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Socially Innovative Initiatives in Deprived Rural Areas of Germany, Ireland and Portugal: Exploring Empowerment and Impact on Community Development

Gabriela Christmann [1,2,*], Ariane Sept [3] and Ralph Richter [1]

[1] Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space, 15537 Erkner, Germany
[2] Department of Sociology, Technische Universität Berlin, 10623 Berlin, Germany
[3] Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hochschule München University of Applied Sciences, 81243 Munich, Germany
* Correspondence: gabriela.christmann@leibniz-irs.de; Tel.: +49-3362-793-299

Abstract: In many (remote) rural areas of Europe and the world, rural communities are facing various challenges. One response is residents leaving their communities. However, there are also many empirical examples of residents staying, launching project initiatives, developing new solutions and experimenting with new practices. This is what we call social innovation. What experiences do actors have in these processes? Can we speak of empowerment? To what extent can such initiatives have an impact on community development? In this article, we explore these questions, for which there is little related empirical research. By applying a multi-sited individualising comparison to case studies in three European countries (Germany, Ireland and Portugal), we obtain empirical evidence of the following dimensions of empowerment that Avelino et al. outline conceptually: the achievement of autonomy, competence and relatedness and also impact, meaning and resilience. Often, however, it is not the individual actors for whom such effects can be reported. Rather, the social initiative as such or the local administration has acquired new skills and autonomy. Regarding community development, 'pathways to impact', such as infrastructure improvements and/or the creation of new employment opportunities and/or the influx of new residents, could be identified. However, this development often depended on both opportunity and the cooperation and goodwill of many stakeholders.

Keywords: social innovation; social enterprise; empowerment; impact on community development; rural areas; Germany; Ireland; Portugal

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1. Introduction

Social actors in remote and deprived rural areas face various challenges in many countries around the world [1–8]. While the specific conditions and scale of the challenges vary from country to country, there are often commonalities. Typically, rural actors are confronted with inadequate local services, including a lack of shops from which to procure local supplies and also village pubs or doctors to perform surgeries. Public transport is also very limited [1]. A lack of communication within these communities is another common complaint owing to the disappearance of places for communication (e.g., the village pub, parish or school building) [2]. Although we live in an age of widespread digitalisation, the digital infrastructure in rural areas is often still poor. Job prospects are also poor, not least because of the low economic productivity of these regions [3–8]. These factors have led to rural areas being perceived as unattractive despite the recognition of their positive aspects (e.g., cheaper to live in, quieter, fresh air, large green spaces). In this context, there has been an exodus, especially of younger (well-educated) people. Older people are left behind, and the ageing of rural societies is increasing. The result is a shortage of needed (skilled) labour and also of consumers, which worsens the economic prospects. Consequently, in many

structurally weak rural areas in Europe, a downward spiral has been set in motion that is difficult to break, let alone reverse.

At the same time, however, empirical research suggests that actors in many rural areas do not just complain about these problems or run away from them but rather take action and develop novel solutions [9–15]. People come together in heterogeneous constellations of actors [16–19]. Sometimes, the actors are supported by social enterprises, which can increasingly be found in rural areas. Some social enterprises are even known for their expertise in facilitating creative and innovative solutions. They know how to avoid dead ends and stagnation in these processes [15,18,19].

Such constellations of actors often launch project initiatives to devise solutions to rural challenges. They experiment with new practices and frequently even expand their projects with thematically related initiatives [20]. For example, in several places, the establishment of multifunctional village shops, village meeting places, co-working spaces and/or novel mobility solutions can be observed. In fact, villagers even install high-speed internet themselves or commission the development of village apps to solve everyday challenges in the countryside. In some places, people work together to create a new kind of centre for older adults, while others collaborate to develop new economic bases for the region, whether through growing and marketing high-quality organic products or promoting tourism.

It is in this context that we refer in this article to social innovation or socially innovative initiatives. Specifically, we understand social innovation as social actors' collaborative and creative development of novel solutions to existing problems, where new practices break with previous routines. Yet, what are the social actors' experiences in the context of problem-solving? Can we speak of empowerment? If so, what does it mean? Further, what contribution can such initiatives make to changes in the community's (and/or possibly regional) development?

Contrary to some definitions of social innovation [21], the dimensions of social empowerment and impact are not automatically part of our definition. Rather, we see a problem in the fact that assumptions of empowerment and positive impact are often accepted without question. A research gap exists concerning the extent to which empowerment and impact are actually empirically evidenced.

We will therefore focus first on how empowerment manifests empirically in the context of socially innovative initiatives. Second, we will address how to approach research on changes in the community's (and possibly regional) development that may be associated with socially innovative activities. Standardised impact measurements are often seen as ideal for this, but they are difficult and consequently remain underdeveloped. We will therefore carefully explore what we call 'pathways to impact' to approach describing empirically how such initiatives can contribute to changes in local (and/or possibly regional) development.

This article presents and discusses research on three socially innovative initiatives in Germany, Ireland and Portugal. They were all concerned with issues related to living and working in a rural community or region, and in all cases, the initiatives were supported by actors from a social enterprise. In Section 3, we will describe the case regions and our methodological approach in more detail. Before doing so, in Section 2, we will clarify the terms and concepts of social innovation, social enterprise, empowerment and pathways to community (or regional) development impact. In Section 4, we will first present our findings for each case and then analyse them comparatively. Finally, in Section 5, we will summarise the findings, draw conclusions and critically discuss them.

2. Conceptual Approaches—Social Innovation, Social Enterprise, Empowerment and Impacts on Community Development

In the following, we will clarify the key terms and concepts in the context of our article. In particular, we will explain what we mean by social innovation, social enterprise, empowerment and impact, or rather the pathways to impact community development. The

discussion of social innovation will be more extensive than that of the other terms because it is the overarching concept.

The term *social innovation* has no clear concept and is therefore complex. There are different approaches that can be categorised into at least two different research streams. The approaches in the first stream emphasise the development of bottom-up initiatives, more collaborative, cohesive social relations between the different actors and thus the empowerment of citizens and also the creation of better solutions to existing problems that make a positive impact in improving the citizens' situation [21–23]. The approaches are characterised by the normative use of the term 'social' in that social innovations are understood as practices leading to the achievement of socially highly valued goals and developing 'the good' in a society. This stream of research dominates the international research literature and has been largely influenced by Frank Moulaert (see, e.g., [24]).

The second stream, to which our research belongs, emphasises the novelty of an innovation in the sense of a break with previous practices [25,26]. It is recognised that this is not an absolute but often a relative novelty in the sense of a new combination of already-known elements [27]. Another central criterion is that social innovations cannot remain in the realm of ideas but must be put into practice and institutionalised [28] (p. 177). This perspective is widely accepted in the literature on innovation. In contrast to the first stream, however, we prefer a concept that has no normative connotations.

