



NEW GEOGRAPHIES OF EUROPE

Collaborative Workspaces Beyond the Urban

Economy, Community
and Regional Development

Edited by

Vasilis Avdikos · Suntje Schmidt · Ilaria Mariotti
Ignasi Capdevila · Thilo Lang · Vera Fabinyi



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New Geographies of Europe

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Vera Fabinyi, Vasilis Avdikos, Suntje Schmidt, Ilaria Mariotti, and Ignasi Capdevila	
Actors, Labour and Function	15
Rural Work, Rural Workers or Working in the Rural?	17
Gary Bosworth	
Actors and Networks Building Coworking Spaces in Rural Austria: Motivations, Contributions and Challenges	35
Carina Wagner and Elisabeth Gruber	
Labouring Together: An Assemblage Perspective on Rural Collaborative Workspaces	53
Nikos Gatsinos and Colm Stockdale	
Exploring Hybridity in Non-urban Collaborative Workspaces: Case Studies from Alpine Regions	73
Helyaneh Aboutalebi Tabrizi and Eleonora Psenner	
Coworking as a Driver for Flexible Work in Sweden	93
Anna Rex and Hans Westlund	

Organisation, Social Dynamics and Spaces of Experiences	109
How the ‘Middleground’ Is Leveraged to Foster Cross-Industry Innovation and Drive Socio-economic Development	111
Juan Diaz-Zagarra and Eleonora Psenner	
From Vacancy to Vitality: How ‘Meanwhile’ Spaces Shape Urban-Rural Socio-economic Dynamics in Oxfordshire, UK	129
Xiaojie Jessie Tan	
Unlocking the Potential of Rural Collaborative Workspaces Through Short-Term Coworking Experiences	149
João Almeida and Maria Bastos	
Exploring Women’s Experiences of Wellbeing in Rural CWS: Evidence from Italy and Austria	167
Francesca Chiara Ciccarelli and Alexandra Wrbka	
Roles, Identities and Imaginaries of CWS in Regional Development and Its Policies	187
Revitalizing Rural Landscapes Through Coworking Spaces: An Exploration of Narratives and Discourses on Place Identity	189
José Ignacio Sánchez-Vergara, Marko Orel, and Valeria Ferreira-Gregorio	
Coworking from (and for) Which <i>Rural</i>? Spatial Imaginaries Within the Project “Spazi Generativi” in Piedmont, Italy	209
Samantha Cenere	
Collaborative Workspaces Enhancing Youth Employment in Rural Areas	229
Dimitrios Manoukas and Ilaria Mariotti	
Impact of Makerspace on the Socio-economic Sphere in Peripheral Areas in Poland	255
Karolina Kapustka	

How to Engage with Local Communities for Regional Development in Rural Areas? Participatory Formats in Outreach Hubs	275
Iciar Dominguez Lacasa and Dana Mietzner	
Collaborative Workspaces Beyond Big Cities: Common Features and Open Questions	301
Danai Liodaki and Thilo Lang	
Index	319

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LIST OF FIGURES

Rural Work, Rural Workers or Working in the Rural?

- | | | |
|--------|--|----|
| Fig. 1 | Rural work, rural workers and working in the rural | 20 |
| Fig. 2 | Creating value for people and places | 25 |
| Fig. 3 | The connecting function of coworking spaces | 27 |

Actors and Networks Building Coworking Spaces in Rural Austria: Motivations, Contributions and Challenges

- | | | |
|--------|--|----|
| Fig. 1 | Actor involvement from the operator's perspective.
Own illustration | 48 |
|--------|--|----|

Exploring Hybridity in Non-urban Collaborative Workspaces: Case Studies from Alpine Regions

- | | | |
|--------|---|----|
| Fig. 1 | Spatial analysis of the cases within 1 km and 500 m.
Source: Authors | 83 |
|--------|---|----|

Coworking as a Driver for Flexible Work in Sweden

- | | | |
|--------|--|----|
| Fig. 1 | Sweden's regions and their regional centers, as selected through
for this study | 96 |
|--------|--|----|

Unlocking the Potential of Rural Collaborative Workspaces Through Short-Term Coworking Experiences

Fig. 1 Remote Workers during the Rural Experience in Miranda do Douro (Source: Authors) 156

Fig. 2 Remote Workers participating in a community event (Source: Authors) 160

Impact of Makerspace on the Socio-economic Sphere in Peripheral Areas in Poland

Fig. 1 Distribution of makerspace in Poland, with identification of peripheral areas 263

Fig. 2 Distribution of MS influence in Poland’s peripheral areas including organizations. The bolded text represents the greatest impact of MS 267

How to Engage with Local Communities for Regional Development in Rural Areas? Participatory Formats in Outreach Hubs

Fig. 1 Number of users during open lab days (10/2022–12/2023) 286

Fig. 2 Participatory science cube for Format 1 (Schrögel & Kolleck, 2019, p. 90) 287

Fig. 3 Participatory science cube for Format 2 (see Schrögel and Kolleck (2019) for general science cube introduction) 289

Fig. 4 Participatory science cube Format 3 (see Schrögel & Kolleck (2019) for general science cube introduction) 291

Fig. 5 Participatory science cube Format 4 (see Schrögel and Kolleck (2019) for general science cube introduction) 292

LIST OF PICTURES

How to Engage with Local Communities for Regional Development in Rural Areas? Participatory Formats in Outreach Hubs

Picture 1	Outreach hub Gewerbehof—inside and outside perspectives	282
Picture 2	Gewerbehof Luckenwalde, building of OpenBikeSensors with a housing and fitting to the bike	288

LIST OF TABLES

Introduction

Table 1	Shares of CWS in urban, intermediate and rural NUTS3 regions (Marmo et al., 2025)	3
---------	---	---

Actors and Networks Building Coworking Spaces in Rural Austria: Motivations, Contributions and Challenges

Table 1	Characteristics of coworking spaces, operators and buildings in which the coworking space is located (at the time of the interview)	40
---------	---	----

Labouring Together: An Assemblage Perspective on Rural Collaborative Workspaces

Table 1	Rhizomatic and arborescent-like practices in CWS assemblages	66
---------	--	----

Exploring Hybridity in Non-urban Collaborative Workspaces: Case Studies from Alpine Regions

Table 1	Implications of hybridity within CWS literature	77
Table 2	Pre-interview features indicating cases' hybridity	81
Table 3	Exploring hybridity in CWS by interviews	82
Table 4	Exploring hybridity in locational conditions	86

Coworking as a Driver for Flexible Work in Sweden

Table 1	Distribution of firms within industry codes	97
Table 2	Starting year of the 42 establishments	98

From Vacancy to Vitality: How ‘Meanwhile’ Spaces Shape Urban-Rural Socio-economic Dynamics in Oxfordshire, UK

Table 1	Comparative overview of urban and rural coworking spaces (Author, 2024)	133
Table 2	Overview of events and facilities at Makespace Oxford’s hub spaces (Author, 2024)	137

Unlocking the Potential of Rural Collaborative Workspaces Through Short-Term Coworking Experiences

Table 1	Summary of the impact of short-term coworking experiences on social capital and practical implications	161
---------	--	-----

Exploring Women’s Experiences of Wellbeing in Rural CWS: Evidence from Italy and Austria

Table 1	Participants’ characteristics	172
---------	-------------------------------	-----

Revitalizing Rural Landscapes Through Coworking Spaces: An Exploration of Narratives and Discourses on Place Identity

Table 1	Coworking spaces that are part of Cowocat Rural network	194
Table 2	Place managers involved in rural coworking development	201

Collaborative Workspaces Enhancing Youth Employment in Rural Areas

Table 1	Unemployment and NEET rates in Ireland, France, Extremadura-Spain, Italy, and Portugal	236
Table 2	CWS characteristics of the five case studies	244

How to Engage with Local Communities for Regional Development in Rural Areas? Participatory Formats in Outreach Hubs

Table 1	Overview of participatory formats within the outreach hub Gewerbehof Luckenwalde	284
---------	--	-----



Introduction

*Vera Fabinyi, Vasilis Avdikos, Suntje Schmidt,
Ilaria Mariotti, and Ignasi Capdevila*

I COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACES IN CITIES AND BEYOND

Since the early 2000s, coworking spaces—as the archetype of collaborative workspaces—along with other forms of shared spaces (such as maker-spaces, FabLabs, creative hubs, business incubators) have proliferated around the world, mainly in big agglomerations such as global cities and metropolitan areas. While in 2018 the number of spaces amounted to 16,599 by 2024, they had risen to 41,975 worldwide (Statista, 2023). On the one hand, the expansion and popularity of collaborative workspaces (hereafter CWS), especially in big agglomerations, can be linked to the turn towards cognitive capitalism intertwined with shifts in the economic

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structure. On the other hand, CWS stands in relation to the growing importance of globalisation since the late twentieth century and the parallel splintering of value-chains that resulted in more freelance work. Cognitive capitalism has increased the importance of knowledge (and knowledge workers) as an economic resource, because it leads to innovation for value creation (Reckwitz, 2021; Storper, 1997). The shift in the organisational structure of the economy manifests in the change of employment patterns such as new independent, project-based, non-routine work, mainly executed by freelancers and self-employed persons (Boeri et al., 2020; Broeckling, 2007; Pongratz & Voss, 2003; Spreitzer et al., 2017). Within this context, CWS in big cities have risen dramatically since the mid-2000s as they hosted the main actors of the shifts above. Freelancers, start-ups, SMEs and large corporations use CWS as sites where labour is performed, networks are enlarged, and collaborations are evident on various levels. Even though CWS remain to be primarily an urban phenomenon (Table 1), recently we observed the gradual spread of CWS in less densely populated communities in rural and even peripheral regions across the EU that face challenges such as brain drain, low investments level, little entrepreneurship, lower social capital and less high-skilled labour to name a few (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024). Recent studies show that CWS in predominantly intermediary and rural NUTS 3 regions count for about 34% of the total number of CWS in Europe, which can be counted at around 12.000 (Marmo et al., 2025). (see Table 1).

CWS in non-urban areas seem to differentiate themselves by those found in urban areas and metropolises and thus entail different scopes, functions and impacts, as they are embedded in their localities (Knapp & Sawy, 2021). By morphing in different spatial settings such as rural, peripheral, suburban or remote areas, CWS are partly shaped by and respond to the specific socio-economic situations of the localities and can be considered as a place-based solution for several structural deficiencies of small towns and villages (Avdikos & Papageorgiou, 2021; Capdevila, 2022).

2 DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN URBAN AND NON-URBAN CWS

As laid out earlier, CWS in urban areas are configured under economic- and labour-related discussions departing from and crystallising in mainly large agglomerations, where the knowledge economy resides. Here,

Table 1 Shares of CWS in urban, intermediate and rural NUTS3 regions (Marmo et al., 2025)

	<i>Country</i>	<i>N. CWS</i>	<i>% of CWS in</i>			
			<i>Urban regions</i>	<i>Intermediate regions</i>	<i>Rural regions</i>	<i>Remote regions</i>
1	UK	2,761	91.5%	8.5%	0.1%	0.3%
2	Netherlands	549	86.7%	13.1%	0.2%	0.0%
3	Lithuania	38	78.9%	21.1%	0.0%	2.6%
4	Latvia	30	76.7%	23.3%	0.0%	16.7%
5	Spain	1,223	71.6%	27.2%	1.1%	3.3%
6	Greece	99	68.7%	19.2%	12.1%	12.1%
7	Germany	1,543	67.0%	25.0%	8.0%	1.6%
8	Italy	820	63.4%	28.5%	8.0%	3.5%
9	Finland	60	61.7%	23.3%	15.0%	6.7%
10	Estonia	25	60.0%	0.0%	40.0%	16.0%
11	Belgium	262	59.2%	35.5%	5.3%	0.0%
12	France	1,932	58.5%	22.1%	19.4%	5.4%
13	Bulgaria	109	56.0%	38.5%	5.5%	9.2%
14	Denmark	83	55.4%	32.5%	12.0%	4.8%
15	Switzerland	260	55.4%	41.2%	3.5%	8.5%
16	Portugal	398	50.5%	17.6%	31.9%	13.6%
17	Czech Republic	137	47.4%	40.1%	12.4%	0.0%
18	Sweden	296	44.9%	44.9%	10.1%	19.9%
19	Croatia	36	41.7%	36.1%	22.2%	27.8%
20	Slovakia	83	37.3%	39.8%	22.9%	0.0%
21	Austria	456	33.8%	39.5%	26.8%	5.3%
22	Norway	164	28.0%	55.5%	16.5%	27.4%
23	Ireland	645	21.6%	9.3%	69.1%	21.7%
	Total/ Average	12,009	65.9%	24.4%	9.7%	4.4%

The % of remote regions is a separate category of regions and is not added up to the urban, intermediate, rural regions sums

certain themes and topics in academic fields ranging from geography, sociology, economics, planning to organisation and business studies had been aligned to CWS. Studies in favour of and interest in the creation and exploitation of innovation highlighted the processes of (different) value creation, creativity and innovation through and in CWS (Brinks, 2019; ‘Collaborative spaces in the digital era’, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2014) and the empowerment of entrepreneurial proficiency (Bouncken et al., 2020; Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Butcher, 2018). CWS have been conceptualised as micro-clusters (Capdevila, 2013), spatio-temporal configurations (Schmidt et al., 2014) and relational milieu (Gandini, 2015) that facilitate learning processes (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Butcher, 2018) and a sense of community (Akhavan et al., 2023; Garrett et al., 2017). Furthermore, they contribute to the exchange and sharing of knowledge from different fields, variety of proximity, trust and social relations traditionally found in industrial clusters (Capdevila, 2013; Mariotti & Akhavan, 2020; Parrino, 2015). In line with these topics and conceptualisations, some research started to elaborate the role of CWS *beyond the urban*. Similarities had been drawn especially on the economic aspect, whereas the social aspect in non-urban areas may even play a bigger role but differentiate from the social relations that are found in urban CWS. In respect to the local economy, similarities to their urban counterparts had been drawn as CWS contribute to strengthen the local ecosystem. This is done by gathering local entrepreneurs (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024) and providing them with access to usually missing local and extra local networks and diverse types of support, thus revitalising small towns and boosting rural regions to catch up with urban agglomerations (Bosworth et al., 2023; Fuzi, 2015; Jamal, 2018). Beyond that, their role in attracting remote workers and digital nomads was pointed out, which results in higher competitiveness of micro-clusters in peripheral areas (Danko et al., 2024; Mariotti & Sasso, 2024) and upgrades the economic paths of non-urban areas.

However, another string of literature focused on the social function for the local community such as in the case of community hubs (Akhavan et al., 2023; Avdikos & Merkel, 2020; Mariotti et al., 2024). In urban areas, the social function of CWS was considered as a new social practice of self-help and self-organisation to cope with precarity and insecurity (Merkel, 2019) and to improve career resilience (Schmidt et al., 2024). CWS *beyond the urban*, however, became conceptualised as resilient spaces (Gandini & Cossu, 2021), which especially underlined their function as

enablers of social innovation and as platforms for knowledge exchange’ by blending entrepreneurial, social and political components (Avdikos & Papageorgiou, 2021, p. 671). Adding to this, CWS contribute to well-being for the workers and the local community (Cicarelli et al., 2025). They provide the possibility for users to avoid social isolation, reducing commuting and benefit a clearer distinction between private and professional life (Hölzel & De Vries, 2021). Along this line, CWS can contribute to processes of social innovation by providing services lacking in marginalised rural areas (Merrell et al., 2021; Stockdale & Avdikos, 2025).

