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Community Cohesion in Rural UK: The Case of Rural Co-operatives and their Potential for Local Communities

ABSTRACT

The debate concerning sustainability and growth in rural areas of the UK is attracting the attention of policymakers at both national and local levels. Little surprise, as the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) indicates that the net migration from urban to rural areas in England in 2009 was 92,000 people (CRC, 2010). This figure reveals a renewed interest shown by people to move to the countryside. However, the CRC states that 'only if people in rural communities have ready access to local schools, local jobs, local shops and pubs and homes which are affordable will they and their children thrive, and will the nation meet its environmental and economic needs' (2010, p 28).

The situation of many rural communities in the UK is not idyllic. The current economic downturn and the financial strategy based on spending cuts adopted by the government are depriving many rural areas of a number of essential services, such as post offices and libraries. The disappearance of these services has an impact on the private sector too, because it reduces the offer of services at a local level, exposing small and medium businesses operating in these areas to closure. In the light of this, small villages and rural parishes become less attractive than other places located within spatial proximity to towns and cities. A clear example of this situation is provided by the pubs operating in village and rural areas. Their number is constantly decreasing, leaving 'blackholes' in rural communities.

The loss of services in rural communities put a threat in relation to the creation of social capital, social networking and economic well-being. In particular, it could have an impact on the level of community cohesion in the area, which is 'what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together (...). People all want to fulfil their potential and feel that they belong and contribute to their local area' (CLG, 2008 p.10). Higher level of community cohesion and social engagement within rural communities are often at the basis of communal initiatives undertaken by group of individuals at a local level. This is the case of rural co-operatives, which may be oriented to pursue economic profits for their shareholders as well as social objectives for their communities, like social enterprises and Industrial Provident Societies (IPSS).

The aim of this paper is to explore and discuss the potential of co-operatives and similar forms of businesses within rural areas of the UK. By presenting original data obtained from primary research, the author examines a number of communal initiatives undertaken by rural communities for preserving their local assets, such as village pubs. In particular, the author investigates several aspects (e.g. different legal forms, the amount of investment required and the availability of financial grants and public sector support) associated with the development of such initiatives. Finally, the paper analyses how cooperatives and IPSSs could foster community cohesion and social engagement in rural areas, and indicates possible public sector policies and solutions in support of these activities.

[PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT AUTHOR'S PERMISSION]

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to expose and discuss communal ownership and community cohesion in rural areas in the UK. In particular, the author discusses the potential offered by forms of cooperative businesses, such as Industrial and Provident Societies (I&PS), in enhancing cohesion among individuals living in rural communities and villages. The author presents two case studies related to village pubs, which represent very important local assets for villages. Their disappearance deprives many rural communities of important services which work as social network hubs for the entire area. The author believes that community ownership in the form of I&PS could help to keep these and other businesses open, and could help the government in achieving the goals announced in their political manifesto in peripheral and remote areas.

The structure of the paper is comprised of five sections, including the introduction. Section two discusses community cohesion in rural areas. Section three focuses on cooperatives and I&PSs. Section four illustrates two initiatives which contemplate community ownership put in place by local communities and examines outcomes in details. Section six concludes.

2. Community cohesion in rural areas of the UK

The debate concerning sustainability and growth in rural areas of the UK is attracting the attention of policymakers at both national and local levels. Little surprise, as the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) indicates that the net migration from urban to rural areas in England in 2009 was 92,000 people (CRC, 2010). This figure reveals a renewed interest shown by people to move to the countryside. However, the CRC states that 'only if people in rural communities have ready access to local schools, local jobs, local shops and pubs and homes which are affordable will they and their children thrive, and will the nation meet its environmental and economic needs' (2010, p 28).