Considering research on innovation processes in general, we are interested in empirically observing and understanding which social processes and under which conditions new practices do or do not prevail and what positive, and also possibly negative, consequences they have. Normative assumptions can obscure this view. Accordingly, like Zapf [28] (p. 177), we understand the *social* of social innovations in a very basic sense as "new ways of achieving goals, in particular new forms of organisation, new forms of regulation, new lifestyles". This concept focuses on social processes and how social innovations work in the social sphere [29,30]. Interestingly, Zapf [28] (p. 177) nevertheless formulates that social innovations "solve problems in a better way than previous practices". This formulation might be misleading as it suggests that the judgement of whether it is a 'better solution' is reserved for the researcher. We avoid such judgements and consider that the motive behind social actors' initiatives is to develop solutions that are, in their view, 'better' than existing ones. In other words, we do not see improvement as an objective fact to be universally accepted as such but rather as a social construction of the actors involved, which must be contextualised and interpreted in its social embeddedness. In this context, it should also be borne in mind that the development of innovation always involves a redistribution of opportunities and risks [25,27,31]. Institutional friction and resistance can be side effects of innovation processes and should always be expected [32]. Conflict is a typical feature of innovation as different rationalities and rival approaches may clash [33]. Last but not least, it should be remembered that innovative solutions are initial experiments and are far from perfect. This means that innovations not only produce new solutions but can also create new problems [26].

Until a few years ago, rural areas were rarely associated with (social) innovation. This is true of the perceptions of rural people themselves, who often find it difficult to declare the implementation of something new in the countryside as 'innovation'. Even creative rural actors do not initially characterise the novelty of their approaches as 'innovative'. They are primarily concerned with developing solutions to existing problems, not with being innovative. Until recently, third parties also perceived rural communities as rather averse to innovation [34]. However, history shows that rural areas have always been used as spaces for experimentation [35]. Moreover, empirical evidence from recent years clearly shows that rural actors develop innovative ideas in the face of multiple challenges [9–12,36,37].

Unlike ordinary local actors working in their communities, *social enterprise* actors often have the explicit aim of driving innovative solutions. Although there is no agreed definition of the term social enterprise, most of the different conceptual approaches have in common the description of social enterprises as visionary organisations that develop and

implement innovative solutions to social problems through an entrepreneurial approach and the creation of social businesses. The focus of their activities is not on profit but on producing social value for a particular society. Thus, an important part of the definition is that social enterprises generate social innovations [38–47].

However, regarding the way in which these social innovations are generated, at least two types of social enterprises can be distinguished [41,44]. On the one hand, there are social enterprises that (only) run their own social business and thereby contribute to solving specific problems or meeting needs [38,40]. These likely constitute the majority of social enterprises. On the other hand, there is a smaller proportion of social enterprises that undertake the task (sometimes alongside their own business) of helping other actors develop socially innovative initiatives [19,42,45–47]. They do the latter by applying for public funding for their activities. In this context, they typically provide or organise the following resources: (i) specialised knowledge in the form of training, advice and/or coaching; (ii) useful contacts or information on social networking techniques and/or (iii) financial resources in the form of micro-credit or advice on existing funding structures. By making know-how available to committed actors, these social enterprises help them professionalise their actions, overcome hurdles and increase their likelihood of implementing an innovative approach. These social enterprises thus help people help themselves and act as catalysts in the social innovation processes of rural communities. Even if they rarely seek analytical knowledge of innovation processes, they apply a range of tried and tested practical knowledge that they have gained in their creative and experimental projects [44–46].

In addition, they draw on the diverse experience available to them from their networks [47]. As they are strongly networked and are intermediary actors, they not only have strong local anchorage but also important contacts at other spatial levels (including internationally). Consequently, they quickly learn about new developments, experiences, ideas and approaches that they can use in their work in rural regions [19,47]. Last but not least, they often have access to (political) decision-makers with whom they are in dialogue about rural development opportunities. In the three cases we analysed, we were able to observe both types of social enterprises.

As indicated above, our understanding of social innovation does not include empowerment and positive impact by definition; rather, these are open empirical questions that need to be answered based on existing initiatives. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify what has been discussed conceptually in these terms.

Empowerment is increasingly being discussed in the research literature as an important aspect of social innovation as a kind of additional side effect that arises when new solutions are developed together. However, the term can mean different things. There is no generally accepted definition. Empowerment can be understood in generic or very specific terms.

An example of a more generic concept is that of Howaldt and Schwarz [48] (p. 39), which refers primarily to "the satisfaction of needs in terms of human development" and a "reconfiguration of social relations". It is about achieving participation, cooperation, bottom-up activities and gaining importance and also about learning and the experience of being able to mobilise material and symbolic resources [48] (p. 39). Empowerment thus also includes the acquisition and dissemination of new forms of knowledge and practices that change or replace established ones ([49] (p. 61) and [50] (p. 24)). Some authors attribute to social enterprises the ability to support actors in their empowerment in this sense [51].

Others take a much narrower view of the term, focusing very explicitly on overcoming oppression, exploitation, social exclusion and poverty in both the Global South and Global North. They think about the empowerment of disadvantaged groups in society by promoting their education, confidence and skills at the intersection of people living in poverty, indigenous people, women, people of colour, people with disabilities and so on [52–56]. These approaches are about more than just changing social relations into more collaborative and participatory forms. They consider the creation of non-hierarchical relationships [50,57]—above all, the change in power relations, participation in political negotiation processes and, even more, decision-making—with transformative power at the

local and/or regional levels [58–60]. Some go a step further and expect empowerment to include "participatory budgeting"—that is, empowering citizens to allocate public funds on an annual basis [61] (p. 202).

This has strong parallels with the normative goals of social innovation, as Andion and Alperstedt [62] (p. 117) note. There is also little discussion of the fact that social innovation in general, and attempts to change power relations in particular, can be fraught with conflict and resistance, making empowerment in this sense difficult [63] (p. 18).

The approach of Avelino et al. [64] is interesting to us because they combine more generic forms of empowerment, which are more psychological in nature, with socio-political aspects of empowerment (see Table 1). On this basis, they identify six dimensions by which they argue empowerment can be characterised (and empirically studied). First, they define empowerment as "the process through which actors gain the capacity to mobilise resources to achieve a goal" [64] (p. 143). The authors thus adopt a dynamic or process-oriented and heuristic approach. Furthermore, the three dimensions of autonomy, relatedness and competence are attributed to the psychological side of empowerment as follows:

Table 1. Empowerment—categories, dimensions and conceptualisations by Avelino et al. [64]. (Own representation.)

Empowerment		
Categories	**Dimensions**	**Conceptualisations**
Psychological aspects of empowerment	Autonomy	Ability to choose one's own actions in accordance with one's personal values
	Relatedness	Establishment of social relations with other people and social groups
	Competence	Development of mastery and effectiveness in executing actions
Socio-political aspects of empowerment	Impact	Experience of one's own actions making a difference and effecting change
	Meaning	Development of a common identity among actors that unites and further motivates them
	Resilience	Ability to learn, adapt and recover from failure

> "*Autonomy* refers to the ability to choose one's own acts and to act in line with personal values and identity, *relatedness* is about connection to social groups, and receiving support and recognition from it, and *competence* refers to the developing mastery and the perception of effectiveness in carrying out actions." [64] (p. 144; emphasis in original)

In contrast, the dimensions of impact, meaning and resilience are seen as socio-political aspects of empowerment. They go beyond actors' purely psychological needs: "empowerment requires the actual experience of having *impact* and the elaboration of a sense of *meaning* derived from efforts to act on goals that matter". As an example of meaning, they mention the development of a shared identity among actors that unites and motivates them in their work to achieve the desired goal. Finally, the authors point to the "capacity to learn, adapt and recover from setbacks", which they call "*resilience*, the final dimension of empowerment" [64] (p. 144; emphasis in original).