Nevertheless, these wider impacts are scarcely researched. So far most of the studies remain focused on the economic impacts, fostering or attracting entrepreneurs, remote workers or creative workforces to adapt economic paths and converge the places towards agglomerated areas (Bosworth et al., 2023; Danko et al., 2024; Fuzi, 2015; Jamal, 2018). Others acknowledge their hybridity depending on the local challenges and settings they are situated in and eventually also generate other benefits such as well-being (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020; Ciccarelli et al., 2025; Gandini & Cossu, 2021; Merrell et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is often referred to small and medium-sized towns or rural areas located mostly in Italy, Germany, Austria, Catalonia, the UK or Northern America. Hence even though research started to focus on CWS and their contribution to and impact on regional development trajectories outside of urban areas, the studies remain scattered around distinct spatial concepts, theories, disciplines and countries.

3 NON-URBAN AREAS AND THEIR FUTURES

The socio-economic shift in non-urban areas has been evident for several decades. For example, rural regions used to be characterised by a high population density and were predominantly home to the primary sector. Today many rural areas are characterised by out-migration and a functional expansion from mainly agricultural production towards places of consumption due to their natural amenities. In addition, restructuring has consequences not only on a socio-economic level but also on the perception and representation of rural places, as they are often seen both as economically weak and lagging places or as idyllic places due to their natural landscapes (Görmar & Lang, 2019; Silva & Figueiredo, 2013). Rural places are thus set as a counter-category to the urban, modern or even productive space, which overlaps with peripheralisation processes of

non-core areas (Leick & Lang, 2018). Peripheral areas are associated by external actors with negative connotations, which is often internalised by inhabitants (Willett, 2016). In addition to the discursive dimension, peripheralisation has been conceptualised as multi-dimensional and multi-scalar process that highlight the diverse and interlinked processes of social, economic and political peripheralisation instead of reducing it to a status as such (Kühn, 2015; Lang, 2015). The process-based conceptualisation shifts also the understanding of rural areas from being associated with the primary sector, natural resources, rural idyll imaginaries or with economic weakness towards areas produced by spatial dynamics, even though not all rural areas might be affected by peripheralisation processes and not all peripheralised areas are rural (Dax & Fischer, 2018; Shucksmith, 2018).

Considering peripheralisation as a process does not only highlight how places are produced, but also imply the possibility for change. Following up on that, peripheral areas can be considered as spaces of possibility, with some degree of freedom for local actors to shape future trajectories (Dax & Fischer, 2018; Shucksmith, 2018; Spanier, 2021; Willett & Lang, 2018; Woods, 2019). Within this scope, the development of peripheral (rural) areas can be shaped by local actors leveraging place-specific resources and alternative narrations and imaginaries of the places can be created. In addition, imagining diverse futures of rural places put an emphasis on alternative ideologies of development (Spanier, 2021), including lenses such as diverse and community economies discourse (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Schmid & Smith, 2021) feminist and post-colonial theories (Escobar, 2020; Jazeel, 2018; Roy, 2016), de- and post-growth discourses (Demaria et al., 2019; Schmelzer & Vetter, 2024; Schmid, 2021), all contributing to a reading for difference, multiplicity and heterogeneity.

4 FOCUS AND AIM OF THE BOOK AND INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTERS

Building on that, the book highlights the variegated impacts of CWS on beyond the urban that can contribute to development, understood in its heterodox terms. Heterodox understanding of development goes beyond equalising development with economic growth and modernisation. The understanding of spatial development is rather context-specific and place-sensitive towards the history, social structure, gender, environment, institutions and alternative cultural practices in influencing development processes. Hence the multi-dimensional and multi-scalar processes that

define development are considered (Martinelli et al., 2012). These perspectives advocate for more holistic and sustainable approaches to development: well-being, quality of life and happiness, gender and socio-spatial justice, alternative economic systems and the acknowledgement of diverse economies, environmental sustainability and ecological thinking, participatory governance and local empowerment. As such, heterodox development lenses require us to broaden the scope of the functions and the effects of CWS in non-urban areas. CWS are not only drivers of economic growth, but also socio-economic structures that are developed because of specific local needs, and most of them are funded via public institutions (Capdevila, 2021; Mariotti & Sasso, 2024).

Based on this, the first section of the book highlights the actors, labour and functions of CWS. Bosworth (Chapter “Rural Work, Rural Workers or Working in the Rural?”) breaks down three types of work performed in rural areas, which allows a differentiated view on the degree of economic and local embeddedness of these types of work, the role of coworking spaces in providing networks corresponding to the different degrees of embeddedness and its effect on rural spaces. Whereas Bosworth highlights the links and connections that CWS can provide its users, Wagner and Gruber (Chapter “Actors and Networks Building Coworking Spaces in Rural Austria: Motivations, Contributions and Challenges”) delineate the network of actors involved in the evolution of CWS, their intrinsic motivations and the importance of both formal and informal ties during different stages of the implementation of CWS. The emergence of CWS as a relational networked medium further represents the existence of dynamic social communities and the agglomeration of social (entrepreneurial) activities that lead to mitigating professional and social isolation in rural areas. Besides the importance of actor constellation for setting up a CWS, an open and horizontal governance structure in CWS needs to be in place in order to unlock the potential latent in rural communities as Stockdale and Gatsinos (Chapter “Labouring Together: An Assemblage Perspective on Rural Collaborative Workspaces”) show. However, even though completely flat structures seem to be ideal, in reality vertical and horizontal structures may coexist. The hybrid nature of CWS is further emphasised in Tabrizi’s and Psenner’s chapter (Chapter “Exploring Hybridity in Non-urban Collaborative Workspaces: Case Studies from Alpine Regions”). Hybridity of CWS is influenced by local conditions, but the spaces are also working towards hybridising their surroundings through various services and sociocultural activities engaging interested locals and decision-makers.

By doing so, they contribute to the vibrancy of non-urban areas and contribute to the revitalisation of its surroundings. In line with the capacity of hybrid spaces to attract high-skilled workers, Rex and Westlund (Chapter “Coworking as a Driver for Flexible Work in Sweden”) highlight the positive effect of offering workspaces and a community for remote workers in peripheral contexts. Thus, peripheral areas might become revitalised through the establishment of a local node by a larger firm.

Whereas the first part points out the actors, labour and functions of CWS, the second part focuses on the organisational level and highlights the social dynamics and experiences. Diaz-Zagarra and Psenner (Chapter “How the ‘Middleground’ Is Leveraged to Foster Cross-Industry Innovation and Drive Socio-economic Development”) delineate CWS as a middle ground that fosters the collaboration between established industries and culture and creative industries. By acting as such, CWS may contribute to socio-economic development of post-transition regions tackling brain drain and the fragmentation of networks. Tan (Chapter “From Vacancy to Vitality: How ‘Meanwhile’ Spaces Shape Urban-Rural Socio-economic Dynamics in Oxfordshire, UK”) provides insights in the provision of affordable and multi-functional spaces for local communities, social enterprises and marginalised groups and its transformative potential to bridge urban and rural socio-economic divides, promoting socio-economic resilience and community cohesion. In contrast to that, Almeida and Bastos (Chapter “Unlocking the Potential of Rural Collaborative Workspaces Through Short-Term Coworking Experiences”) emphasise the new opportunities for rural areas created by short-term co-working experiences. Whilst demonstrating key barriers for the sustainability of the spaces, also potential strengths are pointed out and complemented with implications for overcoming the barriers through community-building, collaboration, co-creation and communication. Lastly, Ciccarelli and Wrбка (Chapter “Exploring Women’s Experiences of Wellbeing in Rural CWS: Evidence from Italy and Austria”) underline the opportunities of CWS for female professionals, who are often negatively affected by structural challenges in rural areas such as limited workplace accessibility, long commutes and insufficient public services, like childcare. By serving as workplace and social space, CWS can enhance the well-being through social interactions and reciprocal care practices.

The last section focuses on the level of roles, identities and imaginaries of CWS in regional development processes and policies. Here the role of CWS in revitalising local landscapes and shaping place identity narratives

is pointed out by Sánchez-Vergara, Orel and Ferreira-Gregorio (Chapter “Revitalizing Rural Landscapes Through Coworking Spaces: An Exploration of Narratives and Discourses on Place Identity”). CWS allow to highlight local culture, history and shared values, which might attract remote workers, cultivate a sense of belonging and foster place attachment. Considering place narratives from another angle, Cenere (Chapter “Coworking from (and for) Which *Rural*? Spatial Imaginaries Within the Project “Spazi Generativi” in Piedmont, Italy”) stresses the manifold spatial imaginaries rural CWS entail in place-based policies. The manner of imaginaries depends on the actors (and their respective spatial imaginaries) involved and participating in the creation of rural CWS. These shape rural CWS and reproduce a certain form of rurality. Manoukas and Mariotti (Chapter “Collaborative Workspaces Enhancing Youth Employment in Rural Areas”) engage with regional development processes through the enhancement of youth employment by CWS. They highlight the potential of CWS to support and promote youth employment, through training, core-periphery links, digital networks and different levels of hybridity. While CWS play a role in youth employment, Kaputcka (Chapter “Impact of Makerspace on the Socio-economic Sphere in Peripheral Areas in Poland”) lays out how CWS create impact on the individual user, local and regional levels in peripheral areas. They improve competencies and skill, whilst supporting local organisations in their development, providing access to the necessary tools for prototyping or bridging the gap between regions in terms of digital skills and access to technological infrastructure. Lastly, Lacasa and Mietzner (Chapter “How to Engage with Local Communities for Regional Development in Rural Areas? Participatory Formats in Outreach Hubs”) highlight the special role of CWS linked to universities to engage directly with local communities. Here CWS functions as a crystallisation point for forming interaction and collaboration between universities and the civil society. Thus, issues of local communities can be directly addressed, or the development of solutions can be facilitated through universities.

As most of the chapters of the book show, CWS can be seen as relational mediums that intensify the flow of people, businesses, materials and networks in less densely populated areas, where agglomerations do not usually exist. Through highlighting the multifaceted CWS in non-urban areas in the book, we also wish to stress the need for opening the topic to questions linked to wider discussions about rural development and future trajectories. Thus, the book can function as a starting point for further

investigating the role and importance of these spaces in rural development processes taking questions into account such as *how far and what kind of future imaginaries are CWS able to mobilise? To what extent are or should these spaces be political spaces? How far are these spaces shaped by (but also shape) new alternative ideologies of rural development? And to what extent do these spaces entail transformative potential for rural and peripheral areas?*

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Actors, Labour and Function



Rural Work, Rural Workers or Working in the Rural?

Gary Bosworth

1 INTRODUCTION¹

The growth in remote and hybrid forms of working that has been facilitated by digital communications technology allows more people to work in rural areas. This trend accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic with employers and national governments establishing clearer guidelines and policies to support remote working (Manoukas et al. *this volume*). As more employees as well as freelance and self-employed workers now have the choice to work remotely, this has created new opportunities for rural coworking spaces to offer an alternative to the home office, a trend explored throughout this edited collection. However, taking a step back

¹This chapter is developed from a keynote presentation at the CORAL ITN closing conference, Athens, November 2024. As such, it is intended to provoke new questions about the next phase of developments in the rural coworking sector.

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to reflect on the types of work and workers that are part of this trend, we need to understand the degree to which the workers and their working practices are becoming embedded into local social and business networks. To address this, two specific questions guide the chapter; firstly, how do “rural work” or “rural workers” differ from “working in the rural”? and secondly, to what extent are people working in the rural engaged as part of the local production or consumption economy?

The chapter title is inspired by an earlier paper by Steffen Korsgaard and others (2015) titled “Rural Entrepreneurship or Entrepreneurship in the Rural – Between Place and Space”. Here, the assertion is that rural entrepreneurship is more dependent on the rural area in terms of access to resources, local networks or local markets and this leads entrepreneurs to consider the needs of the local area in their work. By contrast, for entrepreneurs operating in the rural as merely a convenient location, they are less likely to become so embedded in their local economy for business reasons. They are also more likely to participate as consumers, where their choices of where to work and how to engage in the local area are driven more by self-fulfilment and consumer choice rather than productive necessities. Previously, I have also argued that for a business to be described as “rural”, it should either serve a rural market or rely on the rural environment for the production of goods or services (Bosworth, 2012; Bosworth & Turner, 2018).

Translating this line of thinking into a new understanding of rural remote work, we must revert to the definition of Rural: (*adjective*) *in, of or like the country* (Oxford English Dictionary).

It then follows that “rural work” is somehow different to other forms of work—it must have a particular relevance to the rural environment or to rural communities. For example, the farmer, the forester or the adventure tourism instructor might all perform their work in rural spaces and assume a duty of care over those environments. We could also argue that their personal identities are “rural” (e.g. Riley, 2016). Equally, the village shopkeeper or pub landlord also provides essential social infrastructure and has a similar responsibility to maintain the facility for the communities. Thus, I argue that rural work is materially shaping the landscape or social environments in which it takes place.

Logically, rural work is done by rural workers, but rural workers might do other types of work too. At one level, we could break down the tasks of a farmer and argue that doing the farm accounts is not rural work, but for the purposes of this chapter, I will assume that the farmer is a rural

worker and that the nature of the rural work extends to the associated tasks required to operate the farm business. There could be other forms of rural workers who are not engaged in rural work though. For example, someone who has only lived and worked in a small village would probably describe themselves as a rural person and feel rooted in their rural community. If they are working as a tradesperson or for the local government office in the nearby town, their work is unlikely to be described as “rural work”, but they have found employment that allows them to remain part of the rural community that they call home. These people are part of the rural economy and rural labour market, directly employing their skills within that territory. Where they share a sense of attachment to the local area, economic decisions can become increasingly influenced by, or embedded in, prevailing social relations too (Granovetter, 1985).

The third category of “working in the rural”, however, could be any type of work that is done in a rural area. This includes the examples above but also includes home-working and remote working carried out by employees of urban firms, freelance workers operating in rural area and work done by visitors to the countryside. These people may not be part of the local labour market, feeling much more attached to professional networks elsewhere, and consequently they may have much weaker embeddedness within the local economy. However, this growth of remote and flexible forms provides the focus for exploring the evolving opportunities for rural coworking spaces and the likely implications for rural economies and their labour markets (Fig. 1).

As illustrated above, the logical conclusion is that all rural work is done by rural workers and all rural workers are working in the rural, but the relative size of each domain will vary between different types of rural places. In countries with high rates of counterurbanisation and remote working, the outer circle will be much larger but in more remote and self-contained rural places, the inner circles will remain much more dominant. This has important implications for rural development policy because the needs and challenges of remote workers and rural workers are not the same and the contribution that each can make to their local economies is also very different.

The chapter continues by examining the meanings of embeddedness within a rural context before considering the roles that coworking spaces might play in serving the needs of the different groups of people working in rural areas.