In recent years, the number of services available to individuals living in rural and peripheral areas has experienced a constant decline (DCLG 2007, CRC 2010). The factors of this decline are many and diverse. Firstly, rurality in the UK has not changed its vocation to agriculture. Although many rural areas in the country experience significant volumes of tourism (e.g. Cornwall, Cumbria, Northumberland), the countryside is still interpreted by many as a place for retirement, where the principal activities are basically devoted to crops and cattle. Secondly, rural areas usually show a reduced amount of road-rail networks and infrastructure. This situation represents sometimes a barrier for business opportunities and expansion with regard to a number of aspects, such as customer services and shortage of skilled workforce. As a result, many businesses have to relocate in other areas, usually in proximity of larger towns and centres in order to progress and, in worse cases, survive. Thirdly, while the advancement of new communication means has changed the way of communicating and doing business, still many rural areas cannot profit of new opportunities due to a lack of broadband connectivity. Fourthly, and probably the most important of the factors, is the financial strategy adopted by governments in terms of public sector spending: when the budget has to be reviewed, the initial spending cuts often target services which operate in rural and remote areas. For instance, the tendency to diminish the number of schools by closing those showing low figures of attendees produce the enlargement of those located in more urbanised areas. While this choice appears stark, it often results in disservices for families and households who lose an important local asset. A similar analysis can be done with regards to the closure of village post offices. Public sector spending cuts produce a domino effect on local businesses too, resulting in a reduction of financial streams at a local level (where local authorities and other public sector bodies are significant purchasers, Cabras 2010b), with a consequent impact on local businesses and economy.

In this context, a sustainable growth for rural areas appears difficult to achieve. However, individuals belonging to many local communities in the UK try to overcome the

difficulties associated with remoteness by joining their forces in communal initiatives. These initiatives often aim to rescue a local asset, e.g. a village shop or a pub, from closure. With particular reference to village and rural pubs, many sources indicate that their number is declining at an impressive rate (APPBG 2008, Leach 2009, BBPA 2010). This situation affects rural communities significantly. Recent studies (Muir 2009, Cabras and Reggiani 2010, Cabras 2010a) have described the importance of these places in relation to their capacity of creating social capital, social and cultural engagement, and economic opportunities at a local level. However, in a number of cases communities have managed to save their businesses by forming co-operatives or social enterprise (Cabras 2010a).

3. Community ownership in rural areas

Co-operatives and social enterprises in rural areas

Community ownership, in the form of co-operatives and I&PSs, is present and actively promoted in many countries (Spear, 2005; Aiken et al, 2008). Figures from the European Commission indicate about 300,000 cooperatives operating in the EU, with more than 140 million citizens who are members. It is estimated that co-operatives provide 4.8 million jobs, registering fast growth in the sectors of health care, services to business, education and housing (EC, 2004 p.3).

Co-operatives are run for the mutual benefit of members who use the services provided by their society. Cooperatives are open to anyone who meets the criteria for membership, with no artificial limitation. They can pay interest on members' share capital, and use their surplus to pay dividends to their members, based on the level of transaction with the society. On the other hand, a community benefit society is run primarily for the benefit of the community. The interests of members and shareholders are second to the interest of the community. Community benefit societies have the power to pay interest on members' share capital, but they cannot distribute surpluses to members in the form of a dividend. Cabras (2010a) sustains that co-operatives can boost community cohesion in rural areas, by intending for community cohesion 'what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together (...). People all want to fulfil their potential and feel that they belong and contribute to their local area' (CLG, 2008 p.10).

Community cohesion is a central concept within the 'Big Society' project, which represents the core of the political manifesto announced by the current government in 2010. Higher level of community cohesion and social engagement within rural communities are often at the basis of communal initiatives undertaken by group of individuals at a local level. This is a significant factor in the functioning of co-operatives located in rural areas. A number of studies (Bhunyan 2007, Zeuli et al. 2004, Cabras 2010a) indicate that rural co-operatives may be oriented to pursue economic profits for their shareholders as well as social objectives for their communities. This particular aspect would differentiate rural co-operative from larger regional and national cooperatives, mainly devoted to achieve profits and produce revenues for their shareholders. In this context, a particular form of cooperative, namely the Industrial and Provident Society (I&PS), could be extremely useful in the creation of social enterprises characterised by communal ownership and involvement.

Industrial and Provident Societies

Among the different types of co-operatives, the Industrial and Provident Societies (I&PS hereafter) represent an interesting form of business and possess a number of attributes and peculiarities that differentiate them from other companies registered under the Companies Act (2004), the act that regulates British companies and business societies. First, members of an I&PS must possess at least one share of society in order to be part of it. However, each shareholder has the same weight inside the I&PS, independently from amount of shares s/he possesses. Secondly, shareholders can 'step back' from the I&PS without particular restrictions. Thirdly, the maximum amount an individual shareholder can

hold is £20,000 in share value, although there is no limitation with regard to the number of shares a society decides to issue. The interest paid to shareholders is limited to 'what is necessary to obtain and retain enough capital to run the business' (Brown 2008). Fourthly, I&PSs registered as community benefit societies can install an asset lock, which prevents the society being sold and the proceeds distributed among shareholders. According to Cabras (2010a) 'These characteristics make this type of society extremely valuable particularly when it comes to raising investment capital, a vital aspect for any enterprise'.