The dimension of resilience illustrates particularly well the processual nature of empowerment and the need to deal constructively with the resistance, conflicts and setbacks that can be expected along the way. These considerations provide inspiration for our analyses. However, the empirical case analyses and conclusions (Sections 4 and 5) will show that the approach nonetheless has limitations.

In Avelino et al.'s [64] (p. 144) definition, impact is conceptualised as a dimension of empowerment. They clarify that it is important for the actors driving social innovations to achieve improvements compared with the problematic initial situation. Beyond that, impact has also become increasingly important to third parties. Funding bodies that provide money to socially innovative initiatives, or society as a whole, now want to know exactly what has changed with the money spent [65] (p. 443). In this context, there are now calls for social impact measurement [65] or social innovation measurement [66].

Scholarly debates therefore mainly revolve around questions of methodological approaches [67,68]. Measurement methods are supposed to follow scientific methods and standards. There is consensus that measuring impact should ideally be guided by shared principles and some basic measurements and indicators [69]. To date, however, there are no generally accepted standards, procedures or indicators ([65] (p. 434) and [66] (p. 438)). Experts are aware that standardisations can hardly do justice to all the differences in types of problems, types of actors (e.g., individuals, groups of actors, governance arrangements, organisations, social enterprises), types of actions, target groups and socio-spatial contexts of social innovations. These are always simplifications—that is, reductions in very complex phenomena to a potentially large but limited number of factors. It is also clear that a good impact measurement should include the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders. However, this also means that the results of the measurement are highly dependent on these perspectives ([65] (p. 434f) and [66] (p. 440)).

The fundamental question of how impact measurement can ensure that the effect is indeed the result of an intervention and has not occurred for other reasons is also unresolved. Furthermore, the question of how to deal with the time factor remains unclear. An impact may not necessarily occur in the short term but may only bear fruit in the long term. Conversely, an effect observed in the short term may disappear in the long term [65] (p. 435f). Another question is how to measure impacts at the micro, meso and macro levels or how to conduct comparative impact measurements [66,70]. Overall, there are more questions than answers [43,71].

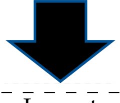
In particular, how to determine the impact of social innovations, which take place in a more or less clearly defined local or regional setting, on community or perhaps even regional development is unclear. In the research literature, there is work on regional innovation capacities in general as well as studies examining local/regional (eco)systems and their consequences specifically for social enterprises or for the emergence and spread of social innovations [66,72,73]. However, that is a different issue. In our case, we are not interested in exploring the impact of the local or regional environment on the emergence and development of a particular social innovation but, conversely, we are interested in the effects of particular socially innovative initiatives and their novel solutions on the socio-spatial context, life and development of a rural community or region. In this respect, we are still largely on our own.

Given the still unsatisfactory conceptual and methodological situation regarding research on the impact of social innovations in the narrower sense of the word, we will not present the results of impact measurement in this article. Our intention is to explore pathways to impact. As stated at the beginning of Section 1, we ask how we can approach research on changes in the community (and possibly regional) development that might be associated with socially innovative activities. This is a very cautious way of framing it. We approach the phenomenon by situating impact within the larger field of output, outcome and impact, thus placing impact as the end point of the field. Of course, these terms are not new. In the practice of project management, these concepts have been used for some time to better plan the achievement of project objectives.

Output, outcome and impact are described as an interrelated 'if/then' chain [74,75]. An outcome can only occur if an output is achieved, and only if there is an outcome can there be an impact. Output and outcome are therefore important milestones on the pathway to impact. Output stands for important decisions that have been taken together and also for important (transfer) activities of projects that have had an external reach (e.g., workshops, events with public appeal). An outcome is defined as the successful realisation of certain objectives in the short or medium term (over a period of one to three years) for a defined target group and thus, the achievement of certain changes, such as if networking has been achieved, new jobs have been created and further projects have been initiated. In the context of outcomes, these are therefore already referred to as effects. Impacts, however, are changes that can be observed in the longer term (after a period of four years or more) that reach beyond the narrower target group and now affect the wider society

(see Table 2). They are therefore also called influences. However, it must be possible to prove or measure that the changes are actually due to the specific original actions in the sense of causal relationships.

Table 2. Pathways to impact. (Own representation.)

Pathways to Impact
Output
- During the life of a project. - External reach through. . . - . . . Achievement of joint decisions; - . . . Implementing public (transfer) activities (e.g., workshops, events).
Outcome
- In the short or medium term, over a period of one to three years. - Achievement of first effects or certain changes through. . . - . . . Realisation of certain objectives for a defined target group (e.g., networking has been achieved, new jobs have been created, further projects have been initiated).

Impact
- After a period of four years or more. - Achievement of influences or wider changes. - Going beyond the narrower target group, now affecting the wider society.

So far, these concepts related to project management have hardly been used in scientific research on impact [74,75]. In our view, they should not be ignored. We will take a closer look at them to determine their value in describing the initial changes that may be associated with socially innovative initiatives (see Sections 4 and 5).

In this context, we also consistently pursue our social constructivist approach, which we have already touched upon in this section. Accordingly, we are particularly interested in what the actors in a community or region themselves see as changes in the context of socially innovative initiatives—what they may view as improvements, as signs of effective public action, as (initial) effects or even as impacts on community or regional development. Methodologically, this requires a qualitative social research approach. Of course, in such an approach, it is not sufficient to interview and observe only those actors who are directly involved in the socially innovative initiatives. Rather, care must be taken to include multiple perspectives. In addition to the views of those involved in the respective initiatives and/or social enterprises, we analyse the perspectives of third parties in the region. These include actors from other regional initiatives or associations and/or regional policymakers and/or regional development experts. We will show in this paper (Sections 4 and 5) that a wide range of actors in connection with socially innovative initiatives do indeed perceive or value changes which, when interpreted and analytically located in the field of pathways to impact, are mostly below the level of impacts in the narrower sense of the word.

3. Methodological Approach

The empirical data for the three case studies were collected across three distinct projects in three different countries as follows: Germany (project 1), Ireland (project 2) and Portugal (project 3)[1]. All three cases represent social innovations in different subject areas. The German case deals with the development of digital solutions for rural areas and a new form of tourism; the Irish case concerns the creation of novel governance structures to foster

local development and the Portuguese case focuses on farmers who have been cultivating and distributing plants in a collaborative network, offering new prospects for the region.

Inspired by the concept of a multi-sited individualising comparison [76,77], we integrate these distinct research projects united by a shared focus on socially innovative initiatives and rural-peripheral areas. In alignment with the approach advocated by Tuvikene, Neves Alves, and Hilbrandt [76], our objective is not to directly compare individual cases but to treat them as empirical instances that we re-analyse to facilitate discourse on the shared research focus concerning the empowerment of socially innovative initiatives and their impact on community development in rural areas.