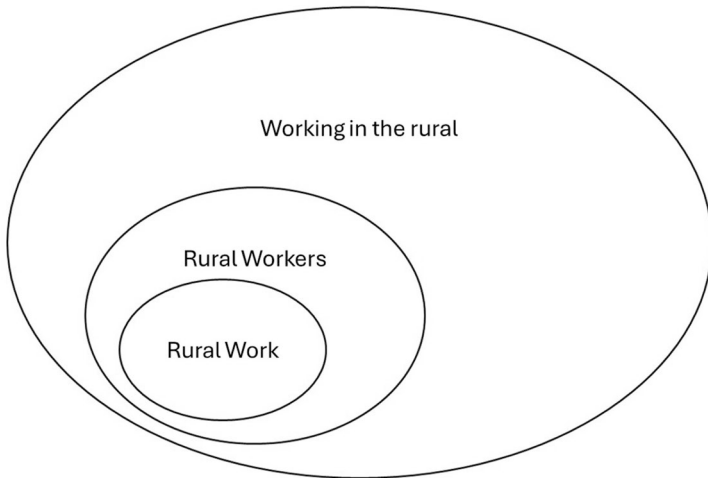


Fig. 1 Rural work, rural workers and working in the rural

1.1 (Local) Embeddedness

As rural development theory has increasingly emphasised the importance of local assets (Horlings et al., 2018; Korsgaard et al., 2015), endogenous and neo-endogenous dynamics (Shucksmith, 2010; Gkartzios & Scott, 2014; Cejudo & Navarro, 2020), and place-based or community-led approaches (Sørensen, 2018; Bock, 2019; Dinnie & Fischer, 2020), there has been an implicit assumption that “localness” implies a degree of connectedness to the places in question. This connectedness has been aligned with the notion of embeddedness, but it is important to distinguish between economic embeddedness and local embeddedness. Granovetter defined embeddedness without a spatial dimension as, “The argument that the behavior and institutions to be analyzed are so constrained by ongoing social relations that to construe them as independent is a grievous misunderstanding” (Granovetter, 1985, pp. 481–482). While it might be easy to assume that these social relations are strongest in a local area, the mobility of rural people and the extended nature of business networks challenge this (Dubois, 2016).

Turning specifically to “local embeddedness”, the territorial dimension provides a very useful mechanism for understanding the degree to which entrepreneurs become part of the local economy, benefit from local

knowledge and bridge the social and economic spheres in their communities (Jack & Anderson, 2002). Indeed, it has been argued that “the ‘local’ embeddedness of actors leads to an institutional thickness that is thought to be one crucial success factor for regions in a continuously globalizing economy” (Hess, 2004, p. 166). Furthermore, this approach allows us to contrast the processes of becoming locally embedded, for example among those moving into rural areas where in-migrants are often better able to exploit extra-local opportunities (Kalantaridis & Bika, 2006).

As we begin to recognise local embeddedness as a process where individuals have agency in expressing choices of where they develop more and stronger connections, the role of meeting places like coworking spaces take on particular significance. A lot of research explains the internal dynamics of coworking spaces as co-creative learning and innovation hubs (Merkel, 2017; Leone et al., 2021; Bouncken & Tiberius, 2023), but embeddedness at the community level remains more complex (Johns et al., 2024; Bosworth et al., 2023). Conceptualising the difference between rural workers, rural work and “working in the rural” reveals the importance of rural places and resources in determining the local embeddedness of different people and their working practices.

Korsgaard et al. argue that “rural entrepreneurship involves an intimate relation between the entrepreneurial activity and the place where it occurs” (2015, p. 7). However, positioning the “rural entrepreneur” as a special case, distinct from the entrepreneur in the rural, it removes the assumption that this is true of all entrepreneurs in rural areas. Two decades of scholarship on embedded rural entrepreneurs have highlighted the potential value of being embedded, both for the firms and for their local economies. These include access to local knowledge, trust and reciprocity among local firms and consumers, and a business identity that can draw on positive aspects of the local rural area (Jack & Anderson, 2002; McKeever et al., 2015; Habersetzer et al., 2021). However, this line of research has also revealed that local embeddedness cannot be assumed, and also that over-embeddedness can limit innovation and growth (Tregear & Cooper, 2016; Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022). The rationale for entrepreneurs becoming locally embedded or not depends to a large extent upon the core markets and networks that add value to their enterprises (Korsgaard et al., 2015), but also on their assessment of the entrepreneurial identity of the place and whether it confers a positive image upon their own business (Bosworth & Willett, 2011).

As the composition of rural economies has evolved to become increasingly similar to urban economies (Eurostat, 2022), many rural entrepreneurs have the choice about whether to develop strong local connections or whether to focus their attentions on more extensive networks, often facilitated by enhanced digital connectivity. Translating this to the remote worker, the degree of personal choice is again a key factor in determining their local embeddedness. This is where collaborative workspaces can provide opportunities to connect different groups of workers, within the local community, linking to other coworking communities or building wider networks beyond the local area (Bosworth et al., 2023; Marmo et al., 2025). Before considering the implications for the rural economy of this “opt-in” version of local embeddedness, it is important to examine the growth of the rural consumer economy that encapsulates this framing of embeddedness as just another element of the consumption choices that are available to construct different rural lifestyles.

1.2 The Growth of the Rural Consumption Economy

Although regional economics has a long history of focusing on export-based models (Solow, 1957), many argue that consumption is equally if not more important as a driver of growth in rural areas (Slee, 2005; Markusen, 2007; Copus, 2014; Eusébio et al., 2017). The rural consumer economy has generally focused on the growth of leisure and tourism and the value associated with place brands that can add value to a range of food and drink and craft products. Growing demands for rural living have also impacted housing markets and rural communities, researched at length in the counterurbanisation and rural gentrification literature (e.g. Halfacree, 2012; Smith et al., 2021). Increasingly, the appeal of rural lifestyles appears to be strongly influenced by personal choices linked to recreation, nature and quality of life, indicating that the growth of the consumption countryside is a significant factor in shaping the perceptions of counterurbanisers and their expectations of rural living.

With increasing rates of remote working, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, more people have the choice of “working in the rural” instead of commuting every day. This has widened the scope for many counterurbanisers to live further from their place of work and thus allowed residential preferences to be even more strongly influenced by other non-work factors linked to schools and family facilities or personal leisure and environmental preferences. UK property industry reports from the early 2020s

identified significant increases in demand for home offices and gardens (Cheshire et al., 2021; Savills, 2023), suggesting that potential coworkers were relocating to more rural areas, albeit coworking spaces were not necessary on their radar. These new patterns of working in rural areas make it timely to consider the role of coworking and other collaborative workspaces within a consumption economy. I argue that they are simultaneously spaces of production *and* consumption for remote workers who choose coworking spaces for many reasons, including social connections, work-life balance, technology and professional workspace (Merrell et al., 2022; Clifton et al., 2022; Avdikos & Merkel, 2020). Personal lifestyle choices and the professional values of networking and focused, productive working are very blurred so the coworking operator arguably needs to cater for both aspects of their market offer to create successful coworking communities.

Understanding the role of coworking spaces as production and consumption spaces has implications for the embeddedness of their users. As consumers, their embeddedness would arguably be one of choice, preferring to support local businesses as part of the place where they have chosen to live and work. As producers, however, embeddedness would be more dependent on the value of local knowledge and access to local resources that are important in their businesses. For remote-working employees, the productive value of local business networks and coworking is unlikely to reach beyond the individual's ability to perform their daily tasks, but for freelance workers and entrepreneurs, the value of embeddedness in local business networks may be very different.

To explore these different forms of embeddedness among rural and remote workers, the theoretical foundation of Korsgaard et al.'s two ideal types of entrepreneurs are reappraised for remote working. Understanding the different motivations for becoming embedded in a local area and the different implications of embeddedness for their economic behaviour can reveal potential future trajectories of rural areas as places of work. In turn, this can provide valuable insights for the potential roles and development opportunities associated with coworking spaces.

1.3 *How Will Rural Working Practices Reshape Local Rural Economies?*

Aligning remote work with the “entrepreneur in the rural”, we should dismiss the assumption that the growing numbers of people working in rural areas have a direct impact upon the rural economy in terms of output or productivity indicators. We should also reject the assumption that network proximity is the same as spatial proximity and instead recognise the complexities of territorial, organisational and institutional network patterns (Bouba-Olga et al., 2015). Returning to Korsgaard et al. (2015), they explain the choices of “entrepreneurs in the rural” as follows:

The choice of business location in a rural area may be the result of the entrepreneur’s lifestyle choice, but unrelated to the activities of the firm. This may affect how rural entrepreneurs engage with location as “place”. Information technologies and generally improved infrastructure have enabled entrepreneurs to settle down in rural areas and enjoy the pleasures of rural life while running their businesses. While this means that the entrepreneur is enacting a form of rurality in his or her personal life, it does not necessarily mean that this is the case for the entrepreneurial activity. In such an instance the entrepreneurial activity is incidentally located in the rural and the venture engages with the location as a space for profit. (2015, p. 12).

When a remote worker is employed by a firm operating outside of their chosen home location, there is no economic need for that worker to become part of the rural economy. Their productive work is incidentally located in the rural, but the productivity generates value elsewhere. Thus, the rural is little more than a convenient location to work, fitting in with other lifestyle demands. If the mechanism to capture value from “entrepreneurs in the rural” is to build local business networks and encourage businesses to draw on local assets to see new opportunities, the mechanisms to generate value from “workers in the rural” is arguably more limited to their local consumption patterns, which will be more influenced by their lifestyle choices than their employment needs.

Although there may be a weak economic imperative for becoming locally embedded, this need not imply that “workers in the rural” are merely passive inhabitants of rural economies. Arguably, the human need for belonging and a sense of community is an equally powerful force in motivating embeddedness (Munkejord, 2017; Redhead & Bika, 2022), and this can drive locally oriented behaviour. Therefore, operators of rural

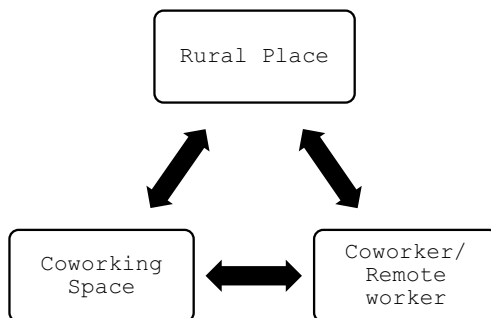
coworking spaces have the opportunity to tap into these different place-based dynamics in order to satisfy the demands of “workers in the rural”. Other rural businesses also need to consider how to serve the demands of people who are increasingly present in rural areas if they are no longer commuting as frequently to workplaces outside their locality. In light of the growth of online competition for retail and leisure spend, one might argue that community venues like coworking spaces will play an increasingly important role in making the local connections that will encourage workers in the rural to engage more in their local economy over time.

The complex dynamics of rural economies and the multiple drivers of embeddedness open up further questions about the role of place in shaping working practices. Focusing specifically on the roles of coworking spaces, operators developing their service offer need to consider their value propositions in relation to the interdependencies between the place, the coworking space and the coworkers (Fig. 2). Some hypothetical questions are presented below the diagram as an illustration of the opportunities for coworking spaces to interact with multiple audiences within their rural localities.

1.4 *What Does the Rural Place Offer the Remote Worker?*

So far, the chapter has focused largely on the question of the rural place and the remote worker. Just as Korsgaard et al. (2015) asked what the rural place offers to the entrepreneur, we can follow this line of enquiry to understand the features of the place that are most likely to see greater embeddedness among remote workers. Where the attractiveness of rural workplaces encompass personal wellbeing factors, such as a nice place to live, reduced

Fig. 2 Creating value for people and places



commuting or a desirable environment (Merrell et al., 2022), coworking spaces need to build this into their business model and marketing. To attract others who are seeking more connections with local businesses and access to local resources, the offer may need to emphasise networking events and other sources of value. Although not discussed here, many rural places offer an attractive space to digital nomads and tourists who look for inspiring, creative places with the necessary infrastructure to allow them to work remotely. For the coworking space, this provides a third audience that requires different marketing approaches and different usage models.

1.5 What Does a Coworking Space Offer to a Remote Worker?

A lot has been written about the general offer of coworking spaces, and this volume expands that literature from a rural perspective, but we have to realise that there are many types of remote worker, as well as many types of coworking or collaborative workspaces. As discussed above, the coworking space needs to be more than just a desk with good IT connectivity and good coffee (these are a given) in order to attract those seeking to develop networks or to enjoy particular types of working environments. Coworking spaces can promote the value of establishing a daily routine with separation of work and home life but when homeworking is free and working from a coffee-shop requires no membership or booking, the value of this offer requires very careful thought. They can also stage events to support workers and entrepreneurs and to make connections with wider networks (Marmo et al., 2025). Fundamentally, selling someone a space to work when, in most cases, these people already have cheaper alternatives is not easy, so it is essential to understand and respond to the wider choices that coworkers are making.

1.6 What Does a Coworking Space Offer to the Rural Economy?

From a policy perspective, coworking spaces are viewed as attractive vehicles for strengthening business networks and providing more opportunities for skilled workers to stay in or move to rural areas. When promoted as hubs for innovation and access to technology, they are seen as part of a stronger entrepreneurial ecosystem that can attract other businesses to an area. However, these benefits are hard to create through a planned policy, particularly in lagging rural economies where the critical mass of potential coworkers is insufficient for the social dynamics to bring about positive change. The contribution of a coworking space to the local economy

should be an important consideration for their operators too. Given that the place is part of the attraction for a large share of the target audience, coworkers can derive value from being part of a movement that strengthens the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. Where venues have revitalised redundant buildings or generated additional investments for a town centre, the collective sense of achievement strengthens place attachment among users. Where the venue acts as a hub for other networking or skills development activities, it has the dual benefit of helping others and building a stronger set of business networks around the venue.

2 DISCUSSION

Drawing from the complexity of social and economic embeddedness in rural areas, and overlaying certain assumptions about the growth of the consumption countryside, this chapter seeks to place coworking spaces as points of connection between often unconnected actors in the contemporary rural economy. They can provide a foothold for those “working in the rural” to find pathways into local business networks and they can offer support to those undertaking rural work who need access to other professionals, clients or digital technology. As a community, and not just a venue, the coworking space can also stretch across the disparate ways of working in rural areas (see Fig. 3), raising awareness of the potential for different

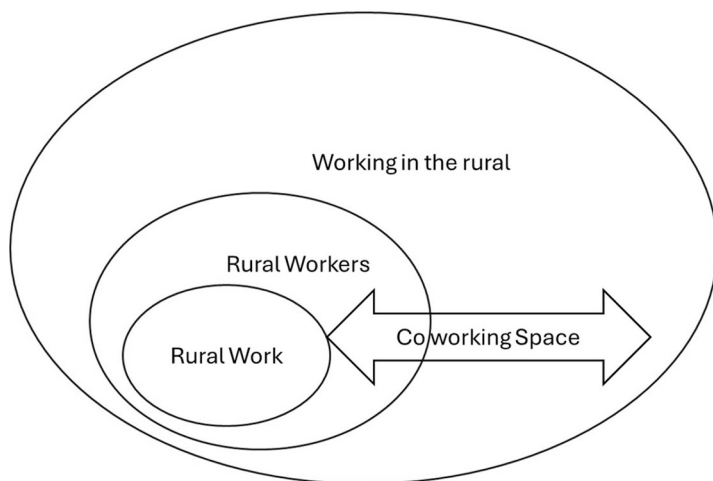


Fig. 3 The connecting function of coworking spaces

types of work and different groups of people to engage successfully in their local rural economies.