In the UK, the number of I&PSs made with community investment has increased significantly in the past fifteen years. As reported by Brown (2008, p.7), there are approximately 8,200 I&Ps operating in the UK, with over 10 million members. I&PSs operate in a wide range of sectors such as community finance (e.g. credit unions), renewable energy, telecommunications and football (e.g. the community buy-out of Stirling Albion football club). Interestingly, the size of I&PSs reported in Brown's study varies considerably, from about 28,300 shareholders of 'Myfootballclub' to just two members of 'Fair Finance'. This confirms the high level of flexibility of I&PSs in terms of shareholders' participation and number of members, which can be modelled in accordance to the specific financial needs required by different types of businesses.

4. I&PS and village pubs: two cases studies

According to CAMRA (2010), there is a list of over 30 community-owned pubs, mainly located in rural areas in the UK. However, many of these pubs are privately owned by groups of five to ten villagers, and only a few of them are run by I&PSs cooperatives. In this section, the author presents two case studies in which local communities managed to save their village pubs from closure by creating an I&PS. The pubs of Hesketh New Market and Hudswell, two small villages located in Northern England, and the I&PSs which managed the pubs will be described and examined.

The Old Crown, Hesketh Newmarket

The first British pub saved by an I&PS is the Old Crown in Hesketh Newmarket. The village is located in Cumbria, North West England, on the border of the Lake District National Park. The case of Hesketh Newmarket is quite unique, as the village has two I&PS co-operatives which hold two separate businesses: one co-operative owns the Hesketh Newmarket Brewery, and the other co-operative owns the pub.

In 1987, Jim and Liz Fernie were looking for a new business to run, when they came across the village of Hesketh Newmarket. The couple noticed the Old Crown and its 300 year old building, and decided to buy it. The following year, the couple started a new business activity, by converting an old barn at the rear of the pub into a brewery. This new business, named as 'The Hesketh Newmarket Brewery', runs parallel to the pub. As reported by Cabras (2010a, p.5) 'The new business proved to be successful; beers won awards at local and national beer festivals and sales experienced a steady growth in the years after opening'. In 1995, the couple sold the Old Crown, which continued its activity under a new management, to concentrate their effort on the brewery. However, in 1999, Jim and Liz chose to retire and put the brewery on the market. Villagers feared a possible closure of the brewery, or that the business could fall into the hands of some national brewing company. In December 1999, a public meeting was called on the pub premises. Participants agreed to rescue the brewery by forming a co-operative and by raising the necessary amount of money by selling shares at the price of £1,500 each. A promoting committee was formed with the aim of collecting the capital. In just few months, the co-operative was created with the support of 57 shareholders. However, the money was not sufficient to buy it. In an interview given to the author, Julian Davey, a co-operative promoter and the brewery's former chairman, says:

'The amount of money raised was not quite enough, and so Jim Fernley agreed to accept part of the payment in shares. I think he had about ten shares, which he, if you like, paid for himself, and he gave them to members of his family. There are eight or ten of Jim's relatives, and himself, who are shareholders. So he received part of the payment, in fact, in shares'.

The brewery was bought by the I&PS, which still holds the business. Shareholders receive dividends at the end of the year, and also can buy beers at a concessionary price. In November 2002, during the dramatic foot-and-mouth outbreak that hit many rural areas in England heavily, the Old Crown experienced significant difficulties due to reduced custom. In this situation, the owners decided to sell. This event created even more worries for the villagers, as the pub represented the centre of the community life. The brewery, also caught by the economic downturn created by the foot-and-mouth outbreak, could not save it. Once again, villagers called for a public meeting in the pub. The solution which emerged was the creation of another co-operative which could buy the Old Crown.

At the beginning of 2003, a promoting committee was formed. This time, 125 individuals answered the appeal and a sum of about £180,000 was raised. The co-operative also received financial support of £35,000 from funds made available from the Cumbria Rural Regeneration Unit and from the National Park Sustainable Development Fund. The new co-operative was registered as an I&PS in March 2003.