The cases presented here are characterised by the fact that the authors were jointly involved in the projects in different constellations and that all three projects dealt with social innovation in rural areas. Although the three cases differ in their backgrounds, they are comparable in that the projects addressed similar research questions. Furthermore, the specific regions in which the initiatives were embedded are comparable in terms of the basic framework conditions. That is, each of the three regions is classified as predominantly rural and is characterised by low population density and structural weakness in terms of neglected infrastructure and harmful effects on the quality of life [7,78,79].

From a methodological point of view, each project combined a case study approach [80] with an empirical qualitative multi-method design [81] and followed a similar innovation process research approach. Building on focused ethnography [82], all studies are characterised by a combination of participant observations [83] within rural communities, expert interviews [84] conducted with both local and external experts, problem-centred interviews [85] with local actors and residents and document analyses [86] (see Table 3).

Table 3. Overview of the case studies and the collected empirical data. (Own representation.)

Case Study	Social Innovation Initiative	Collected Empirical Data		
		No. of Qualitative Interviews	No. of Field Note Pages	No. of Analysed Documents and Media Articles
Graupelow (Germany)	Digital solutions and tourism offers in a rural region	13	36	25
Kellybost (Ireland)	Novel governance structures for more independent rural development	12	33	8
Alentejo (Portugal)	Network of small farms to generate new regional prospects	14	180	23

For more details and already existing articles on the three projects or cases please see [14,17,20] for project 1, [19,36,39,47] for project 2 and [15,42,43,46] for project 3.

The fieldwork in Germany was performed between July 2019 and March 2021[2]; in Ireland, it was undertaken between April and December 2016 and again between October 2018 and November 2019 and in Portugal, it was carried out between September 2018 and November 2019. The project data have been saved locally in a comparable manner and follow a standardised syntax. From each project, qualitative interviews are available as anonymised transcriptions. Together with observation protocols and collected documents (e.g., media articles or project descriptions), they built the empirical foundation for a secondary analysis to address the research questions about the empowerment and impact of socially innovative initiatives in rural areas. Regarding the analysis method, we applied qualitative content analysis [87] complemented by the interpretive analysis of key statements [88]. The goal of the qualitative content analysis was to systematically re-analyse the empirical data to derive knowledge of the effects and influences of the socially innovative interventions as they were discussed by different stakeholders in the collected material. Given the clear research focus on empowerment and pathways to impact, we utilised a deductive category system [87] consisting of the dimensions of empowerment (see Table 1) and the three phases of output, outcome and impact. The coding rules were defined according to the conceptualisations of Avelino et al. [64] and the pathways to impact (see Table 2).

In the coding process, we applied MAXQDA analysis software(Version 2020). We decided against applying a more nuanced category system because broader categories would allow for capturing longer pieces of text that would satisfy our intention to further interpret the identified texts. In the interpretive phase, we paid particular attention to information about the temporality, context and cause–effect relations articulated in more or less obvious ways.

To ensure the confidentiality of our conversational participants, we employ pseudonyms for both their identities and the designations of the respective villages. The utilisation of pseudonyms prevents the inadvertent disclosure of sensitive information about specific communities. The precise names of locations are not germane to the assertions of our research; however, they can be readily obtained from the authors upon request.

4. Findings from the Case Studies—Empowerment and Impact on Community Development

In the following sections, we will first report on the three case regions and socially innovative initiatives and present the main findings of our empirical research regarding empowerment and impact (Sections 4.1–4.3). We will then provide a summary and comparative overview of the cases and draw our initial conclusions (Section 4.4).

4.1. Case 1: From a Social Enterprise to a Digital Flagship Region in Rural Eastern Germany

Graupelow is a tiny village with fewer than 150 inhabitants, situated within a rural municipality in eastern Germany, and it can serve as an example of how an innovative social enterprise has contributed to awakening an entire region from its slumber. The village is situated about 100 km from Berlin's city centre and about 60 km from Potsdam. A railway station is located in the main town of the municipality about 6 km away, and a bus service runs irregularly. The main town of the neighbouring municipality is a similar distance away, so there are many connections to both municipalities. As in many eastern German villages, there are no amenities or restaurants in the village itself; errands must be completed in the next town, and people often commute long distances to work. Local associations, such as the volunteer fire brigade, encounter challenges in attracting new members.

The transformative trajectory of Graupelow commenced when young social entrepreneurs arrived in the village as newcomers. In 2017, this group acquired the erstwhile manor house, subsequently converting it into a co-working and (temporary) co-living centre—the idea of a rural workation away from tourist hotspots was completely new at the time and its success was initially uncertain. Their central proposition posited rural Brandenburg as an appealing refuge for urbanites and remote (international) digital nomads grappling with urban-induced stress. Graupelow not only presented an aesthetically appealing edifice for their endeavours but also boasted a substantial locational advantage in the form of high-speed internet connectivity.

The acquisition of the manor house necessitated the persuasive articulation of their concept to the municipal authorities. Consequently, the social entrepreneurs engaged in direct discourse with the municipal administration and local politicians from the project's inception. Part of the concept, from the outset, was to also provide premises for the local village community, for instance, for club meetings, or discounted places in the co-working space. The aim was for the building to become a social centre with connections to the whole world, and "it is also a space that is a place for knowledge, for knowledge transfer, for education–a place for exchange" (C1-I04). The importance of the house as a place for empowerment in the sense of relatedness is already apparent here.

Regarding the psychological side of empowerment, we can observe autonomy and competence, especially concerning digitalisation, in relation to both institutionalised and individual actors. According to the municipality's digitalisation commissioner, the establishment of this centre is also "the genesis of all digitalisation-related endeavours in the vicinity" (C1-I02). In addition to pursuing their own commercial initiatives, the social entrepreneurs collaborated with the municipality to vie for recognition in a smart com-

munity competition. The subsequent victory in this competition facilitated the realisation of various digital projects, including the development of a village app, the creation of a YouTube channel for enhanced local information dissemination and the establishment of a programming club tailored for adolescents. The village app, particularly lauded by both the federal state and the local populace, has been adopted by other municipalities as well. When the app was introduced, it also became apparent that older residents were especially enthusiastic about using it and "that it really is a great added value, especially for older people" (C1-I13). There was even an adult education course on how to install apps because it turned out "that basically how to actually install apps was the main problem, the main access barrier to using the app" (C1-I13). Developing this competence would facilitate digital autonomy and thus also empowerment. At the same time, the village app can be considered an outcome on the pathway to impact as it was a direct effect of the social innovation initiative. It remains to be seen whether this will result in wider changes in terms of impact, but it appears to be a step in this direction.

Subsequent to securing national funding as a smart region, an expansion of digital projects ensued, with a strategic focus on domains such as health, mobility, tourism and culture. Noteworthy initiatives include an augmented reality art walk, which opened in 2023. These later undertakings also functioned as national pilot projects, assessing the efficacy of novel digital measures that may be disseminated to other rural regions upon successful validation. While such dissemination is a typical feature of social innovation, it can also be understood as an outcome whose impact may sometimes be seen in completely different places.