In urban areas, coworking spaces have been described as mediating spaces that bring together flows of professional workers including employees, entrepreneurs and freelance workers (Avdikos et al., 2025). In the rural context, they may not be used by people doing rural work, but we should explore how they might still make these connections. For example they might provide new market opportunities for rural tradespeople or support young people to explore different career opportunities that are increasingly possible in rural areas by virtue of the digital technologies available. Among the wider category of rural workers, coworking offers new network connections beyond their locality as well as a professional workplace and working identity. For local freelancers, the opportunities to expand their markets and widen collaboration without having to search for networks outside of their locality can be particularly valuable too.

Current trends suggest that the largest category of people “working in the rural” will be critical to determining the future direction of rural coworking spaces though. For these people, coworking offers a professional workspace where employees can remain connected to their employers, and where they can continue with a similar patterns of work, just with a shorter commute and a different social context. For more nomadic workers, using a coworking space as opposed to a coffee shop or holiday let provides a deeper connection with the local economy as well as the ability to maintain some separation between work and other aspects of their lives. When designing a service to meet the needs of “working in the rural”, coworking operators face the challenge of providing the essential facilities to support productive work and the desirable attributes that will satisfy the consumption demands of remote workers.

One of the features of coworking that crosses over the production and consumption domains is the opportunity for social interactions—whether that is to enhance wellbeing and overcome the isolation of working from home, or whether that is about new business network connections. Staging events and providing informal spaces where unplanned and serendipitous connections can occur can make coworking more accessible and engage more users. That could simply be a café that is open to non-members, or regular network evenings or professional talks—all of which have been tried in different rural venues (Bosworth et al., 2023). Among smaller venues with limited managerial capacity, however, this relies a lot on the goodwill of the owner and the support of the coworking community to

sustain social initiatives. Even maintaining a social media presence or an online community page is a significant time commitment for a small organisation, so this is where more innovative and perhaps collaborative approaches could help.

To date, the inclusiveness and accessibility of coworking venues, particularly smaller venues in rural areas, has been somewhat overlooked. Recognising the needs and different modes of engagement among diverse user groups can strengthen business models by offering multiple value propositions. Encouraging users to engage in activities that promote the venue can also add variety to their offer and reduce the burden on one or two key individuals, but this depends on the community being open to new ideas and new users and it depends upon a critical mass of remote workers. Where rural areas have fewer digital workers and are more remote from economic centres, they are less likely to sustain coworking spaces, adding to the growing disparities between attractive places for consumers of rural living and lagging rural economies in need of greater productivity. We cannot assume, therefore, that coworking spaces will always provide a boost to rural economies. They are currently an attractive option for public sector investment that seeks to stimulate rural productivity, but if the rural area suffers from low demand due to the demographic or worker profiles, the provision of enhanced digital infrastructure or networking spaces alone will have little impact.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Theorising the difference between “rural workers” and those that are “working in the rural” raises some important questions, both for the future trajectory of rural economies and for the potential evolution of rural coworking spaces. Firstly, just as Korsgaard et al. (2015) showed with entrepreneurs, this reveals that the different degrees and underlying rationales for becoming embedded are highly significant and understand evolving patterns of rural working. The needs of rural workers who frequently work with other local businesses and depend on local resources are very different to the needs of people who choose to do their work in a rural area for a range of other reasons. This in turn has implications for the business proposition of coworking spaces in rural areas and raises question about the degree to which these spaces can build meaningful new connections that can strengthen rural economies.

Highlighting the distinction between rural work, rural workers and “working in the rural” also acts as a reminder that a sustainable rural economy requires rural workers to provide key services to local communities and to carry out the jobs that create rural landscapes. Too much focus on the household-level wealth of people “working in the rural” risks ignoring the continuing decline of many areas of “rural work”. The lack of mixing between rural workers and “workers in the rural”, who often live very different lives and interact in very different social and business networks, adds to this risk. Policy makers, and potentially coworking operators, are much more likely to interact with people working in the rural and share their lifestyle-oriented perceptions of rurality. If these groups continue to exist as two immiscible networks within what is often perceived to be a single rural economy, their divergent understandings of rural work and rural life could weaken the social cohesion that has historically been one of the attractions of rural community life, particularly in the UK context. In this light remote working and coworking can be seen as the deeper penetration of urban cultures into rural places, started by counterurbanisation process in the twentieth century (Vartiainen, 1989), which increasingly become sites of consumption through residential and lifestyle choices as well as leisure and recreation. The extent to which they also offer a potential renaissance for rural economies will depend on their inclusivity and continuing appeal among diverse groups of workers in the years ahead.

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Actors and Networks Building Coworking Spaces in Rural Austria: Motivations, Contributions and Challenges

Carina Wagner and Elisabeth Gruber

I INTRODUCTION

Originating in urban areas, coworking spaces (CWSs) have now spread to smaller towns and rural areas (Mariotti et al., 2022; Knapp & Sawy, 2021; Hölzel & de Vries, 2021), which has received considerable attention in recent years. This is because CWSs in rural areas act as economic centres away from urban agglomerations (Bähr et al., 2020; Heinzel & Engstler, 2021; Merrell et al., 2022), provide professional jobs close to home, which affects personal well-being and daily routines, and offer operational advantages for self-employment and flexibility for new entrepreneurs (Gruber, 2022). Similarly, they can act as social ‘anchors’ for local populations and people living in multiple locations to discuss local issues (Bruck et al., 2022, p. 29), thereby discouraging migration and encouraging people to return (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020; Gruber, 2022; Hölzel & de Vries,

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2021). Their multifunctional qualities and arts, culture and education offerings (see Rundel & Salemink, 2021; Cowie et al., 2020) often also intent to revitalise town centres (Bruck et al., 2022; Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century, 2021), thus generating both economic and social added value for rural areas (Tomaz et al., 2021; Hölzel & de Vries, 2021; Bruck et al., 2022; Rundel & Salemink, 2021). CWSs are therefore contemplated as more than just rentable office space and aim to create synergies and facilitate exchanges to build a community (Hölzel & de Vries, 2021; Brinks, 2012). In some countries, several frameworks have been implemented to support the creation of coworking spaces in rural and peripheral areas (e.g. in Austria, regional development agencies have supported the creation of coworking spaces, and even public funding schemes have been implemented (see FFG, 2023; BML, 2023; CIS, 2023)).

However, operating a coworking space (CWS) is often a financially risky endeavour, especially in rural areas, unless a sufficient number of users can be attracted in the medium and long term to generate rental income (e.g. Bähr et al., 2020; de Peuter et al., 2017). In addition, the development of a CWS is also intensive and time-consuming (Gruber, 2022). This is why a central responsibility often lies with the actors who implement CWSs in rural areas. While many studies have investigated the potential effects of CWSs in rural areas, there is still a lack of studies that focus on the people who initiate and operate CWSs, as well as their motivations and objectives for setting up CWSs in the first place. Given the growing support for the establishment of CWSs in rural areas, there is also an impending need for more research, considering the uncertain prospects for success. We know from research to date that the establishment of a coworking space in rural areas is driven by various motivations, including strengthening the local economy and achieving independence from employment (Bähr et al., 2020; Bosworth & Salemink, 2021; Voll et al., 2021). Also, the development of a CWS can be triggered by various factors and involve different actors. But which actors are important, and how exactly does the complex interplay of actors and motivations work? The following sections present findings from a study conducted in Austria based on interviews with operators (9) of different types of rural coworking spaces and other stakeholders (5).

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

To guide the research on the actors and motivations of different types of coworking spaces in rural areas, two research questions were developed: (1) Which actors play a role in the different phases of establishing CWSs in rural areas, from the ideation phase to operation? (2) How do the motivations of the actors constitute and change in the different phases?

The questions were analysed using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to provide a comprehensive analysis. ANT serves not only as a theoretical framework, but rather as a methodology. It is a lens that allows a heterogeneous spectrum of actors, objects, actions and power in the present and future to be examined and the associations that connect them to be traced (Latour, 2019, p. 17; Deleuze und Guattari, 2005, p. 16-17) in order to make the structure visible (Latour, 2019, p. 114, 19). The method thus resembles a mapping that localises the origin of actions (ibid., 105) as well as the origin of power and domination (ibid., 110; Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, p. 20-22) and the means to enforce them (Latour, 2019, p. 114, 149). This is because individual possibilities for action and the exercise of power (agency) result from coalitions between human and non-human entities (the actor-network or structure) (Müller & Schurr, 2016, p. 218). In the context of CWSs, this method is particularly useful because it considers both the temporal dimension and external influences. Furthermore, it links the motivations of the operators as an expression and thus integral part of the structure (ibid., 224), which often explains why and which forms of coworking develop.

By creating a landscape of the various actors involved in the establishment of rural CWSs in Austria, a further explanation of the existing types of CWSs in rural areas becomes possible. Another aspect of the investigation of coworking actors was to possibly learn about the constellation of successful actors. Even if every CWS functions differently, especially in rural areas, there are potential success factors that are universally recognised. As people and communities form CWSs, it becomes clear that a closer examination of the actors involved is warranted. The different perspectives and motives were explored and contrasted by conducting nine problem-centred interviews with CWS operators and five experts who themselves or whose institutions were to support the establishment of a rural coworking space. The interviewees followed a recursive narrative, which allowed for a detailed analysis of the transformation processes of CWS genesis in detail along different phases (the ideation & planning

phase, operation phase, wish & future phase). Additional interviews with the five institutional actors made it possible to compare the motives of institutions and operators.

The transcribed and pseudonymised interviews were analysed in MAXQDA in two rounds. First, pre-codes were used, including those for motivations, actors and user groups, following the literature on operators' motivations (see e.g. Bähr et al., 2020; Bosworth & Salemink, 2021; Voll et al., 2021). This was complemented by more detailed coding based on the interview material, for example, with regard to the distinction between motivations and goals, and further categories of actors and users and their respective differentiation. The content categories of the interviews were labelled with time markers to indicate the respective phases. Both implicit and explicit time references were made in the interview questions. The 'ideation & planning' phase was pre-defined as involving reflection on the personal situation and needs, planning, and contacting stakeholders. The 'operating phase' refers to the operation of the space, while the 'wish & future phase' marks sequences in which operators talk about their ideal scenarios, unmet expectations and their plans for their CWS. While the institutional actors largely adhere to different chronological logics and the classification of time plays a minor role in the evaluation of their statements, the results of the operator interviews could be clearly categorised according to these phases.

3 TAKING A CLOSE LOOK: THE ACTORS-NETWORKS AND MOTIVATIONS FOR SETTING UP CWSs IN RURAL AREAS IN AUSTRIA

Our study aims to give a better picture of the diverse actors involved in the initiation and operation of CWSs in rural areas. To this end, we contacted coworking spaces and attempted to get in touch with those responsible for the operation of a coworking space or its owners, from a total sample of 27 coworking spaces previously identified in Austria (see Gruber et al., 2022). The operating CWS were found in rural areas with weak functional interdependence (type 410, 420 and 430, according to the urban-rural typology, (Statistik Austria, 2021)), i.e. with a high number of out-commuters and distances to urban or regional core zones that can exceed 30 minutes even by private car. For the interviews, we selected six CWS operators in peripheral rural areas (430) and two CWSs in intermediate rural

areas (420), with the latter being closer to regional centres than the former. Another interview was conducted with a space located in a central rural area less than 30 minutes' drive from an urban centre (410). Of these CWSs, three were no longer active at the time of the interview (O6, O7) or were in the process of closing (O2). The closed CWSs were explicitly selected, as the study also aims to consider the factors leading to failure. In addition, five expert interviews were conducted. The CWSs are located across Austria and the interviews were conducted online. The interview sample consists of nine operators, defined as the main person responsible for the operation and implementation of a CWS, and ten CWSs, as one interviewee established two (see O7). The operators were mostly private entrepreneurs (7), but a minority were part of the municipal administration when the CWS was founded (1) or were hired by the municipality to set up a CWS (1). Five CWSs were established on own property, two on municipal premises and two on rented premises. Table 1 provides an overview of the operators, the spaces and their characteristics, the operational status of the CWS, the source of funding and information about the building in which the CWSs were set up. The results of the interviews are now presented. The section is organised according to the three phases through which the interviews were analysed and includes the actors and their motivations mentioned by the interviewees.

3.1 The Ideation and Planning of CWSs in Rural Areas

In almost all cases, the creation of a coworking space was the initial idea of the operator we interviewed. These ideas either arose from a personal interest in coworking itself (or in working in a coworking space) or from an interest in coworking as a source of local or regional economic development. In all examples, we see individuals playing the main role in the establishment of rural coworking spaces. Still, even in the phase of ideation and planning we found other influential actors, be they private individuals, future users or mayors of municipalities, but mainly family, friends and business partners of the operators. In one case, a CWS managed by the municipality was the result of a citizen participation process to stimulate the regional economy, with demand coming from both, the operator (O8) and the local population. But even in this case, it is often single individuals and their close personal networks that take up and drive these ideas. In the initial phase, operators try to establish various contacts and networks with actors who, in their opinion, have the financial and

Table 1 Characteristics of coworking spaces, operators and buildings in which the coworking space is located (at the time of the interview)

CWS				Operators		Building	
founded	operating status	public funding	location*	pseudonym	occupation	ownership status	building stock
2016	open /in process of closing	non	intermediate	O2	self-employed	owned	existing
2016	closed	non	peripheral	O6	self-employed	owned	existing
2016 / 2021	closed	non	peripheral/central	O7	self-employed	owned	existing
2020	open	non	peripheral	O1	self-employed	owned	newly erected
2018	open	non	peripheral	O9	self-employed	owned	newly erected
2023	open	municipality, LEADER	central	O5	self-employed	owned by municipality	existing
2022	open	municipality	peripheral	O8	employed	owned by municipality	existing
2021	open	LEADER	peripheral	O3	employed	rented	existing
2019	open	LEADER	intermediate	O4	self-employed	rented	existing

* The location is indicated according to the urban-rural typology of Statistics Austria (Statistik Austria, 2021).

idealistic potential to realise their idea. Supporting actors are sought who have sufficient funds at their disposal and who are believed to have an ideological interest in the establishment of a local coworking space and are therefore more likely to invest financial resources or provide other support (e.g. rent reduction). These actors include the mayors of the municipalities where the CWS is to be initiated, regional development offices, funding bodies and very importantly, property owners (only for operators who need to rent). Operators of municipality-led spaces have more contact with these actors than operators of privately established CWSs, since, for example, regional development offices or public administration have been essential in the planning processes anyway (e.g. municipality providing a

building). Many of the respondents indicated that grants were important to them to initiate a rural CWS. Much of the funding (in three out of ten cases) came from the LEADER initiative. Smaller contributions came from municipalities, federal states and sectoral funding programmes such as a federal programme to promote innovation in rural areas. In some cases, local and regional banks have also played a role in the realisation of coworking by providing financial resources. Numerous formal networks are initially sought by operators, such as links to chamber of commerce and coworking-specific networks (see CoWorkLand eG, [n.d.](#)). In general, however, informal connections and trust are crucial for support, which requires personal acquaintance between the operator and the actor. The prospect of support, which can go beyond financial assistance, is particularly promising when representatives of the supporting institutions also have a personal interest in coworking.

