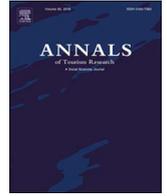


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## The roles of social entrepreneurs in rural destination development

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore how social entrepreneurs are relevant to our consideration of rural destination development. While many peripheral rural areas face significant challenges in terms of sustaining communities and attracting tourists it is often social entrepreneurs, as much as traditional entrepreneurs, who are involved in developing new ideas, new products and activities, and envisioning a future for the area. This study, which is based on case studies resulting from nine semi-structured interviews carried out in rural areas in Ireland, South Africa and USA, identifies key roles that social entrepreneurs play in terms of rural destination development; namely that of an opportunist, catalyst, and network architect, and this is used to build a theoretical framework within which SEs can be analyzed.

## Introduction

The focus of this paper is to enhance our understanding of the key roles social entrepreneurs (SEs) play in rural destination development and to develop a new theoretical framework as the foundation of further research in this area. As [Jaafar and Rasoolimanesh \(2015\)](#) note rural tourism represents a tool for rural revitalization. SEs can influence the development of rural tourism; however, literature documenting the roles they play is lacking, posing a gap in understanding the ways rural tourism is developed. Examining the roles of SEs in tourism destinations sheds light on the engagement of entrepreneurs who are motivated not only by profit, but also by social objectives. This type of academic engagement reflects pragmatic changes that are evident in rural tourism destinations.

This paper addresses gaps in our understanding of the roles SEs play in rural destination development. This was achieved through our cross-case analysis from Ireland, South Africa and USA. The objectives of the paper are four-fold. Firstly to identify if there are commonalities in terms of the roles that SEs play in rural tourism destinations, secondly to identify the roles that are played by SEs in rural tourism destinations, thirdly to examine how these roles are connected and fourthly to begin to build a framework within which the role of SEs can be analyzed.... Combining findings from three geographically diverse contexts, our paper provides rich insight into the role of SEs as opportunists, catalysts and network architects in rural destinations and suggests that our rural tourism lens needs to adjust from focusing primarily on the role of communities, policy makers, and to a lesser extent entrepreneurs, to encompass this new stakeholder. Doing so will provide an opportunity to push existing boundaries and consider the role of SEs in rural tourism development. The next section reviews the concept of entrepreneurs and SEs in tourism, on which this paper is based.

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### Role of entrepreneurs in rural tourism development

Ritchie and Crouch (2003, p. 140) highlight in their destination competitiveness model that entrepreneurs and small businesses are of “fundamental importance to the development of tourism as an industry”. While the tourism industry is mainly comprised of small businesses (Lashley & Rowson, 2010), exploring their impact is absent in the literature (Power, Di Domenico, & Miller, 2017). Specifically, small businesses may cultivate strong social capital as they may act as a link between the local community and the tourism industry (Shaw & Williams, 1998). However, the tourism literature, according to Koh and Hatten (2002), has ‘overlooked’ the tourism entrepreneur as a player in tourism development. Recently, some scholars note the important role that entrepreneurs may play within destinations. For example, Komppula (2014, p. 361) concludes that “without innovative committed, and risk-taking entrepreneurs no destination will flourish”. Ryan, Mottiar, and Quinn (2012) demonstrate that the influence of entrepreneurs may continue long after the original entrepreneur is involved through the development of an environment in which entrepreneurship is encouraged and supported.

Despite the importance of entrepreneurs to destination development, the various roles they play requires investigation to shed light on how social objectives are achieved. Perhaps an obvious role is that their efforts, through product development, may attract tourists to destinations. However, the contributions of multiple entrepreneurs are less obvious and can have a combined effect, which is often greater than the impact on their own individual firms and exhibited through the formation of networks contributing to destination development (e.g., Beritelli, 2011; Pavlovich, 2003; Tinsley & Lynch, 2007). Russell and Faulkner (2004) examine tourism entrepreneurship within the framework of chaos theory and state that entrepreneurs “play a primary role both as chaos-makers and as initiators of adaptive responses to chaos induced by external events” (2004, p. 556). Entrepreneurs also act as leaders within the destination, often developing a long term vision (Ryan et al., 2012), being innovative (Weiermair, Keller, Pechlaner, & Go, 2010), and identifying opportunities (Johns & Mattson, 2005). It is also notable that local social situations and environments may affect entrepreneurial strategies (Bosworth & Farrell, 2011; Kline & Milburn, 2010; Mottiar, 2015). As such, entrepreneurs tend to be deeply connected to the rural economy and the community, leading us to further consider the entrepreneur community connection and in particular, the role of SEs.