Recognising the inherent opportunities and imperatives for proactive intervention, the social entrepreneurs engaged with receptive mayors and collaboratively initiated digitalisation initiatives, initially within the municipality and then throughout the entire region. "Together with other initiatives in the region, this slowly results in, let's say, a cluster where a lot happens" (C1-I04). Political actors and administrators were certain that the community's activities were closely linked to the commitment of social entrepreneurs: "What we are currently doing has been triggered by [name of the project] and the people there" (C1-I02.4). With their assistance, successful grant projects were applied for, leading to the region's transformation into a digital flagship area and to closer collaboration between the neighbouring municipalities. In this regard, one could assert that the social entrepreneurs contributed to the empowerment of the local administration in terms of meaning and competence.

Prior to acquiring the manor house, the young social entrepreneurs not only conducted a market analysis by examining international co-working spaces but also possessed considerable experience in establishing creative communities. They leveraged this experience to become integral members of the local village community and minimise conflicts. Upon assuming ownership of the manor house, they "held a workshop at the very beginning, where we invited all the people from the region and introduced ourselves and then asked them, 'What do you expect from the place? What is important to you?'" (C1-I04). The extent to which the local village population was empowered by the numerous new projects could not be definitively ascertained. However, for the organisation of the annual village festival in the manor courtyard, the entire village gathers, and local organisations, such as the volunteer fire brigade, actively contribute to shaping the event. We therefore see at least indications of the construction of 'relatedness' and 'meaning' in particular. In any case, these activities can be read as a clear output in the sense of public activities.

Furthermore, demographic data indicate that at least outmigration has declined, and "there are now really examples of the first five people moving to the region because of [name of the project]" (C1-I04). Additional small enterprises, including social enterprises, have also established themselves in the municipality. This might indicate that the initiative would even have had an impact on local development. However, it remains unclear to what extent this is directly attributable to the socially innovative initiative or to a general new attractiveness of rural areas in eastern Germany, especially for Berliners.

The success of the workation project in Graupelow had another notable impact on a larger spatial scale. In collaboration with other residential and work projects in rural regions of eastern Germany, the social entrepreneurs established a network of rural community spaces aimed at connecting and helping creative spaces in rural areas gather and share practical knowledge from the projects, which was available online as a knowledge platform. This network was also intended to support municipalities and property owners in exploring new pathways and provide guidance on establishing new locations for living and working in rural areas. Thus, the specific experience from Graupelow has been disseminated beyond the region, contributing to the 'relatedness' and 'competence' of rural actors, and by doing so, giving them new 'meaning'. This has also reached beyond the initially narrower target groups (city dwellers in search of temporary peace in Graupelow and local villagers), creating an impact in the field of rural development.

The empowerment dimension of 'resilience' could not be comprehensively assessed in this example, as there were hardly any real setbacks during the observation period. However, the fact that the social innovation activities survived the pandemic indicates a certain "capacity to learn, adapt and recover from setbacks" [64] (p. 144). Regarding community development, the strong role of the social entrepreneurs can also be viewed critically as it is completely unclear what the possible abandonment of the company would mean for digital activities in the region—in other words, how dependent the municipality actually is on this core group. A real pathway to impact would mean that the activities have been successfully stabilised such that self-supporting structures are also working in the long run.

4.2. Case 2: A Community Manages Itself: From a Neglected Place to a Role Model in Ireland

Kellybost is a rural town in Mid-West Ireland with a population of 1200 people. The town was one of the first rural communities in Ireland to take local development into its own hands by means of a social enterprise. Rather than remaining fully dependent on public authorities or volunteer engagement, the community decided to create a professional not-for-profit association with charitable status that aims to improve the living conditions in the town and to foster local development. One of the initiators of the newly created community development association (CDA) described the mission and gave 'meaning' to the initiative: "Two centuries back, three centuries back, [Kellybost] was the most vibrant town outside of the city area, and hopefully, we can restore it to that over next decade or so" (C2-I01). Only a few years after its foundation in 2008, the association had built up new facilities for social life, business activity and recreation and had fostered social inclusion. Organised by professional management but guided by the needs and activities of the local community, the CDA became a nationwide role model for rural development.

The evolution of the CDA dates back to the 2000s when the community was heavily hit by the global financial crisis, followed by the closure of factories and an unemployment rate of 32 per cent. Disposable incomes decreased, shops on the local main street closed and signs of neglect broadened: "The community here was very much neglected for a number of years" (C2-I02). An existing volunteer organisation, "Friends of Kellybost", attempted to improve the situation but was unable to overcome the multifaceted challenges. Likewise, the local authorities did not proceed to change the situation, and people lost confidence: "There were a lot of discussions with local authorities [. . .], there were a lot of promises made, they failed to deliver. So, by the time, there were a lot of disillusioned people" (C2-I03). In this situation, the volunteer organisation asked a regional development agency for support. With external help and in close interaction with the local community, a development plan was created, and the mentioned CDA was set up. The association particularly benefitted from a new funding scheme for social enterprises in Ireland and the appointment of a chief executive officer (CEO) who was very experienced in community development. The professional organisational structure provided a new scope for action and a gain in local 'autonomy'. The initiative can be regarded as social innovation because the non-governmental management of local development is a new collective approach that

suggests addressing the needs of the local community in a 'better' way than was possible within the established structures.

The CDA's central principles are participatory governance arrangements and the provision of assistance for self-help rather than fulfilling the role of a full-service provider. From the beginning, the association invited residents to become members ("The whole community was invited", C2-I02). An annual member fee of five euros keeps the threshold low, and the association consequently has about 80 members. Moreover, a 16-seat board of directors, composed of all sorts of local stakeholders, should guarantee that the association fulfils the will of the local people and addresses their needs. In terms of the empowerment dimensions introduced by Avelino et al. [64], the association made considerable effort to ensure the 'relatedness' of the new organisation with the people in the local town. O'Hara and O'Shaughnessy [89] (p. 97) confirm this interpretation: "The capacity of local people and organisations has been strengthened and the perception of community development as a pan-community activity has been enhanced".

A keyword frequently used by the CEO is "ownership". She explained this working principle: "But the community has to take ownership. We, we don't, we are not there to take ownership. We have to [. . .] the way I see it is that you are always to get people to come in. But then you put it back to them" (C2-I02).

The CDA has adopted the role of a facilitator that activates people to express their interests and provides infrastructure and professional support. However, "the group will do it themselves [. . .]" (C2-I02), ensuring that they forge their own future. For the CEO, "ownership" is a lesson of the 2000s, "when the place was falling apart" (C2-I02) and a sense of responsibility was lacking. Furthermore, it is a question of 'resilience' in case the association is forced to reduce or terminate its activities: "The community has to be able to survive all of those [activities]. So, the more we enable the local people and the community voluntary organisations within it, the better chance we have as a community to be able to sustain itself" (C2-I02).

The governance structure and working principles laid the foundation for the CDA's success in the development of the community. It mobilised public grants and private funds of more than four million euros and created a community enterprise centre, refurbished a community centre and sports complex, developed a town park with a playground and a recreation path and built a civic centre. The latter accommodates meeting and event rooms, a library, equipment for printing and copying and a restaurant with quality and healthy meals. The new buildings and parks are materialisations of the association's endeavours. They provide evidence that the social innovative initiative has made a difference and is producing the desired outcomes for the rural community. For the CEO, the fast realisation of building projects is essential for ensuring local support: "Projects that have a quick turnaround and quick results help sustain community interest and involvement" (C2-I04). On the pathway to impact, the new buildings and parks are outcomes rather than outputs or impacts because they are more than short-term effects but are less far-reaching than the aspired vibrancy and prosperity.