A notable difference was found between operators of municipality-led spaces (O5, O8) and privately run spaces, with the former having a much more robust formal network, having no difficulties in raising funding and receiving additional support. Operators who own their buildings make less use of financial support from the local authority or a funding organisation than operators who rent their CWS and also have less contact with stakeholders during the ideation and planning phase. In particular, operators with newly constructed buildings (O1, O9), who have the appropriate financial resources and have been able to design their CWS from scratch according to their own ideas, repeatedly emphasise that they need little support and mobilise their own resources, such as education, profession, property portfolio, own company, family and business partners, to realise their project. They stated during the interviews that they do not place a high value on support from stakeholders other than their closest personal network, have contact with very few actors at this stage but are successful in their endeavour. Whilst this ‘loner-ism’ did not diminish success in some observed cases, we found one CWS who reported that a long-term operation was unsuccessful due to a lack of available personal and informal networks (O2).

Operators often show an intrinsic motivation for founding a CWS. Personal motivation (being an entrepreneur, working from home or being in a crucial phase of life, e.g. starting a family) is often the background in the ideation phase. Five of the nine interviewees mentioned their family situation as the initial motivation for founding the CWS. Many, including institutional actors, also mentioned their work situation and

their own need for a CWS as the primary idea for starting or supporting a CWS. Apart from this, additional inspiration for their own realisation came from outside: all interviewees had either researched coworking, visited a space or contacted other operators before they started opening their own space. The motivation of the operators and local or regional actors can also revolve around peripheral, rural areas, labour shortages, commuting and emigration, and the idea of creating new framework conditions for new work. This is true for private operators as well as those working on behalf of public authorities. Motivation is then often based on a spatial dimension, i.e. a strong sense of attachment to one's living environment, community or region and a desire to provide a better life (in the countryside) for oneself and others.

Although the idea of starting a CWS can be compelling and based on a well-constructed business model, not all CWS ideas take root—literally. This is because the structural aspects, such as finding a suitable location for a space, are equally important. In one project, a municipal council spent months trying to find a use for its building. Only after partnering with someone with a solid coworking concept (O5) were they able to secure funding and begin implementation. These examples show that securing a location and working with different actors is crucial to the realisation of a project. It also shows that there are probably some differences between operators who already own a property and those who have to find and rent one. Based on the results of the interviews, it can be assumed that operators who have to rent have a stronger social motivation for setting up a CWS, but for operators who own a building, the idea of setting up a CWS was mostly preceded by the idea of finding a use for an unused property (renting it out as a flat or office, or setting up a CWS).

3.2 *From Ideation to Operation*

As we have described above, the idea of setting up a CWS often comes from a single person, who often needs a larger network of actors to realise his or her idea. When a CWS finally opens, the number of people involved in the spaces we observed becomes smaller again. Although in the operation phase we found that the number of people involved is often reduced to a single central responsible individual, they are almost always surrounded by a team of business partners, friends or family members with whom they co-manage the CWS and complete tasks together. The operators and their team members are the local point of contact for users, set

the direction of the CWS and/or ensure the day-to-day operation. However, while in most of the CWSs we observed the ideators become the operators of the spaces, sometimes we find crucial changes in the transition to the operational phase. Responsibility for day-to-day operations is often delegated to ‘operation managers’, either in full (O1, O7, O8) or in part (O3, O6, O9). This is true for entrepreneurial and self-employed operators, but also for operators who have ideated municipality-led CWSs. While the operation managers are charged with providing the daily necessities, the operators often continue to act as the social anchor of the CWS, defining themselves as a centre for social interaction alongside the rooms and spaces. All interviewees agree that a committed operator, also during the operational phase, is crucial to the success of a CWS. In line with this assessment, some CWSs (O6, O7), where the operators have completely delegated the day-to-day running of the CWS and are present neither to use the space themselves nor to host, are reporting difficulties due to the lack of contact with the users. This ultimately leads to less effort to adapt the CWS in a user-oriented way, a decrease in demand and, ultimately, failure. These two cases show that ‘internal resources’, such as the profession of the operators, can be crucial—after all, the profession of O6 and O7 in the real estate sector led them both to transform the CWS project back into an average rental property.

Next to the operators, the actual users of the CWS become the most important actors in the operational phase, whereas they are only mentioned in a few cases in the initiation phase. There are two trends in the development of users. On the one hand, the personal connection to certain groups remains important. Operators continue to focus their offers on groups to which they themselves or close relatives and friends can be assigned in terms of work organisation, e.g. as a solo-entrepreneur, but not necessarily in terms of the sector to which they belong. In line with the fact that most operators are self-employed, the most common user groups in most CWSs are solo-entrepreneurs and micro-enterprises with employees who use the CWS on a regular (mostly daily) basis. On the other hand, operators are confronted with characteristics of user groups and location needs that they were not previously aware of, and which sometimes challenge the information they gathered during their research in the initiation phase. Some operators respond openly and promptly to location needs, adapting their spaces and adopting strategies to meet them. However, those CWSs that consider user groups at an early stage seem to find it easier to promote the CWS at a later stage, as learning what the local

community and potential users need can also be incorporated into the planning process.

Municipality representatives decrease significantly in importance during operation. This is due to the fact that most private operators have learnt at this stage that they cannot obtain significant financial or other support and do not explore the potential of these actors further. Nevertheless, some operators keep the municipality informed about the development of the CWS during the operating phase. Actors that are mainly associated with financial support potential, such as LEADER or the Chamber of Commerce, are also informed during the operating phase rather than actively approached and involved. During the operating phase, most operators strive for independence, the goal being to run the CWS entrepreneurially, and only seek and maintain loose contacts with other stakeholders. The networks with other CWSs and operators, which were used in the ideation phase to gather ideas and experience, have a new function in the operational phase. The operators themselves are now role models or inspiration for other CWSs, but stories of failure are also disseminated through the networks.

While most operators describe a high level of motivation in the initiation phase, motivation decreases somewhat in the operation phase. As the motivation to start a CWS is often driven by being enrolled in an unfavourable working condition (home office), once the CWS is in operation, these framework conditions are also seen as resolved, which changes the motivations. Similarly, but unexpectedly, operators report that even disadvantaged living conditions due to peripheral location can be significantly alleviated by the operation of the CWS. This perception is very different from that of institutional actors, who see the disadvantages of rural locations (often from a distance) as constant and unchangeable, while operators experience the positive changes for themselves and their users at the local level. In the operating phase, motivation is driven by the positive changes brought about by the CWS, such as finally having social or professional connections for themselves and others and is focused on the future development of the CWS. This includes a general realisation of the new world of work that goes beyond the CWS, as well as an (even) greater appreciation of the community. For most operators, the motivation to create offers for specific users, i.e. those that match their own profile, diminishes over time. As a result, CWSs are becoming more open, accessible and heterogeneous. Conditions that could not be fully resolved at the time of

the opening of the CWS, such as an unrealised financial gain, remain as a motivation.

3.3 *The Future: Between Hopes and Conflicts*

In the context of future goals and desired scenarios, operators reflect on their past and present achievements, and especially disappointments, and try to make things better for the future: Disappointment with low stakeholder involvement in the initiation phase leads some operators to want their involvement in the future. Operators who are (inadvertently) lone fighters (O2) want a good team and to share tasks. Negative experiences with municipal representatives (O4) or funding opportunities (O3) lead to a desire for the exact opposite but have also led some operators to go it alone. The hope that more participation can be achieved in the future is therefore abandoned by some operators. They fall back on their original resources (e.g. their professional skills or their family) for future goals, because they have found during the ideation and operation phase that they can rely on them, as the networks are highly consensual and the potential for disputes is low. Actors outside the personal network are only considered for future cooperation if cooperation has been successful in the past. Municipalities and mayors are excluded from this rule, as mentioned in Sect. 3.2. Despite the conflicts and lack of support for private operators, they are still important because they are perceived as highly influential.

As a rule, the motivations described will remain in the future, unless the framework conditions have improved, and disadvantages have been eliminated as a result of the opening of the CWS. This does not apply to social motivations (e.g. finding social connections, networks and so on), which remain despite the positive changes made possible by the opening. The connections, be they social, professional or occupational, are seen as very valuable and motivate the operators to continue operating the CWS in the future. Particularly for those operators with well-developed plans (O1, O3, O4, O5), positive change becomes a new source of encouragement and sometimes inspiration for planned goals and steps to be taken or achieved in the future. New objectives have also been developed through dialogue with users, especially those whose profiles and needs were unknown to the operators when the CWS was set up, and their demand for more or different services during operation. Developments that deviate significantly from the original concept and are aimed at expansion are rather the exception (O3, O4). Often the aim is simply to adapt the

services within the CWS in such a way that the operation can at least cover the running costs or generate a small profit margin in the future. This also shows that even when CWSs are well received in rural areas, they are often run with business models that cannot guarantee economic operation. Failure is therefore always a possibility and proves to be an inherent part of all CWS plans. At all phases, we have observed that failure affects the activities of the operators. The most common strategy, irrespective of the success or failure of the operators, concerns the adaptability of the building. This is to allow for cost-effective remodelling and permanent letting, which some operators are already planning during the ideation phase. While O2 was in the process of letting its property at the time of the interview, O6 and O7 had already closed their CWSs several years ago. However, the future of these CWSs and their operators is again very much dependent on the original founding intention. O7 explicitly ruled out relaunching a CWS as his or her financial targets had not been met, whereas O6 indicated its willingness to do so, citing the continued motivation to support young entrepreneurs as a driving force despite the failure.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With CWSs often described as having potential for rural areas, it is crucial to recognise the essential elements that make up a CWS in order to realise successful locations. This study looked in detail at who the people behind CWSs are, what motivates them, and what actors are involved in establishing rural CWSs. In the analysis, a total of 35 different actors were mapped. All involved actors mentioned by the operators (within the key categories of related actors, i.e. ‘mayor’ + ‘municipal employees’) are now summarised in Fig. 1. The curves show the progression of the presence of actors, resulting from the summed sequences in which the respondents talked about the actors of the same category in each of the three time-coded phases. The total number of interactions with actors mentioned by operators in each phase is denoted by Σ . The diversity of actors in the ideation phase, in which an average of 9.4 actors are mobilised by the operators, differs from the operation phase and the wish and future phase, in which an average of 7.6 and 6.2 actors, respectively, were named. The overall involvement of actors (mentioned contacts with actors) is similar in both the ideation and operation phases ($\Sigma=259$ and $\Sigma=252$). However, it should be noted that the actors present in the ideation phase include temporary contacts, e.g. with heritage authorities, investors, landlords and so

on, which become important on a case-by-case basis. These contacts become less meaningful as the coworking space progresses. The ideation phase can also be quite lengthy, up to one year, and in one case even longer. Actors in the wish and future phase are mentioned much less frequently. Based on the interviewees' statements, the course of the curve and the total number of mentions, e.g. of 'mayor, municipality, politics', but also 'building' and 'funding agencies', it can be interpreted that this phase shows a high degree of congruence with the ideation and planning phase. This is because the operators have similar motivations and act in a similar way with regard to the future of the coworking space as they did during the early ideation and planning of the CWS. However, deviations based on the operator's experience with groups of actors during the operation phase are likely to lead to changes in future actor involvement as they become more knowledgeable about the actors' usefulness (Fig. 1).

Although not clearly shown in the figure, as operators do not frequently mention their own importance, the research has shown that operators, and therefore single individuals, are the most important actors in the context of rural CWSs. However, they often need support from many different actors. Operators are providers of business solutions and caretakers of the CWS; they can provide solutions for commuters in structurally weak areas, but often they are people who want to build a social centre in the community. Their intrinsic motivation and personal needs play a central role in deciding what to provide and in the establishment of rural CWSs. Personal commitment, often based on personal circumstances and motivations (e.g. the operators' profession, the needs of their families), is decisive, even when other actors such as mayors, municipal officials or regional development agencies are considered. While operators are of course crucial, not all CWSs in rural areas are initiated by individuals who go on to become operators. Sometimes there are processes that originate from the municipalities in their desire to implement CWSs. As the ideation phase involves a wide variety of actors, especially in CWSs where the ideation phase is only co-initiated by the future operator (e.g. municipality-led CWSs), the involvement of multiple actors is essential. This has a greater impact on enabling the transition from idea to operation than the motivations, needs and objectives of the operator. For most CWSs (notably privately run ones), actor involvement can be seen as a success factor, especially when trusted actors (e.g. from the private and informal network) are involved. Most evidently, users are a key group of actors, often only becoming important in the operational phase. However, some

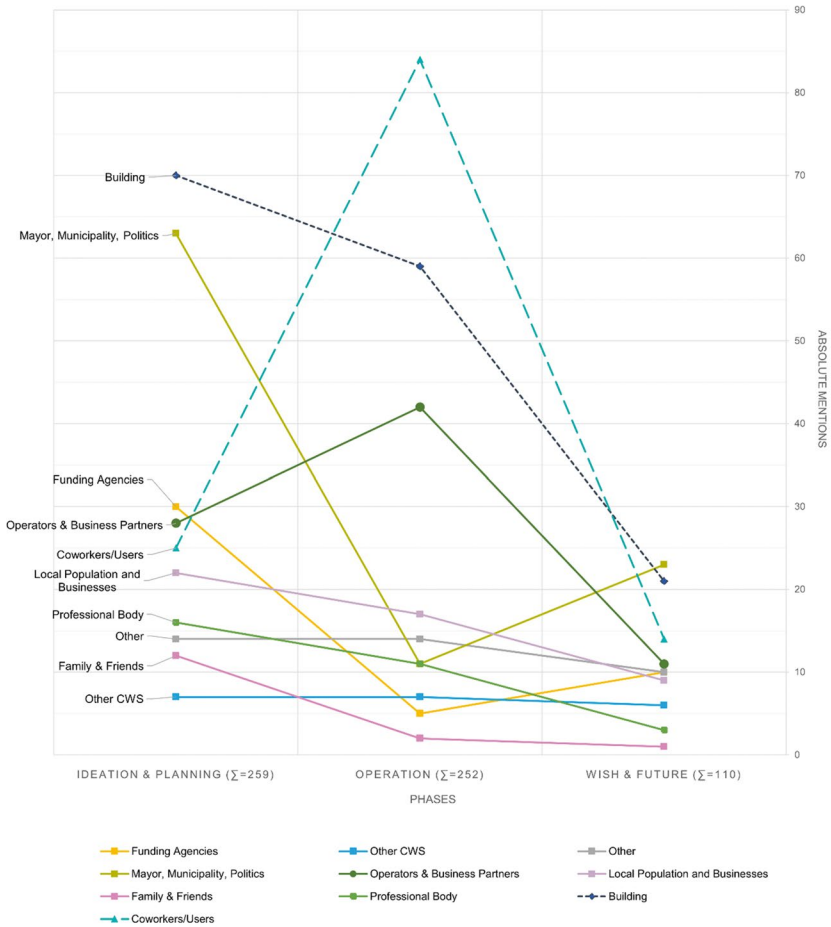


Fig. 1 Actor involvement from the operator’s perspective. Own illustration

operators seek contact with (future) users during the initiation phase and benefit from early exchange through greater adaptability to user needs during operation. Flexibility and the inclusion and adaptation of user needs have therefore been key strategies for many places in the past and will continue to be so in the future. Our research confirms the notion that CWSs are not just physical spaces or offices, but rather social communities that facilitate the resolution of social or professional isolation. Intrinsic

motivation, personal and local or user needs as well as commitment strongly shape the CWS in terms of its qualities and offerings, as CWSs can be both a place of work and a place of leisure. Therefore, CWSs with operators of opposing orientations (more likely, but not exclusively, municipal and private, business-oriented operators) may be inherently different in their make-up and more prone to failure.

