a hub for innovation, equipped with modern technology and co-working spaces. Since its inception, SCENIC has supported around 80 social enterprises in Sabah, driving local innovation and earning recognition for its impact on digital adoption in the public sector.

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Social enterprise case study:
Digital Dera

Digital Dera, launched in 2020 by the Internet Society and Agriculture Republic, is an initiative focused on empowering farmers in Chak 26 S/P, a rural village in South Punjab, Pakistan. By providing crucial internet access and digital tools, it enables farmers to make informed decisions on weather, pest control and market prices — directly enhancing productivity and reducing financial losses. Beyond agriculture, Digital Dera offers educational opportunities and access to essential government services, fostering broader community empowerment. Its success has garnered attention from the Asian Development Bank, which recommends its adoption in other regions, highlighting its significant impact on improving rural livelihoods.

Watch now

6.

Integrate social inclusion and environmental protection criteria in procurement processes

Procurement processes focused on "value for money" are often inaccessible to rural social enterprises. Integrating social inclusion and environmental protection criteria as appropriately scored elements in public procurement makes it possible for social enterprises to compete effectively. It also creates incentives for non-social enterprises to commit to a more responsible and sustainable management of the production process and the employment of workers.

Photo: Impact Hub Syunik

Policy case study:

Social procurement at the Paris Olympics in France

The Paris Olympics aimed to be the most sustainable and progressive Games ever held, from lowering carbon emissions to ensuring gender parity across sports. Among those aims was to be more sustainable and inclusive economically, in particular through its procurement strategy, by making sure that SMEs and social economy organisations had access to the Games' procurement contracts. Paris 2024 put in place a dedicated procurement platform enabling smaller businesses to easily bid for contracts, Entreprises 2024, and the ESS 2024 programme, run by charity Les Canaux and the Yunus Centre, with support from Paris 2024 and SOLIDEO (La Société de livraison des ouvrages olympiques, a public body in charge of coordinating part of the Games' procurement contracts). According to Paris 2024's sustainability report, 75% of contracts have been delivered by SMEs, including 500 social enterprises.

Source: Pioneers Post - Paris 2024: How the Olympics welcomed social enterprises into its supply chain

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7.

Create incentives for local community asset ownership in rural policy

Local community asset ownership can empower rural communities. When communities have a stake in the ownership and management of local assets, they are better positioned to leverage these resources for their collective benefit. Strategies to promote local community asset ownership may include legal frameworks that facilitate community land trusts or cooperative ownership models, capacity-building initiatives to strengthen community governance and management skills and policies that prioritise community participation in planning and development processes.

Policy case study:

The Community Ownership Fund in the UK

The Community Ownership Fund is a £150 million fund over four years (2021-2025) to support community groups across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to take ownership of assets that are at risk of being lost to the community. It forms part of a substantial package of UK-wide levelling-up interventions building opportunity and empowering communities to improve their local places. The Fund supports projects that fulfil one or a combination of the aims below. All of these are taken in the context of saving an asset with the goal of community use:

- take ownership of a physical community asset at risk, such as land and buildings, which benefit local people
- renovate, repair, or refurbish an asset to make it sustainable for the long term
- set up or buy a community business
- buy associated stock, collections or intellectual property
- move a community asset to a new, more appropriate location within the same community. This might be because a different location offers better value to continue the asset, or because the venue is in itself an asset of community value
- develop new assets where these relate to saving, preserving or relocating a past or existing asset.

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Social enterprise case study:

Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn (UOG)

Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn (UOG) is a community trust that manages the 56,000-acre Galson Estate in northwest Lewis, Scotland. The property was purchased in 2007 with financial support from Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and the Scottish Land Fund. Home to around 1,800 residents, 860 homes, 400 businesses and 22 crofting townships with over 600 crofts, UOG drives community-led economic and social regeneration. Since acquiring the estate, UOG has expanded from three to sixteen staff members, primarily through the income generated by three wind turbines. The Trust operates through a volunteer board and oversees trading activities via Galson Estate Trading Ltd and renewable energy initiatives through Urras Energy Society and Galson Energy Ltd. As a result of these efforts, UOG has generated millions of pounds in revenue from renewable energy, which they have invested in over 50 community projects while providing grants and support to local businesses, leading to the creation of additional jobs and enhancing local infrastructure. This strategic approach has transformed Galson Estate into a model of sustainable, community-driven rural development.

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8.

Leverage the role of social enterprises to retain and attract people to rural communities

Creating jobs through social enterprises is a powerful way to retain people in rural communities. Many young people leave for education and do not return, which leads to ageing populations. Social enterprises offer meaningful careers and skills development locally. They are committed to promoting human and labour rights by supporting fair wages, social protection, safe working conditions and respect for fundamental rights at work. This strengthens social cohesion and enhances overall wellbeing. Coupled with the benefits of a closer connection to nature, supporting social enterprises can significantly boost both worker retention and attraction in these communities.

Photo: Impact Hub Syunik

Tax exemptions for work integration social enterprises in Italy

In Italy, social cooperatives enjoy a more favourable fiscal treatment. They are exempted from payment of corporate taxes on retained profits. When compared with the standard VAT rate charged to conventional enterprises (22%), social cooperatives with an activity of general interest are charged a 0% or 5% VAT rate. Furthermore, social cooperatives which employ disadvantaged persons are exempted from the payment of national insurance contributions for the disadvantaged workers they have integrated and donations made to them are tax-deductible.

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