This might change if the new infrastructures lay the foundation for follow-up effects and permanent socio-economic improvement. The first signs were observable already during this research. The infrastructures were frequently used by the community and contributed to social inclusion. Older adults, for example, would frequently meet at the community centre for bingo events and once a week for a hot meal in the restaurant. Those who were unable to walk would be picked up by car. At the end of the year, the community had a Christmas festival that was affordable for poor families to attend. A community employment scheme provided training for unemployed citizens to enhance their employability. In addition, a monthly event took place called "Five of Friday", where people with specific skills (e.g., website programming, accounting) shared their knowledge with others for a fee of five euros. By enabling these activities and events, the CDA adds to the 'competences' of the local people.

The CEO concluded that the association “has changed the face of the community” (C2-I02). The new developments coincide with a population growth of seven per cent between 2011 and 2022, after years of stagnation and decline. When the civic centre was opened, an invited minister was full of praise: “As a politician, I have been involved in community developments over the last 30 years and, I must say, this is one of the finest developments I have seen” (C2-I05). Another policymaker characterised the CDA as “a template for other villages” (C2-I06). The CEO agreed that Kellybost had become a role model in rural Ireland: “There are groups that we have hosted here who have come to learn: ‘How did you do it? What did you learn? Or what were the pitfalls?’” (C2-I01). Being treated as a blueprint for the transformation of rural towns in Ireland is an example of the ‘competences’ that others ascribed to the CDA. In the long run, however, challenges in sustaining the involvement of local people in the CDA have occurred. Today, five out of the 16 positions on the association’s board are vacant. Maintaining ownership of local development and ensuring the social innovation’s impact are not self-evident but require ongoing efforts.

4.3. Case 3: Successful Networking and the Modest Creation of New Economic Prospects in Portugal

Alentejo is a region in south-eastern Portugal near the Spanish border. It is home to more than 700,000 people, but the population has been steadily declining in recent decades. While the coastal regions of Portugal enjoy a degree of prosperity, the predominantly rural inland areas, particularly in the east of the country, are considered structurally weak and neglected. Alentejo is characterised by agriculture, although the soils in the east of the region are very poor and stony, which has forced many farmers to give up. There are few job prospects. Therefore, unemployment and poverty are high. Consequently, there has been an exodus of young people in particular. Administratively, Alentejo is divided into five sub-regions. In one of these regions, we observed the activities of a group of actors who nevertheless decided to try their luck as farmers in a specific segment and were supported by a social enterprise in the region.

The group of farmers started to form in 2011 and, interestingly, were mostly newcomers who gradually came together in the region. Originally from larger cities, they used to work in completely different professions. Their new start in farming was therefore characterised not only by the challenge of difficult natural conditions but also by the fact that they had little experience or knowledge of growing plants and setting up a small business. However, attracted by the new development opportunities they saw for themselves and the region, they embarked on a stony path in search of (innovative) solutions.

From the beginning, the farmers understood that they needed to work with other farmers in their segment to gain a better position in the market. They wanted to remain small, self-sufficient and unique units and yet be able to compete with large agri-businesses. Their socially innovative solution in this respect was to expand their network throughout Portugal and set up a regional cooperative. Creating a digital platform, initiated and implemented by the supporting social enterprise, has allowed them to not only exchange knowledge and experience of growing the plants but also to develop coordinated growth plans or coordinate the purchase and rental of special technical equipment that they would not have been able to afford on their own. They also discuss how to overcome bureaucratic obstacles. Most importantly, they explore new marketing channels and organise the marketing of the products. Because of the regional appeal of the initiative, regional development agencies have joined in to launch and promote other local or regional projects that could build on it (e.g., in trade or tourism). These efforts have resulted in a strong support infrastructure. In addition to the fact that solidarity-based practices were implemented among farmers, there has been an effort to bring more income-generating activities into the area. This was the aim from the very beginning. Opportunities should be created for rural residents to work on the farms or to start their own businesses in the area, as Novikova points out ([42] (p. 9); see also [90]).

In this case study, we can see that farmers have been empowered by learning from each other. This enables them to increase their individual knowledge and skills, and the new skills enable them to generate income from cultivation and achieve their goal of economic independence by running their small agricultural businesses. As they have developed a large—even supra-regional—network and work closely together, social relations and intensive cooperation have also been strengthened. The following factors of empowerment in the sense of Avelino et al. [64] (p. 144) can, thus, be identified so far: the expansion of competence, the securing of autonomy in action, especially in economic terms, and the establishment and strengthening of solidarity-based relatedness within the farming segment and beyond.

As mentioned above, the local social enterprise played an important role in the empowerment process by initiating the formation of the network and providing practical support for its implementation through an online platform. This has supported social innovation processes, and the social enterprise has taken on the role of advisor and facilitator. The farmers recognise this to a high degree as they see their capacities being absorbed by the hard work in their fields. They did not have the time to build the contacts and the network themselves. One local farmer in the network put it as follows:

> Somebody has to develop these other aspects of linking, networking, cooperation, contact with official institutions, research institutions, other countries. Basically, we think, “Ah we need help with this; let’s try [name of local social enterprise]”. Because they have been working in this field for many years already, they have much experience; they know everybody. (C3-I01)

After all, as we were repeatedly told, the farmers’ economic activity has generated some, albeit modest, economic value in the region and created a limited number of jobs [42] (p. 74). Additional regional development projects have also been initiated. Although these are limited in number, the activities have contributed to strengthening the regional identity and spreading a sense of self-efficacy among the actors. They have experienced that collective learning and solidarity-based action are possible, and they have learnt that it can be worthwhile to get involved because it can make a difference, even if only on a small scale. They have also realised that they do not have to give up when they face obstacles (e.g., dealing with the authorities) but, instead, gain strength and find solutions to overcome them owing to the support of the network.

These processes have also been supported by the local social enterprise. Third parties (e.g., actors of other initiatives) have observed this and therefore recognise the social enterprise as playing an important role in the region:

> They [actors of the local enterprise] are willing to create a dynamism in the region that will make people come back to their villages and come back to an area that is quite forgotten in the country. I know [the local enterprise] tries to change a lot of the mentality, tries to bring innovation. I know they help small companies to start, and they try to create awareness of the environment, the heritage and the potential of the region. (C3-I02)

According to Avelino et al. [64] (p. 144), these aspects point to the following dimensions of empowerment: impact (i.e., an effect on the region through small-scale economic value creation), meaning (in terms of regional identity formation processes) and resilience (due to the newly acquired ability to overcome bureaucratic hurdles). Overall, therefore, all the empowerment factors discussed by Avelino et al. [64] can be found in this third case study. The outcome of the socially innovative initiative also seems to be quite positive in this respect.