The research was conducted through the lens of Actor-Network Theory, which provides us with a tool to analyse the actors involved without resorting to the usual social explanations. This approach made it possible to identify relationships and connections between different actors. Our findings show that motivations and actors linked to personal interests and concerns consistently play a crucial role. Specifically, family members of operators could be identified as influential actors in a CWS environment because of their impact on the operators' decision-making processes and the resulting design of the CWS. It should be noted that the ANT also considers non-human actors, such as buildings, in addition to human actors. Although not the focus of the manuscript, the interviews revealed that social factors are not the only determinants of CWSs development. Based on the differences between operators who rent and own a building, those who are community or business oriented, and the actions of municipalities regarding their vacant buildings, we found that the built environment plays a major role in the implementation process. In several cases, the importance of non-human actors exceeds the importance of human actors in the establishment of CWSs. The results of the study help to fill the identified research gap on operator motivation and provide a more nuanced perspective on how and by whom CWSs are initiated in rural areas. CWSs are complex and individually designed projects, and operators often, but not invariably, intend their CWS to provide valuable services that respond to specific local needs. Facilitating institutional networking would make it possible to benefit from the knowledge of the operators and, from a regional development perspective, to assess and better manage the 'side effects' of the establishment of CWSs, such as the reutilisation of vacant properties or a better supplied and more satisfied population. A limitation of this study resulting from the application of ANT is the bias due to the dominant perspective of the operator interviews. Although having included expert interviews, we excluded the perspective of the other actors mentioned, which may be important in the context of coworking spaces. Therefore, future studies on CWS-specific actor-networks might consider a different approach. A more nuanced perspective (e.g. including

gender differences in actors' motivations and future plans) might be worth exploring in future studies.

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Labouring Together: An Assemblage Perspective on Rural Collaborative Workspaces

Nikos Gatsinos and Colm Stockdale

I INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we focus on collaborative workspaces (CWS) operating in rural areas, where they often offer more than merely hot desks for rent and, by being committed to their communities, they play a broader role in regional development (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020). Recent debates refer to the political economy of CWS, which oscillates between the market and the commons (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021), spanning entrepreneurial-led (ELCS) and community-led collaborative spaces (CLCS) (Avdikos & Iliopoulou, 2019). Beyond overlapping goals and functions (e.g.,

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interactive learning, reducing professional risks, serendipity production), ELCS and CLCS manifest differences related to their ideals and operation. While ELCS aim at accumulating capital by marketising a service, along with a superficial attachment to an alleged community, CLCS tend to be not-for-profit ventures, cultivate a sense of belonging to an authentic community, and forward democratic decision-making procedures. These extremes (the market and the commons, or entrepreneurialism and the community) are conceptual tools to understand CWS' orientation, rather than clear distinctions of how they operate—CWS most often operate somewhere in-between (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021).

Motivated by the above debate, in this chapter we discuss labour's governance in rural CWS, with a view on both paid labour, and voluntary, reciprocal labour. We draw on two cases of CLCS: a cultural hub in rural Greece and a network of associations and worker cooperative in rural Austria. Both focus on raising value for their community, based on a collective spirit, an (activist) engagement in the local surroundings, as well as a not-for-profit mentality. Nevertheless, we found nuanced differences regarding how paid labour is organised and the consequent (implicit) power relations. This is the contribution of our chapter: by empirically substantiating that horizontal and vertical labour governance structures may extend across the aforementioned dualism between the market and the commons, we show the impact of open and democratic procedures for rural CWS and the limitations of their absence. To do so, we adopt an economic geography perspective and operationalise Avdikos and Pettas' (2021) CWS assemblages framework, enriching it with the concepts of 'rhizome' and 'arborescence' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2020). With our findings—namely (a) the importance of openness and (b) the repercussions of hierarchical structures in CLCS—we contribute to two ongoing scholarly discussions. Firstly, to the discussion about bottom-up CWS, providing empirical insights about their operation, along with their potentials, and limitations. Secondly, to debates about regional development in geography, with a specific focus on discourses about 'left-behindness', where places are usually framed as passive recipients of changes on higher governmental levels and agency is often overlooked. Our contribution brings these debates together, as we show that community-led initiatives may play an important role in regional development by activating untapped potential in rural areas.

2 CWS AS COMMUNITY-LED ASSEMBLAGES

Assemblage thinking offers a relational ontology of fluidity, i.e., a non-essentialist worldview giving prominence to processes of *becoming* (events) rather than *essences* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2020; Müller, 2015). Assemblages are agential, contingent multiplicities, consisting of heterogeneous components. What drives assemblages' agency is desire, i.e., they are purposeful and entail a distinctive plan (or 'abstract machine') to-be-realised (Buchanan, 2015¹). This is important for coworking, since, as we show later in this chapter, CWS assemblages are considerably formed by the desire of coworkers while CWS' purpose is what gives shape to their structures.

Important to understand how assemblages work and expand is the concept of *rhizome* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2020), one growingly used in organisation studies to understand the dynamics of resistance, emancipation, and democratisation (Hsu, 2022). Given its applicability in exploring the microspaces of collaboration, where democracy and hierarchies are negotiated, rhizome pertains to the ongoing discussion on emancipatory potentials latent in the coworking praxis (Merkel et al., 2023). Rhizomes are 'open systems' (Deleuze, 1995), in which multiplicities are connected horizontally and non-hierarchically. Thus, in rhizomatic CWS assemblages we see more horizontal internal (labour) organisation structures, whereas their relations with the broader assemblages in which they partake (e.g., civic society, social movements, local communities) are relatively open. Rhizomes develop differently to arborescences, which are tree-like, meaning there is a 'genetic code' multiplied hierarchically, forming a homogeneous, striated space, where a 'domain of routine, specification, sequence and causality' prevails (Moulthrop, 1994, p. 303). Arborescent CWS assemblages are governed hierarchically, while the logic of their operation is relatively unchallenged (e.g., orientation to capital accumulation). Importantly, 'rhizomatic' does not merely substitute 'horizontal'. Rhizomes indeed unfold horizontally, though they expand through constant reinvention, being fused with other entities; they evolve by being 'always subtracted', rather than 'by always adding a higher dimension' of the same quality (Deleuze & Guattari, 2020, p. 5). Thus, a rhizomatic CWS assemblage is not only horizontal in the sense of welcoming a

¹ Interestingly, what was called an 'assemblage' in Deleuze and Guattari's later work (since 'A Thousand Plateaus') was earlier called a 'desiring-machine'.

community to its premises and activities (e.g., affordable access), but *exposes itself to change* by the community. Lastly, we should consider that, similar to the commons and the market, rhizomes and arborescences are extreme metaphors, whereas in practice, entities are usually influenced by both.

In coworking literature, Avdikos and Pettas (2021) analyse CWS assemblages' internal organisation and external relations with broader networks focusing on three interconnected levels: (a) the common pool resources, (b) the plurality of coworkers, and (c) the coworking praxis. The first pertains to material and immaterial elements, such as skills, knowledge, infrastructure, and finance. The plurality of coworkers concerns their perceptions about community, the culture of collaboration, and openness, among others. Lastly, coworking praxis refers to how labour is mobilised (e.g., communal labour) and how CWS are internally governed (e.g., decision-making processes). Enriching assemblage thinking in coworking with the notion of rhizome, we uncover (a) the complex internal organisation of labour in CWS and (b) the relations with their broader communities, highlighting instances when CWS become more vertical (striated, arborescent) or horizontal (smooth, rhizomatic).

To embed assemblage thinking in an economic geography perspective, we apply a 'Diverse Economies' framework, which—in a similar fashion to assemblage thinking—offers a non-essentialist view of the economy and sheds light on its complexity. Drawing on thick description, Gibson-Graham (2008, 2014) suggest the coexistence of numerous forms of enterprise, labour, property, transactions, and finance, extending the prevalent, capitalocentric perspectives on economy. The diversity of labour—central in this chapter—encompasses wage, alternatively paid, and unpaid work. Within this framework we discuss the various forms of labour relevant to our case studies, namely wage, self-employment, and volunteer labour (McKinnon, 2020).

3 METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDIES

We draw on qualitative research conducted in a cultural hub in rural Western Greece—'Hub Rural Greece' (HRG), and a network of associations – 'Collaborative Association Rural Austria' (CARA) and its associated worker cooperative – 'CARA-Coop' in rural Upper Austria. We have anonymised all interviewees and the towns where our cases operate to

avoid their identification. Our material consists of more than 40 interviews,² focus groups, participant observation, and extensive informal discussions with members of the CWS and the broader communities.

The two cases exist in starkly different socio-economic contexts. In terms of GDP, Austria performs better on all economic indicators, with a GDP per capita in Upper Austria almost four times higher than in Region Western Greece. GDP per capita in the latter corresponds to 70% of the national median, while it has a higher rate regarding persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 10%, compared to the national accounts (JRC, 2024). Moreover, it manifests one of the highest shares of the primary sector in the economy among the EU27 regions, while performing feebly regarding industry and construction (Eurostat, 2024). The town where HRG operates still feels the fallout from the economic crisis, with many faded ‘available for lease’ stamps posted on vacant buildings, a great deal of which are on the edge of collapse. The town’s economy previously relied on the regional university, which, after a merger, represented a drop in students from approximately 5000 to 500—a detrimental decline for a town of around 12,000 inhabitants. Therefore, HRG operates in a socio-economic environment characterised by economic peripheralisation, both at the regional and the local level, leading to a common feeling of ‘left-behindness’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), as our interviews showed. Left-behindness translates to a mistrust in local authorities and a reluctance towards collaboration and participation in collective initiatives, manifesting an ‘emotional lock-in’ after the ‘chronification of embitterment’ (Hannemann et al., 2023; Pike et al., 2024)—these became obvious to us early in the exploratory phase of our fieldwork.

In contrast, the Austrian town (approx. 7,500 inhabitants) is a local commercial centre, with lots of surrounding industry providing employment. Although ‘rural’, only 2.4% of the labour force works in the primary sector, while the rates for the secondary and tertiary sectors are 40% and 57%, respectively (Statistik Austria, 2024). It is well connected to other towns and cities via motorway and train, enabling the in and out flow of people for work and leisure. Moreover, the town is adjacent to one of the European Capitals of Culture in 2024 and benefits from increased tourism. Nevertheless, despite the two contrasting environments, both regions

²Few of the interviews were conducted by both researchers simultaneously. Most participants were interviewed twice, once per researcher.

suffer from similar problems such as youth out-migration and a lack of social activities addressing this target group.

The CWS in question are closer to the commons' end of the spectrum. Both emerged out of an intrinsic interest to provide for their local communities. HRG began from a group of activists, concerned with giving visibility and suggesting solutions to problems facing the local municipality. Two people from the group founded HRG (2019) as a non-profit organisation, with the aim of preserving and promoting the local culture through sustainable tourism while cultivating a collaborative culture. CARA, originally formed as a network of associations in 2010, with CARA-Coop founded in 2014 to support the associations fiscally and administratively.³ CARA's aspiration is to provide free space for experimentation to groups of people with an idea they want to implement. Therefore, if a group takes initiative to form an association, CARA provides expertise and advocates with the municipality to provide free infrastructure (e.g., electricity, internet connection, vacant buildings). Access to space provided through CARA's advocacy requires that the group offers something back to the community, not in monetary terms (e.g., an open workshop). CARA-Coop's members apply for projects to draw funding, which are then implemented toward local community development (e.g., educational workshops).

Neither CWS are typical coworking spaces, i.e., offering hot desks, while they mainly deal with project implementation in the field of regional development. For example, HRG collaborates with local schools through an environmental education programme funded by the Greek Ministry of Culture, for which it employs wage labour and cooperates with external collaborators and volunteering local school teachers. CARA-Coop collaborates with a wide array of stakeholders, carrying out projects with a view to raise social, economic, and environmental impact on the regional level (e.g., connecting children in kindergartens with new technologies, like 3D printing).

On paper these are two different cases, operating in two contrasting contexts: HRG is a hub operating as a social enterprise, whereas CARA-Coop is a worker cooperative. Nevertheless, thinking with assemblages renders comparison feasible. Building on Avdikos and Pettas (2021), who

³The associations alone could not manage projects since they were not legal entities. Therefore, they could not, for example, sign contracts and leases. Moreover, the cooperative, as an economic entity, was able to draw funding to support projects bigger than 5,000 euros.

opened the question of seeing CWS through their processes rather than their essences, we deviate from focusing on the essential properties of the two cases (e.g., the nominal characteristics of a social enterprise), and compare their respective processes and practices. In this way, we can see that although HRG and CARA-Coop are ostensibly different, they manifest comparable assemblages. On the one hand, both showcase a core of paid labour, which serves as the mainstream of income for coworkers and revolves around the interests of local communities. Collaboration is key in both CWS: labour from the point of drafting a project proposal to its implementation, or mutual support in coming up with and operationalising a creative workshop is shared among coworkers. Moreover, our cases demonstrate differentiations between forms of paid labour (waged, self-employment, waged for coop-members). On the other hand, both HRG and CARA-Coop are based on and employ volunteer labour, provided by the communities. This is key for supporting events like cultural mapping in the case of HRG and repair cafés in CARA. In that sense, we see two CWS assemblages operating on two distinct, yet interconnected levels: an inner circle of paid employment and an outer layer of relations with communities and voluntary labour.

With these specificities in mind, the research questions guiding this study are: (a) how is labour organised within the CWS assemblage, both internally and in the broader relations it takes place? And (b) in which instances do rhizome- and arborescent-like labour governance structures emerge, and what are the implications? Regarding internal labour organisation, we consider HRG in relation to waged workers and collaborators, whereas we consider the worker cooperative (CARA-Coop) for the Austrian case. As for CWS' relations with the broader communities, we focus on HRG's connections with local volunteer groups and CARA as a network of associations.⁴

4 CWS' INTERNAL LABOUR ORGANISATION

In this section, we showcase how labour is organised within the CWS, focusing on the plurality of coworkers and the coworking praxis (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021). The plurality of coworkers entails the assemblage's

⁴CARA as a network of associations spans several places across Austria. In this chapter we specifically focus on one place, which, at the time of research, served both as a workspace for workers of the cooperative and as a place where a number of associations were hosted.

cognitive reach, and whether the latter encompasses the needs and desires of broader assemblages, of which the CWS are part. The coworking praxis includes how coworkers practise collaboration in the everyday, with a focus on labour relations and decision-making processes.