### Social entrepreneurs and tourism

The existing literature echos several dominant dimensions of entrepreneurship including autonomy, innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness (Covin & Slevin, 1989). Dollinger (2008, p. 10) defines entrepreneurship as “the control and deployment of resources to create an innovative economic organization for the purpose of gain or growth under conditions of risk and uncertainty”. While some literature (e.g., Licht & Siegel, 2006) implies the social agency of entrepreneurs such interests seem to be environmentally sensitive (e.g., heightened agency in developing economies) and thus not indicative of entrepreneurs generally. Indeed, the literature is dominated by the supposition that traditional entrepreneurs are almost exclusively motivated by self-interest; specifically in regard to maximizing profit, and an individual’s personal utility (Miller, Grimes, McMullen, & Vogus, 2012). However, recently SEs, who are distinctively motivated by social objectives have been identified.

Although scholars have yet to determine one single definition, it is accepted that social entrepreneurship (SE) is “an innovative, social value-creating activity, that can occur within or across the non-profit, business or government sector” (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006, p. 2). As such, SEs may consciously pursue social and/or economic objectives. Dees (1998, p. 4) suggests SEs “play the role of change agents” [...] “by creat[ing] and sustain[ing] social value”, “relentlessly pursuing new opportunities” serving a social mission, continually innovating, adapting and learning, and “exhibiting heightened accountability”. The range of explanations in consideration of who social entrepreneurs are, how they are motivated, and what they are capable of suggests that research contributing to a typology of SEs may aid in our understanding.

Enhancing well-being (Perrini, 2006) via focusing on social agency, and accountability is what distinguishes SEs from traditional entrepreneurs. Furthermore definitions of success are variant, traditional entrepreneurs seek profit maximization whereas SEs prioritize social impact and draw on revenue streams in order to ensure financial sustainability. Examples of social entrepreneurs spanning environmental, and/or social interests include Cicely Saunders who started the hospice movement, and Mohammad Yunus who started micro-financing to a group of women in a Bangladesh. The purpose of this paper is to explore the roles of SEs in driving rural destination development, and where possible, discover patterns toward the development of new frameworks or theory.

Different types of SEs have been identified in the literature including resourceful key actors, heroic individuals (Nicholls, 2010), and those interested in “put[ing] something back’ into society” (Thompson, 2002, p. 414), aiming to create social change (Dees, 1998). Personal motivations of SEs reflect one’s “voyage of self-discovery and [...] drive by a cause (Thompson, 2002, p. 414). The primary focus of SEs to make a social contribution perhaps explains the positive light in which the research presents these individuals. SEs encompass a variety of individuals with different backgrounds and in some cases, the social objectives are their only motivation, whereas in others, such objectives parallel profit interests. The shared commonality is a desire to achieve social objectives.

Research on SEs has gained traction among a variety of business fields yet, interest among tourism scholars has been slow to develop. The insurmountable behaviours and practices in the tourism industry globally highlight the imperative for sustainability thinking (Boluk, Cavaliere, & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2017). Sustainability discussions in tourism highlight opportunities for considering the role of SEs (Ergul & Johnson, 2011). A SE keyword search carried out in July 2017 among top tourism journals revealed only one publication in *Annals of Tourism Research* (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016) and *Tourism Management* (Altinay, Sigala, & Waligo, 2016). Kimbu and Ngoasong’s (2016) research details the critical role of women SEs in Cameroon, who combine social transformation and commercial goals while promoting local development. Altinay et al.’s (2016) research used Guludo Beach Lodge in Mozambique as a

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