However, the development has not been as conflict-free as it might appear. There are also limits to empowerment. Empirical research in the region has shown that traditions and history are extremely important. The rural population and actors have clear expectations of how things should be done in general and, in particular, how they should not be done. Actions must be in line with regional and specific local cultural traditions. This

is antagonistic to the creation of socially innovative solutions. In their field research, Umantseva et al. [90] (p. 35) found that social innovators "only partially shape the processes of social innovation emergence, as resistance to innovative practices also plays a great role in how these processes unfold. Resistance to social innovation predominantly stems from a conflict between the culture of the context and the new culture that social innovation brings with it" (see also [42,91] (p. 82)). Actually, rural residents are very sceptical and by no means welcome everything that develops in the region. Local political actors, in particular, feel challenged by the approaches and, given their social position and power, know how to undermine, delay or prevent social innovation processes.

We will now take a closer look at the possible changes in terms of the pathways to impact local and regional development. We were told, and it is also well-documented, that since the foundation of the network, hundreds of events and workshops have been organised and almost 10 multi-annual projects have been launched to pool activities in the region, explore further potential and drive regional development processes. This has taken place mainly in the fields of historical heritage, tourism and gastronomy but also in the area of social inclusion. This achievement has even been recognised as exemplary by prominent stakeholders. In November 2017, the practices of the network and the supporting local social enterprise were included in the list of good practices in rural development as part of the AGRI Innovation Summit[3] for being pioneering for rural Portugal and the specific agricultural segment. Overall, significant achievements have thus been made that have even been recognised by the wider society, not only in the region but also at the European Union (EU) level. However, as indicated above (Section 2), output should not be confused with impact, although this output has achieved international visibility.

As far as other aspects of the pathways to impact are concerned, the following developments have been achieved, albeit on a small scale: business development in a new agricultural segment in the region with 16 small businesses operating successfully so far, regional value creation and job creation in the labour market. The actors also see as a significant change the fact that regional actors have joined forces to form a strong network and that learning processes have taken place. All these achievements can be interpreted as outcomes because they can be observed in the medium term within a limited target group at the regional level. On the whole, however, the outcomes and related changes for regional development remain modest.

Intriguingly, it is worth noting that some actors in the region are nevertheless seeking to measure impact in the narrower sense to learn more about the effects of their actions. However, quantitative as well as qualitative data are lacking, as an actor of a local initiative pointed out: "[The impact is] more than statistics, I can say. If you look at impact as the way people perceive the relevance of that intervention in their own lives, this is what matters to me and this I would very much like to know" (C3-I03, [43] (p. 44)).

Some local actors and projects are already striving to record the impact of their activities to be accountable to themselves and others. As another local actor noted, however, it was apparent that forms of output and outcomes tend to be collected there in the first instance: "We do this [impact assessment]. One of the areas of this calculation is about the indicators of the employment created by enterprises. We report how many projects we supported–10 projects–how many employees you got from this. We have all these in mind" (C3-I04, [43] (p. 44)).

At the same time, actors pointed out that there are major problems in assessing impact. They recognised the complexity and methodological difficulties and complained that they were not trained to measure impact and were left to do it alone. They also lacked the time and resources to adequately collect and analyse data (see also [43] (p. 44)). The problem of recording or measuring impact is obviously not only discussed in the social science literature but has long been present in the practice of local and regional actors.

4.4. Comparative Summary

The case studies show that the actors involved in the social innovation initiatives were largely empowered. However, similarities and differences can be identified across the cases, which we first present as an overview based on the concept of Avelino et al. [64] and pathways to impact (see Table 4).

Table 4. Overview of the empowerment dimensions in the case studies. (Own representation.)

Empowerment Dimension	Case 1 (Germany)	Case 2 (Ireland)	Case 3 (Portugal)
Autonomy	New autonomy as a smart community	Gain in local autonomy through the community development association (CDA)	Economic autonomy for small-scale farming
Relatedness	Indications of new relatedness among social entrepreneurs, the administration and residents, a new network of rural community spaces	Participatory governance and activation of residents to take ownership over local development and social inclusion	Solidarity within the farming segment and beyond; knowledge exchange, coordinated growth plans, purchase and rental of special technical equipment
Competence	New digital skills for actors from the administration, civil society and residents	Improving employability and skill enhancement among local people; ascribed competence as a role model	New farming and business skills
(Pathway to) Impact	Social enterprise as a starting point for new municipal activities; new networks for disseminating approaches to rural development beyond the village and the region	New social infrastructures are outcomes and lay the foundation for a broader impact, which is partly already visible through social inclusion and slight population growth	Regional network events as outputs and small-scale economic value creation as outcomes of the socially innovative initiative
Meaning	New meaning of the rural municipality as a digital flagship	The mission of the CDA to make the rural town a vibrant place again gives meaning to the activities	Contribution to regional identity formation
Resilience	Unclear/still open	Ownership of local people will ensure the continuation of the activities in the case that the CDA is no longer able to assist	Successfully dealing with obstacles through solidarity-based support

It is noteworthy that the case studies provide empirical evidence of at least five of the six dimensions of empowerment described conceptually by Avelino et al. [64]. They show that actors not only gained 'competence', 'autonomy' and 'relatedness' but were also able to achieve 'meaning', 'resilience' and the first signs of 'impact'.

Concerning '*autonomy*', our cases show that a gain in autonomy can have an individual (e.g., at the level of farmers or local residents) and/or institutional dimension (e.g., local organisations). The socially innovative initiatives differ in the ways they facilitate individual and institutional autonomy; while the German (C1) and Portuguese cases (C3) show gains in both individual and institutional autonomy, in the Irish case (C2), collective institutional autonomy is more relevant.

All analysed socially innovative initiatives aim to foster social relations and belonging, thus contributing to '*relatedness*'. We observe several ways to foster belonging and social inclusion as follows: formulating joint interests (C2, C3), organising events to experience belonging (C1, C2), fostering a regional identity (C3) or building digital networks and knowledge exchange (C1, C3). However, we see slight differences between the actions *for* the people living in the rural area (C1) and the actions *with* the people (C2, C3).

When we look at '*competence*', again, the development of competences has an individual and an institutional dimension: On the individual side, initiatives aim to enhance the skills of local people and further target groups through courses (C1, C2) and mutual learning (C1, C2, C3). On the institutional side, competence is ascribed to the whole initiative or administration. C1 earned the designation of a smart region and the administration successfully applied for funding owing to the new competence. C2 was considered a role

model for the transition in rural towns, and C3 was listed as an example of good practice for rural development at an EU Innovation Summit.

The first steps on the '*pathway to impact*' caused by socially innovative initiatives can be observed to some degree in all three cases. In C1, the social enterprise became a starting point for new municipal activities, which can be seen as an outcome with the potential to foster regional development. Through the foundation of a broader network to disseminate new approaches to rural development, the pathway to impact also goes beyond the single village and region. Furthermore, older community members have become enthusiastic about digital solutions. In C2, the outcomes are visible in the form of new social infrastructure, joint ownership over local development and contributions to social inclusion. In C3, a strong network has enabled people to join forces rather than compete, and at least some new job opportunities have been created. However, on a regional scale, the effects have been rather moderate. Another issue is the sustainability of social innovations. C2 shows that the acquired level of ownership can also diminish. Social innovation is not a fixed result but can change and even disappear. Sustaining the innovation in the practices and thoughts of the people can require ongoing effort, such as motivating them to remain engaged. Interestingly, in all cases, stopping population loss and fostering in-migration is a relevant topic; in C1 and C2, indicators point to a demographic turn, although it is unclear to what extent the socially innovative initiatives have contributed to this effect.