4.1 *The Plurality of Coworkers*

Regarding the plurality of coworkers, the CWS in question are rather similar. Both are characterised by a collective identity and a social activism ethos. Desire plays a key role in territorialising the CWS: in HRG, coworkers wish to alter the negative trajectory of their town and shape active, concerned citizens, while in CARA-Coop they pursue social change on the regional level, building a collective culture beyond standard work, i.e., work which transcends the mere coverage of one's expenses and that is socially useful. Both CWS ensure that the plurality of coworkers is homogeneously coded to reinforce their identity. Staff and CWS' goals greatly coincide: in both cases, workers expressed their belief in what the organisations pursued, namely the connection of their work with community development. Common in both cases is that workers valorise activities for social and environmental good over profit-driven ones.

The openness of CWS assemblages is critical for the preclusion or inclusion of practices coming from the coworkers and/or the local communities, which help shape the CWS assemblage. Thus, openness helps extend the CWS assemblages' 'spatial and cognitive reach, by embodying goals, desires and needs, oriented from the broader assemblages in which they come from' (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021, p. 48). Numerous examples exist of staff using the CWS' resources for their own projects in their spare time, such as using a laser cutter in CARA-Coop, and using HRG as an art studio. Additionally, coworkers bring their own materials into the CWS, sharing them with others. As a result, the common pool resources of both spaces are commonised, adding to an open, democratic, and collaborative ethos. Wolff connects 'democracy at work' with ownership and direction by member-employees (2012)—while this is the case for CARA-Coop, it is not for HRG, where most workers are not members. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the infrastructure shared within HRG is not *common property*, it is still *pooled* in reciprocal terms. Here, assemblage thinking and the Diverse Economies' framework are helpful in approaching entities through practices rather than their essences; in both cases we saw that

resources were pooled based on a culture of sharing, regardless of their ownership status.

4.2 *The Coworking Praxis*

Central in how labour is mobilised in the case of HRG are its founder's aspirations. Dimitris co-founded HRG, assuming a tremendous amount of labour and responsibility, while he did not receive a wage before the hub reached its 4th year. Observing Dimitris, one can second his statement that he works 'full-life' instead of full-time: he spends most of the day working either in the hub or on the go. Often while walking through town, he would be asked about the hub's agenda; thus, his work transcends the CWS as a workplace, often beyond his control. These underline his intrinsic desire to offer an alternative future for his hometown, an aim being *the* priority.

Besides Dimitris, there are three waged employees contracted on a fixed term basis with the option for prolongation if funds allow. This corresponds to the hub's financial capacities, which also define the level of wages (see below). The hub also collaborates with either freelancers (e.g., local tourist guide, artists) or local enterprises (e.g., fishermen's cooperative). Staff receive the minimum wage⁵ including the possibility of a bonus, whereas the administrator earns a slightly higher wage (around 800 euros per month), given his greater share of responsibilities. The administrator would prefer wages to be higher and without disparities, but the organisation cannot support such an action currently. Similarly, HRG tries to offer fair pay to its collaborators, which also contributes to transparency in how the hub operates, something significant in a town where corruption and subsequent mistrust prevail.⁶ As the environmentalist who collaborates with the hub told us, transparency from the side of HRG was key to underpin the trustworthiness of the hub, and in turn, to attract people who cared for the town and were willing to contribute thereto. Monetary remuneration aside, the hub offers to its workers, collaborators, and the

⁵ Over the last two years, the minimum net wage in Greece was raised from 612 in 2022 to 667 in 2023 and 706 in 2024. These figures correspond to 12 monthly payments per year. In the private sector, workers are entitled to 14 payments.

⁶ This is an empirical observation taken from numerous conversations with locals telling us their concerns about corruption at all levels and a general mistrust with the authorities, administrative bodies (local, regional, national, and EU), and civil society actors. Challenging these perceptions was a central motivation for the administrator to initiate HRG.

local community access to its infrastructure and brand for free. Therefore, creative workers can use the hub's physical space for trial-and-error procedures, for their own activities, as well as use raw materials (e.g., wood for carving).

In terms of governance, one should consider rhizomatic decision-making processes, i.e., how open and democratic they are, and how local communities (broader assemblages) are embedded therein. HRG hosts monthly meetings, where all staff workers partake. During regular gatherings, issues as sensitive as the hub's finances are discussed for reasons of transparency. During meetings, employees can raise concerns and express opinions. The administrator's suggestions may even be abandoned when the group disagrees. Additionally, where some workers showcase higher expertise than others (e.g., artistic workshops), they are given a broader freedom of action. Here, the governance tends to become rhizome-like. Nevertheless, the final word lies with the administrator, since he is 'the hub's consciousness', as a former worker said. When a deviation from the hub's trajectory is foreseen, then the 'consciousness' takes over and dissolves the tensions. In such instances, the CWS assemblage is territorialised in an arborescent way, as the hub's internal processes are open to the extent that they serve the hub's reproduction, not labour's autonomy per se. To be clear, the administrator is sensitive in terms of decent labour conditions and attentive to workers' needs. But in terms of decision making, the hub's sustainability is the most important, since it ensures the CWS' capacity to fulfil its purpose. These disparities in terms of internal power relations, along with the low pay, led two workers to resignation.

Regarding its collaborators, HRG functions rather rhizomatically. Professionals are welcome to discuss with the administrator and the hub's workers to draft potential activities relevant to the community's interests. Similarly, local groups are welcome to make suggestions for future activities initiated by the hub. Here, the CWS' membrane is porous, and components of broader assemblages are given the power to co-shape the hub's agenda.

In the case of CARA-Coop, labour organisation echoes the needs of precarious, self-employed professionals and aims at realising workers' potential through cooperation. The associations and the cooperative were initiated by Lukas, the former head of the region's Development Agency, who believed that local communities should have a say in the emergence of ideas and the implementation of development plans, hence his resignation from the Agency. The cooperative's ideology is driven from a desire

to do ‘work one really, really wants’.⁷ This entails work that is personally fulfilling and community-oriented. CARA-Coop encompasses member owners and waged workers who are not members of the cooperative. Each member owns their private cost centre, and by bringing project funding to the cooperative, they finance their positions, hire employees, and bring liquidity serving as a safety net. Transparency and equality are key: information about income, each worker’s contribution in working hours, and reimbursement of work-related expenses are open to all workers. Wages are defined by national collective agreements; thus, income disparities follow one’s years of experience in the labour market.

Governance and decision making follow the ‘one member one vote’ rule. Regular assemblies take place, where members discuss and decide the board’s composition, strategy, and the approval of projects, *inter alia*. Non-member employees are also welcome to join. Although devoid of the right to vote, they can actively take part in discussions and be informed about the cooperative’s strategy. Moreover, membership is rather accessible to interested people, including waged workers. These show the CWS assemblage’s rhizomatic character, being open to the fusion with new-coming ideas.

Membership in the cooperative is also connected to how the surplus is used. In more community-oriented initiatives, accumulated wealth may cease to function as capital, resembling more a common pool resource, as ‘surplus’. In CARA-Coop, the surplus may cover exceptional needs of the members, functioning as a safety net. For example, around two years ago, a coop-member had a car crash during a business trip and the insurance company wouldn’t fully compensate for the damage, leaving the remainder to be paid by the member. As a form of solidarity to their coworker, the members decided to cover half of the expenses from a ‘buffer’ saved for such purposes. Additionally, cooperative members have access to a minimum pay, something impossible under self-employment. For example, Lea, a designer and single mother of two, faced a year when she could not ensure an adequate, regular income through her own projects. Nevertheless, she was able to make ends meet due to ensured earnings through the cooperative, being subcontracted to other members’ cost centres. This gave her the time to prepare for future projects and relieved her of the emotional stress of having to pay the bills for herself and her

⁷ Cooperative’s motto. The cooperative’s ideology about work largely stems from the work of Frithjof Bergmann.

family. That would not have been possible if it wasn't for the cooperative. These empirical examples underline the importance of cooperatively organised CWS in addressing precarious freelance labour (Pettas & Avdikos, 2023; Sandoval & Littler, 2019).

5 CWS' RELATIONS WITH COMMUNITIES

In this subsection we trace the relations between the CWS and the broader assemblages with which they are related to uncover how CWS can foster 'the diffusion of a collaborative culture' in the local environments (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021, p. 45).

In their relations with local communities, HRG and CARA manifest very porous membranes, collaborating with a variety of actors across market and civil society. HRG has a rhizomatic relation with the fishermen's coop and ecologist whom they collaborate with for boat tours and for their educational programme. The CWS also houses a number of civil society groups, such as an oral history group. Other uses of the space include art classes, students' homework, and art exhibitions of local artists. Individuals can use the space for various activities; for example, one artist used the space for printmaking, while others use it merely for socialising. The CARA associations also host and incubate groups, making use of the local school's infrastructure, which is provided by the municipality for free. At the time of research, there was a woodturning group, an art group, a group teaching technology skills to the elderly, a repair café, and a refugee integration group, among many others.

In both cases, reciprocal labour is key to CWS assemblages' everyday reproduction. As many of their activities are offered for free, the CWS do not have the capacity to always employ staff, whereas it is also intentional to keep some of the activities outside the sphere of monetary transactions. For example, a local, well-known engraver provides free courses in HRG, and his work is displayed in the hub's premises in turn. HRG also holds an annual festival for the town, where the community pools their labour to help out, in both administrative tasks and hosting various workshops and events. Moreover, the community is actively engaged in activities like cultural mapping, where the town's historical value is reconstructed and maintained, and cleaning of the streets and the local beaches. In the CARA association, there is a voluntary, decentralised management team dedicated to maintenance of schedules and bookings. In both CWS, informal collaboration often leads to professional cooperation. In CARA, several

people, who initially engaged in the associations, were offered a contract to implement projects of the cooperative, while numerous economic entities, such as a company that makes 3D printers and a food co-operative, developed out of the associations. Here, the CWS act as ‘free space’ (Törnberg, 2021) allowing people to develop their ideas into concrete projects, ranging from grassroots to market innovations (Seyfang & Smith, 2007).

One key difference between the two cases are CARA’s well-established relations with the municipality, the chamber of commerce, and regional banks, key for attracting project funding, in which Lukas’ role is pivotal. Notwithstanding that the founder of HRG also plays a key role in making connections with local actors, HRG lacks consistent collaboration with political institutions. Partly this is because of the mistrust as alluded to earlier. As the founder told us, there are numerous issues with how local and regional political bodies evaluate project proposals, not least due to the absence of a streamlined, transparent process. Moreover, he stressed that several initiatives are funded by the local and regional governments on the basis of clientelist relations, rather than transparency.

In the next subsection, we discuss rhizomatic and arborescent practices in the CWS assemblages introduced in this chapter. Table 1 below summarises CWS’ characteristics, as described so far.

6 DISCUSSION: OF RHIZOMES AND ARBORESCENCES IN CWS ASSEMBLAGES

As we have shown, both CARA and HRG have actualised the potential within their local communities. CARA endorsed locals to form voluntary groups and engage in trial-and-error procedures. Similarly, HRG harnessed the intrinsic motivation of locals to volunteer, aiming at changing the bleak reality facing the local town through creative means. Voluntary labour provided by local civic groups through the CWS in question is a form of ‘collectively performed reciprocal labour’ (Gibson, 2020). Groups have invested their labour in fostering spaces of communication, in educating locals, and in maintaining the social fabric, from which volunteers also benefit, making us think about ‘voluntary labour not as a gift but as a form of reciprocation’ (Gibson, *ibid.*, p. 177). The above were possible because of the open, rhizomatic ways the CWS in question embrace local

Table 1 Rhizomatic and arborescent-like practices in CWS assemblages

		<i>Rhizomatic</i>	<i>Arborescent</i>
Relations with communities	CARA	The community takes initiative to form an association Access to CARA space requires a reciprocal offer back to the community (not in monetary terms) Voluntary, decentralised management teams Collaboration with local authorities	
	HRG	Open collaboration with groups and individuals Free or low-cost access to the space (e.g., trial-and-error) Open to suggestions by the community regarding future activities Reciprocity (e.g., free use of art space in exchange for art classes)	
Paid labour	CARA-Coop	Wage employment as a member Assemblies open to all workers 'One member, one vote' principle Non-member workers' opinion is heard in assemblies Non-member workers enjoy considerable autonomy when implementing projects Membership is rather open to waged workers	Wage employment without membership Right to vote restricted to members
	HRG	Monthly meetings where all waged workers partake Non-member employees can express their opinion. Administrator's suggestions sometimes overridden Financial transparency Commitment to fair pay Equitable relations with external collaborators	Wage employment Founder has the final say Over-reliance on founder

desires and needs, and through their porosity with the broader assemblages in which they partake (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021).

Our findings resonate with recent geographic scholarship, in which mainstream understandings of ‘left-behindness’ and ‘rurality’ are questioned. The discourse on ‘left-behindness’ often strips places of their capacities, constructing them as weaker ‘Others’, who have failed to keep up with the complexities of a fast-evolving world (Willett & Lang, 2018). The case of HRG, which operates in a geographical context typical of ‘left-behindness’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), exemplifies that capacities may be latent in such peripheralised places and that community-led CWS have the potential to actualise them. Key in that respect is that the CWS sparks trust to the community and invites it to actively shape its agenda. Thus, HRG understood local needs and desires and tapped into creative agency based on an ethos of collaboration, and a sense of belonging and attachment (MacKinnon et al., 2022). Although rural Upper Austria does not explicitly fall under the umbrella terms of ‘left-behindness’ or ‘places that do not matter’, CARA has strived for a development model beyond the conventional, revolving around community development and social economy (MacKinnon et al., *ibid.*). In practice, this translates to the provision of material infrastructure (e.g., space) and support for communities to develop their ideas into concrete projects, in which the benefit of the local communities is at the forefront. Given the above, our cases exemplify geographic scholarship, where assemblage thinking is suggested to illuminate the processes through which latent potential in regions is unpacked (Willett & Lang, 2018).

Notwithstanding the similarities regarding the actualisation of local capacities, differences are to be found in how *wage labour* is organised in HRG and CARA-Coop. In HRG, arborescent hierarchies exist between the administrator and waged workers. Despite rhizomatic practices such as workers conferring often and having a say in shaping the organisation’s agenda, two non-member employees decided to resign. That was—to a large extent—because typical hierarchies were not resolved, inasmuch as workers were not (and could not become) full members. Consequently, workers needed to follow the organisation’s momentum regarding project implementation and design, along with the occasional intensification of work, typical for creative industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010) and common for CWS when resources are scarce (Houtbeckers & Korica, 2023). In such instances, workers enjoyed less freedom as labour was territorialised to serve the CWS’ goals. These show that the desire driving

HRG as an assemblage is community development, not labour's autonomy. This resulted in contradictions with workers, who—albeit in line with the organisation's orientation—needed to keep up with labour intensification and arborescent governance practices in favour of the hub's reproduction.