The committee opted to lease the pub to tenants. The lease obliges the tenant/s to preserve the link between the pub and the brewery by purchasing and serving Heskett Newmarket beers; to purchase the majority of goods from local suppliers; and to obtain the co-operative's approval before doing or projecting any structural change of the building. This lease model, first adopted on a three year projection, is still in use (Cabras, 2010a).

Two I&PS in a small village such as Heskett Newmarket create a situation in which decisions in both cooperatives are made mostly by the very same people. However, while the two I&PSs have many shareholders in common, they function in a different manner. Julian Ross, former chairman of the Old Crown co-operative and also a shareholder of the Heskett Newmarket Brewery, says:

'They [the two co-operatives] are totally distinct and run in different ways. The brewery is managed by a management committee, who have hands on management responsibility. They also have a manager who is not part of the cooperative, he is somebody from the licence trade from the brewery trade, and they sell their beers not only to The Old Crown but also to other outlets, mostly in Cumbria'

The two cooperatives also operate differently with regard to the distribution of dividends among the shareholders. In the past twenty years of activity, the brewery has grown quite significantly and the investment made by shareholders has regularly paid them off at the end of the year. John Parker, Heskett Newmarket's brewery-manager, states:

'The brewery has now 125 shareholders and they receive a dividend every year. In 2001, it was only 25 pounds but now we pay 100 pounds but many prefer to get their dividend in beer!'

Parker states also that the only year in which the co-operative failed to distribute dividend was in 2002, during the foot-and-mouth outbreak. The number of withdrawals has also been very low: since 2005, only six members have decided to cash their shares. Reasons for these withdrawals were associated with either shareholders' relocation or death. On the other hand, the Old Crown I&PS took four years to pay any dividend. At the beginning (2003), the plan was to pay a five percent return on shares immediately from year one, but

this showed itself to be a very ambitious goal and no dividends were paid until the end of year four (2006). However, this has never been a matter of concern to its shareholders. Ross explains:

'The dividend just comes out from the rent, from which we pay the costs related to insurance, maintenance etc. (...) For the first three years that we had the pub we did not pay any dividends whatsoever, because everything we had went straight back into the business. (...) In year four we paid ten pounds dividend, it was more a symbolic thing really, and quite a number of shareholders refused their dividend and decided they did not want to take it. The year after [2007] we doubled it to twenty pounds, and this year [2009] we doubled it again and we are now paying forty pounds. This is about three and a half percent so we're not there at five percent yet. But we're still aiming to get there in the next year or two'

The case of Heskett Newmarket was the first in the UK that saw a rural community creating an I&PS to rescue its village pub from closure. It is even more interesting to find two businesses in the same rural village run by two separate co-operatives. Also, if the village shop had not found a buyer in 2009, there would have been yet another cooperative.

The Butcher's Arms in Hudswell

The model adopted at the Old Crown proved to be successful and has also been replicated at Hudswell, in North Yorkshire. In this village (pop. 262, ONS, 2008), the Butcher's Arms closed in August 2008. After about a year, in July 2009, villagers clubbed together in order to discuss solutions which could help the pub to re-open. The final decision was to create a cooperative which could buy the pub. A promoting committee was formed and led to the realisation of the Hudswell Community Pub Initiative within the end of the summer. Negotiations started with the pub-owner, namely a bank, and an offer was made in October 2009. Martin Booth, member of the I&PS committee, says:

'Initially, the bank didn't take us seriously, but they accepted the offer in the end (...) as soon as the offer was accepted, the bank started to put on pressure to conclude the purchase within fourteen days. (...) this was ridiculous, we had to explain to them democratic community ownership doesn't work like that'

In this case, support and expertise obtained from external organisations, including the Cooperative and Mutual Solutions (CMS), helped the villagers to negotiate a fairer timescale with the bank. In January 2010, the cooperative was registered as an I&PS and launched a share prospectus in order to attract shareholders. Unlike what happened at Heskett, this time the committee opted to sell shares at £1 each. An individual shareholder was entitled to buy anything from a minimum of 500 shares up to a maximum of 7,500, with the help of the Key Fund Yorkshire which purchased a £20,000 share - the only share purchased at that price and called an 'institutional share'. Martin Booth explains:

'We thought we could achieve the target faster and with less problems by giving the opportunity to people to invest different amounts. Also, it would have enabled more people to join us, since £500 does not look like a massive price to pay (...) However, everybody has the same weight when it comes to making decisions, we are still one-man-one-vote no matter how much you invested!'