All three socially innovative initiatives are directly or indirectly goal-oriented not only regarding success but also concerning local or community development (C1 being a pioneer region in digital transition, C2 making the town a vibrant place again and C3 creating a new dynamic in the region). The goals and visions potentially give '*meaning*' to those who are part of the initiatives. However, more information is needed about the extent to which the local residents know and support the overall goals. Moreover, the visions differ in the extent to which they suggest new development paths (C1) or address more traditional values in a new way (restoration of past importance in C2, revaluation of the region's endogenous potential in C3).

Finally, '*resilience*' seems to be the most complex dimension as successfully overcoming obstacles is subject to a certain temporality, and it remains unclear how long and how many obstacles an initiative must surmount to be considered resilient. However, in C2 and C3, structure building has been essential for enhancing resilience. In C2, the resilience of the activities has been enhanced through the creation of structures that are maintained by the people themselves and thus will continue to exist even without the support of the initiating organisation. Making the local people owners of the initiative is a lesson learned from the past when neither the authorities nor the local people felt sufficiently responsible for the town. The objective of the socially innovative initiative in C3 is to enhance the resilience of the involved farmers in facing obstacles, such as bureaucracy, and joining forces in the network has helped the farmers overcome hurdles.

Another similarity that our cases share concerns the physical places (e.g., the manor house or the community enterprise centre) and digital networks (e.g., the network of rural community spaces or the farmers' online platform), which can be understood as spaces of social innovation, contributing to each of the empowerment dimensions. This means that spaces, whether physical or digital, can be important preconditions for empowerment and impact.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we addressed two central questions empirically—that is, how does empowerment empirically manifest in the context of social innovation initiatives and how can such initiatives on the pathway to impact contribute to the development of the community or the region as a whole? In light of the adopted definition of empowerment as "the process through which actors gain the capacity to mobilise resources to achieve a goal" [64] (p. 143), we find in each of the three case studies clear indications of the

empowerment of rural communities. In the German case (C1), new partnerships between a social enterprise and local authorities have paved the way for new capacities to compete for public grants and activate local people to make the rural region a flagship of rural digitalisation. In the Irish case (C2), we observe a strong professionalisation of local development structures, which has enhanced the capacity to raise private funds, public grants and voluntary work. The acquired resources have enabled huge investments in public infrastructure, which fosters more social activities, social inclusiveness and the flourishing of the rural town overall. In the Portuguese case (C3), we observe an initiative of rural network building, which has improved the capacity of farmers to collaborate and share instead of compete. This has laid the foundation for knowledge acquisition, improved cultivation, improved market access and more dynamic rural development overall.

In conceptual terms, we find that 'impact', which Avelino et al. [64] define as one out of six criteria in their empowerment grid, must be elaborated when investigating the effects of socially innovative initiatives in rural regions. This is because impact stands for effects that exceed the original context of the initiatives and manifest in the broader context of the community or society, such as in new development dynamics at the local or regional level. This is a challenging task for initiatives with, usually, little man- and womanpower. Thus, we suggest conceptualising 'impact' as a 'pathway to impact', which represents a processual category with three successive occurrences as follows: output, outcome and impact. The empirical analyses show that each of the initiatives has produced outputs, such as networking events or courses for skill enhancement, and goal-related outcomes, such as new social infrastructures or the creation of new jobs. It is more difficult, however, to provide empirical evidence of a broader influence on local or regional development. Initial changes are visible, such as a gain in digitalisation projects, socially inclusive activities, economic value creation and an influx of new residents, which could be interpreted as impacts. However, what makes us careful with this conclusion is the difficulty in tracing these observations back to the social innovative initiatives. Besides this, social enterprises are noticeably key actors in each of the initiatives. They foster social innovation and contribute to empowerment and community development by educating people, stimulating network building, mobilising external resources and undertaking other leveraging activities.

The cross-case analysis shows that the empowerment dimensions proposed by Avelino et al. [64] must be adapted in other respects. Especially regarding the first three dimensions, it is worth distinguishing between collective/institutional actors and individuals. In our cases, we clearly see that new competence and autonomy are often related to actors from the local administration or the social initiative as such. New actors—in our cases, social entrepreneurs—directly supported the development of their competence. Thus, we see competence not only on the psychological side of empowerment, as Avelino et al. [64] do, but also interpret it as a socio-political aspect of empowerment as these exceed personal or interactional empowerment and may be described as institutional empowerment. Relatedness does not only refer to the social cohesion within the community but also to the relations between core groups in social innovation processes and the community. In each of the observed cases, the social innovation process is driven by key players [18] (i.e., social enterprises), which have exerted considerable effort to ensure that the rural community would adopt the innovative solution and thus bring the social innovation to life.

In addition to the characteristics of the various dimensions described above, we observe a further empowerment effect, which has been mentioned as "mutually beneficial hydra-like constellations" [20] (p. 324): actors of the core group gained experience and recruited other actors who helped as a reinforcement of the initiative. Against the backdrop of experiencing self-efficacy (e.g., relatedness, impact and meaning), more courage and more ideas emerge—that is, further projects grow out of a grassroots project.

A weakness of our case studies is that although we took into account the views of not only the actors involved in the local social innovation initiatives and the social enterprises supporting them but also those of actors from other initiatives, policymakers and regional development experts, the voices of rural residents and other target groups received

little attention. As key persons and other community members do not always share the same goals and meanings or experience the same relatedness, additional interviews with ordinary community members and perhaps other stakeholders with independent perspectives would offer a full understanding of the empowerment that these social innovation initiatives have enabled. In addition, a general challenge in researching the impact of social innovations is causality. Alternative explanations of the effects on local or regional development cannot be ruled out. Detecting the impacts of social innovations requires tracing an observed effect back to a social innovation intervention or at least showing that an effect has most likely resulted from that intervention. Methodologically, this can be realised by conducting additional interviews with involved people (e.g., with newcomers to ascertain if the social innovation was relevant to their in-migration decision), by comparing cases with and without socially innovative interventions (treating the case without intervention as the control group) or by adopting longitudinal research methods, such as narrative interviews. Further research is required to improve the methodology for impact detection with qualitative methods to avoid only quantifying social innovation impact measurement procedures.

In addition, we can conclude that each of the socially innovative initiatives benefitted from public funds. Public support is important because the initiatives produce public goods and cannot generate sufficient income from selling goods in an open market and because the initiatives directly lead to further public initiatives. Volunteer work is another important resource but is difficult to maintain with constant intensity over a long period. Therefore, to ensure the sustainability of the social innovations and their effects, we recommend providing public funds that are not only project-related but that also have structural components, such as the co-financing of a managerial position for the socially innovative initiatives or incentives for volunteers. This, however, requires a reliable assessment of the performance of social enterprises and further socially innovative initiatives, which brings us back to the need for applicable instruments for detecting empowerment and impact as important goals of such initiatives.

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Notes

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[2] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted by telephone or via video conference after March 2020.

[3] The event was organised by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI).

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