In less than a month, the number of shareholders grew to 152 and about a half of them were from Hudswell. The initiative proved to be successful and the pub was bought in

February 2010, although significant investment had to be made in order to make it useable. At the end of March 2010, the I&PS obtained a grant from the North Yorkshire County Council, which gave £50,000 through a programme aimed at supporting small business enterprises within rural communities. An additional £5,000 grant was received from Business Link, a public sector agency. The pub was finally able to open in June 2010. Tenants pay the rent to the I&PS and take the business risk, similarly to what happens at the Old Crown. On the other hand, the village has got its pub back A villager comments:

'When the pub shut we started to use the village hall more, but of course it wasn't the same as our pub...the atmosphere was different, everything was different. (...) the pub was bringing the neighbourhood together, if you worked outside Hudswell, you really wanted to come back and meet at the pub. Now [with the pub reopened] people are starting to go meet up again!

The number of shareholders continued to increase, reaching 170 in July 2010. Now the majority of them are not from Hudswell, and some are even from overseas. The I&PS is confident of paying a dividend (they projected about 3.5% per annum) calculated on each share price starting from the end of year one. Moreover, the I&PS plans to expand its business by acquiring the village shop, which closed years ago and left the community without any retailer.

5. Community ownership and community cohesion could be two pillars of the (rural) Big Society?

The two case studies presented in the previous section show the potential of co-operative businesses in relation to local assets and the importance of community cohesion for the success of co-operative and social enterprises in rural areas. People living in the two small villages of Heskett Newmarket Market and Hudswell managed to rescue their respective pubs from closure. By doing this, they succeed to preserve their main places of social aggregation, keeping vital local assets for their respective areas. In addition, the two I&PSs prove to be successful businesses which bring benefits to the villages and the areas in their proximity. These initiatives represent a significant achievement for local communities, which risk losing these and other services day by day.

The successful I&PSs of Heskett Newmarket and Hudswell demonstrate the importance of community cohesion with regard to achieving sustainable growth and maintaining high standard of life in rural and remote areas. Furthermore, these considerations appear to be parallel with the targets proposed by the Big Society, the political manifesto launched by the coalition government in 2010. The manifesto states:

'We want to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want. We want society – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before. Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all (Cabinet Office, 2010 p.1).

And again:

'Building this Big Society isn't just the responsibility of just one or two departments. It is the responsibility of every department of Government, and the

responsibility of every citizen too. Government on its own cannot fix every problem. We are all in this together' (ibid.)

The objectives expressed above seem noble and appealing. Nevertheless, they represent a challenging task to achieve for both public sector bodies and local communities. In particular, the current economic climate may not favoured strategies in support of peripheral and rural areas. As a result, many rural areas risk losing important local services; this situation may produce inconveniences for small local communities and diminish their sense of belonging to the place. In the light of this, the author believes that policies and incentives in support of rural co-operative businesses may bring multiple benefits to rural communities for a number of reasons. Firstly, shareholders in rural cooperatives are usually local residents: this mean that locals tend to be promoters and buyers of their co-operatives' products, with a higher retention of resources at a local level (Cabras 2010a). Secondly, cooperatives can be a significant source of employment in these areas. Their presence may enhance the quality of the workforce through the provision of trainings and skill transfer schemes (Zeuli et al 2004). This would improve the economic situation within the area and influence local supply chains in a positive manner. Thirdly, rural cooperatives bring people together: this may increase the level of community cohesion significantly, improving relationship and social networking among individuals and reinforcing their sense of belonging to the community (Zeuli and Radel 2005). Fourthly, cooperatives may be able to provide a range of services in those areas 'abandoned' by the public sector for budget reasons and it would help the government in re-allocating resources more efficiently.

For these reasons, social and business enterprises in the form for cooperatives - and I&PSs in particular - may represent an attractive and useful instrument to be used for achieving the aims prospected in the Big Society. The government may consider a number of strategies targeting rural cooperatives by including different types of support and incentives, such as rate relief schemes or the provision of financial aid focused on initial phases of their realisation. Campaigns of information may also be useful for introducing community ownership to people and to illustrate benefits and advantages for local communities. By doing so, the government could get a real chance to pursue government political manifesto in rural areas in a pro-active manner by increasing the level of cooperative businesses and by strengthening the level of community cohesion. In the light of these considerations, community ownership and community cohesion are important aspects for local communities to explore, value and incentive, and may represent the pillars of the Big Society in rural areas.

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