When we asked if there were thoughts about shifting HRG to a cooperative scheme—and if not, why that was so—the administrator said that so far there was no need, which is partly due to an absence of trust and a collaborative culture in the town, something in line with conceptualisations of left-behind and peripheral areas (Hannemann et al., 2023). He stated that most people prefer to be employees, rather than assuming entrepreneurial risk. From his point of view, HRG's goal is to stimulate a collaborative culture in the town that would enable such a model, which is currently latent, if not absent. In a context where lack of transparency from political institutions has led to a disengagement of the community from issues of public interest (Pike et al., 2024), HRG leads by example, being transparent with their collaborators and facilitating trust. Following the cultivation of trust and the motivation to invest in the community, collaborations have gradually become denser. The above shows that whether the rhizomatic ways of how communities are tied to CWS can be maintained regarding the organisation of paid labour depends on whether the broader socioeconomic contexts in which CWS operate allow so. In contrast to HRG, CARA-Coop benefited from an existing pool of people with a rather established culture of collaboration, which enabled the formation of the cooperative, an organisational form treating labour rhizomatically. Moreover, the cooperative benefited from a flourishing economy, where project funding was relatively accessible, especially given the networks and expertise of Lukas. That was not (yet) possible in HRG and has led to contextually arborescent labour governance structures within, to not diverge from the hub's goals, namely community development.

7 CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we approached CWS assemblages through the notions of rhizome and arborescence. We focused on how different forms of labour are organised in two community-driven CWS, and on the CWS' relations with broader networks in which they partake. Importantly, we found that CWS' openness incubates and accelerates professional collaborations, while it helps nurture a collaborative culture within the local environment.

Thus, our findings corroborate scholarly work, which calls for tracing CWS' relations with the broader circuits where they operate (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021), or for 'taking coworking *out* of the space' (Crovara, 2023, p. 4).

Taking cue from the above, we furthered our analysis of how rhizomatic and arborescent forms of governance unfold regarding labour. Albeit operating in quite contrasting socio-economic contexts, our case studies inform us that rhizomatic structures benefit the actualisation of—yet unutilised—capacities of local assemblages. Both HRG and CARA highlight not only how communities can be activated, but also how eager these communities are to invest in their own futures. This desiring aspect of local assemblages in rural surroundings invites more studies on how 'left-behind places' are conceptualised, and the potential of rhizomatic approaches as alternative development strategies.

Moreover, we found differences in how paid labour is organised in the two cases. Whereas in CARA-Coop labour is organised rhizomatically, HRG retains a rhizomatic structure with collaborators, but often manifests arborescent ones in regard to waged workers. We found two interconnected reasons why that happens. First, HRG prioritises community development over labour's autonomy. Second, the difficult economic conditions in Region Western Greece, the sectoral precarity of cultural work, combined with mistrust in local political institutions and the general absence of a collaborative culture threaten the hub's sustainability and lead to HRG's arborification when it comes to labour. Nonetheless, it is clear that both CWS' success in pursuing local development comes from their rhizomatic connections with communities. Therefore, we would like to conclude with a call for greater attention to rhizomatic structures in regional development, which empower initiatives' and individuals' capacity to act.

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Exploring Hybridity in Non-urban Collaborative Workspaces: Case Studies from Alpine Regions

Helyaneh Aboutalebi Tabrizi and Eleonora Psenner

I INTRODUCTION

Hybridization refers to the process of combining distinct elements, whereas hybridity pertains to the outcome of the combination (Brandsen & Karré, 2021). The concept, extensively researched across social sciences, defines complex scenarios or simple combinations, ultimately characterized as ‘hybrid’ (e.g., hybrid space). The term ‘hybrid’ emerges in CWS across multiple studies. This chapter explores hybridity from multi-disciplinary CWS literature and examines it mainly from planning and architectural perspectives, within the conceptual framework of three

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dimensions: spatial-functional, social, and digital (Paay et al., 2007; Di Marino et al., 2023).

Hybridity happens when we cannot answer “where could we draw the boundary between the different types of communities and spaces?” (Koch, 2004, p. 176), and theoretically “emphasizes an associative relation between objects, communities, or spaces instead of a causal relation”; to “evaluate geographical questions”, within ‘hybrid communities’ (physical and/or digital) or ‘hybrid spatialities’ (physical entities having digital counterparts and vice versa) (Koch, 2004, p. 173). Physical and virtual spheres are interwoven, forming hybrid spaces where social interactions blend across physical and digital realms, as architecture adapts to societal needs by merging public and private areas, accommodating diverse users, and transformations by ICTs in social interactions and spaces (Koch, 2004). Therefore, emphasizing the three dimensions of spatial-functional, social, and digital provides a structure for our way of thinking, literature analysis, and preparing results.

While hybridity is well-studied in urban contexts, it remains underexplored in non-urban areas. Considering the rise of post-pandemic hybrid working (Mariotti et al., 2022), flourishing CWS in non-urban areas (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020; Mariotti et al., 2021) accounting for approximately 34.1% in Europe (Marmo & Avdikos, 2024), existing ‘rural hybrid CWS’ requiring further research (Di Marino et al., 2023), their potential to attract knowledge/creative talent, having socio-cultural role, driving infrastructure development (e.g., 5G network), reducing spatial inequalities (Brouwer & Mariotti, 2023), integration of digitalization and built environment (Paay et al., 2007), and ICTs addressing local challenges (Matern et al., 2020), and the hybrid developments interacting with their surroundings (Cho et al., 2015), this chapter examines hybridity in non-urban CWS.

The objective is to understand hybridity dimensions, position its application in the context of CWS as small-scale initiatives, and extend the discussion to their non-urban surroundings.

Cases are selected from the non-urban Alpine context due to boosting local economies and regional development through cultural and creative industries, tourism, digital nomad lifestyles, the growing CWS networks/projects (Coworkation Alps, CoWorCare, AlpSatellites), trends like coworkation, ‘hybrid symbioses’ of CWS types, bringing hope to peripheral Alpine areas impacted by migration, climate change, and economic challenges (Werther, 2021). Alpine towns must embrace innovative methods

to maintain their functionality (Perlik et al., 2001), and CWS can be potential drivers for such improvements.

Since the selected CWS exhibit signs of hybridity from their online platforms, they are ‘presumed’ to be hybrid. The question is how/in what dimensions. Thus, within the predefined conceptual framework (physical, social, and digital), this chapter aims to address two research questions/phases:

1. How does non-urban CWS encompass the three dimensions of hybridity?
2. How do the locational conditions of non-urban CWS contribute to understanding the hybridity dimensions?

This chapter collaborates on a solid understanding of hybridity in CWS (Sect. 2.1); provides background on hybridization in non-urban context, adopting mostly from urban studies, representing the gap in researching hybridity in non-urban context (Sect. 2.2); presents the methodology (Sect. 3); and discusses the results (Sect. 4) and conclusion (Sect. 5).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Hybridity and CWS*

CWS, encompassing various types such as coworking spaces, makerspaces, fablabs, and cultural-creative hubs (Schmidt et al., 2014; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016; Capdevila, 2017; Montanari et al., 2020; Mariotti et al., 2021), are defined as having variety, flexibility of use, autonomy, and collaborative ethos (Montanari et al., 2020). They are recognized for growing a sense of community, exemplifying Oldenburg’s ‘third places’ (Akhavan, 2021).

CWS are frequently identified and discussed as ‘hybrid’ environments with different and semi-related meanings. Conceptually, rather than ‘third places’ (Oldenburg, 1999), CWS are ‘hybrid second-third places’ (Yang et al., 2019) or ‘fourth places’ involving living sphere (Morisson, 2019). The integration of home, work, and leisure realms, and a holistic blending of physical and digital experiences, reflects the complex nature of “hybrid models of living and working associated typologies” (Di Marino et al., 2023, p. 1).

Furthermore, multiple organizational configurations (Ivaldi & Scaratti, 2019), diverse users (Migliore et al., 2021), different sociocultural activities (Trapanese & Mariotti, 2023) in temporal basis within the interchangeable functions of spaces, informal reciprocities, the blurry separation between public and private (Di Marino et al., 2023) are key social characteristics of hybridity in CWS.

Moreover, the integration of digitalization and new technologies into daily habits, and using mobile devices, has delivered another level of hybridity in spaces, since traditional physical and digital boundaries continue to dissolve (Paay et al., 2007). ICTs allow working from multiple locations, thus the term ‘hybrid work’ conjures thoughts where online access to work/events happen, within the four elements: physical, temporal, virtual, and social (Eurofound, 2023). Even before the Covid-19, digitalization enabled digital workers to operate from diverse locations like homes, cafes, and coworking spaces (Schmidt et al., 2014).

CWS serve as fitting instances for examining the phenomenon of hybridity since all the above are evident in many CWS, even in rural ones. In summary, Table 1 shows ‘how the term ‘hybrid*’ is defined/perceived within CWS literature’. Notably, the “interaction”, “mutual influences” (Di Marino et al., 2023, p. 5), or “no sharp boundaries” (Koch, 2004, p. 177) between the interpretations is evident in Table 1.

Rural and remote regions face challenges like population decline and weakened economies (Mariotti et al., 2021), and hybrid CWS can be potential ‘solutions’ for area development such as promoting remote-working communities in an Alpine village (Benozzo et al., 2024), while hybrid work stayed as a long-term effect after the pandemic (Akhavan et al., 2023). They foster socio-cultural activities benefiting local neighborhoods (Mariotti et al., 2021), like ‘resilient coworking’ which diverse practices interact within a hybrid context (Gandini & Cossu, 2021).

2.2 *Hybridity in Non-urban Context: Adopting from Urban and Rural Studies*

The following features, primarily drawn from urban, then rural studies, relate to the predefined hybridity dimensions. Despite describing them independently, cross-dimensional ‘interactions’ are evident.

Physical Features Since the 1990s, traditional land use mixed living, working, playing, and learning activities as an urban revitalization strategy

Table 1 Implications of hybridity within CWS literature

<i>Pre-defined hybridization dimensions</i>	<i>Code</i> Generalised interpretations of hybrid* in CWS	<i>References from CWS literature ("Di Marino et al., 2023" is applicable to each row but was omitted to avoid repetition)</i>
Physical (spatial-functional)	P1 'Hybrid work'/events happening in physical locations • (post-pandemic) hybrid work/events P2 Hybrid realms of living, working, socializing (hybrid place) • CWS as hybrid intermediary spaces between home and work • mixing living, working, and social realms of place • second-third place (hybrid place for working and socializing) (Yang et al., 2019), fourth place (hybrid place for living, working, and socializing) (Morrisson, 2019) • work-leisure spaces, shifting dynamics of hospitality industries • mixing coworking and coliving P3 Hybrid typologies/categories • mixed pre-defined CWS types within functions or with other services (gym, childcare, etc.) P4 Hybrid usage of (open/large) spaces • flexibility in architectural layout • open spaces, with modular furniture for multiple purposes • large (regenerated abandoned industrial) buildings for multiple purposes	Nenonen and Sankari (2022), Akhavan et al. (2023) Waters-Lynch et al. (2016), Uytendrouck and Teller (2017), Yang et al. (2019), Orel (2021), Manzini Ceinar et al. (2020) Waters-Lynch et al. (2016), Migliore et al. (2021) Pacchi (2017), Migliore et al. (2021)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Pre-defined hybridization dimensions</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Generalized interpretations of hybrid* in CWS</i>	<i>References from CWS literature ("Di Marino et al., 2023" is applicable to each row but was omitted to avoid repetition)</i>
Social (and organizational)	S1	Hybrid activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> diverse activities/events in open flexible spaces creative/cultural/innovative production spaces Hybrid place where the social realm is involved <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CWS as hybrid place for working and socializing formal/informal social interactions 	Waters-Lynch et al. (2016), Pacchi (2017), Migliore et al. (2021), Trapanese and Mariotti (2023)
	S2	Hybrid place where the social realm is involved <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CWS as hybrid place for working and socializing formal/informal social interactions 	Yang et al. (2019), Tomaz and Tabrizi (2024)
	S3	Hybridity of users <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diverse backgrounds, ages, and user-tags 	Pacchi (2017), Migliore et al. (2021)
	S4	Hybrid organization/partnership/collaboration/ownership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed management/ownership (e.g., community(ies) and managers; managers and municipalities) public-private organization 	Marchegiani and Arcese (2018), Migliore et al. (2021)
	S5	Hybrid access <ul style="list-style-type: none"> public-private, semi-public access to (some or all) facilities 	Pacchi (2017), Migliore et al. (2021)
Digital	D1	Hybrid work by/through digital solutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> technologies and digital tools transforming working habits post-pandemic hybrid work 	Nononen and Sankari (2022)
	D2	Hybrid/virtual shared spaces for communication/cooperation/socialization/participation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> virtual-physical spaces for communication hybrid events/courses (online/onsite) social media 	Bilandzic Foth (2013), Nononen and Sankari (2022)

Source: Authors

reduces transportation, boosts social interactions via proximity of services, and improves walkability (Wardner, 2014). Cho et al. (2015, p. 24) identify hybridization in interrelated forms of “spatial, programmatic and/or operational” in urban developments (mixed transit, multi-leveled, multifunctionality) and define ‘spatial hybridization’ in structural complexity, technological innovations, accessibility, connectivity, public use, and complex designs. ‘Programmatic or functional hybrids’ is mixed activities, offering unconventional space usage, enhanced by flexible, multi-use designs in large-scale projects (e.g., railway stations), having “everything under one roof”, and creating hybrid typologies (housing, mixed-use areas, transit-oriented spaces, greenery) (ibid:7). In non-urban debates, spatial hybridization draws on the smart region concept, emphasizing spatial diversity and evolving urban-rural dynamics (Matern et al., 2020).

Socio-organizational Features ‘Operational hybridization’ (public-private partnerships) redefines spatialities through rethinking boundaries and accessibility, encompassing ownership and management, and publicness modes (Cho et al., 2015). Hybridization emphasizes social actors, participatory processes, networks, and cross-sector collaboration (political, administrative, economic, and communities) to navigate rural-urban dynamics (Matern et al., 2020). ‘Hybrid rural spaces’ enrich rural areas through interactions and practices, intersecting culture, economy, biology, planning, governance, and social norms (Cloke et al., 2006).

Digital Features Technology and digitalization accelerate the hybridization processes in spaces (Di Marino et al., 2023). Antoniadis and Apostol (2014, p. 1) reexamine Lefebvre’s “right to the city” in the digital age and propose using wireless technology and open-source software, empowering citizens to create DIY networks “for their rights to the hybrid city”. Cities blend digital and physical infrastructures, forming hybrid public spaces for interaction (Volpi & Opromolla, 2017). Interactive databases and digital territories allow individuals to customize information as they navigate urban areas (Frith, 2012).

Interaction Spatial hybridization manifests as structurally complex and technologically innovative designs, creating novel access, connectivity, and public use conditions (Cho et al., 2015). ICTs have transformed cities’ physical and social relations, creating hybrid spaces for interaction (Volpi & Opromolla, 2017). Designing hybrid environments involves analyzing

their physical and social layers and understanding relationships, leading to digital layers (Paay et al., 2007). Urban spaces are becoming hybrid where ICTs facilitate diverse social interactions in close physical proximity (Antoniadis & Apostol, 2014). Urban elements (infrastructure, ICTs) are revolutionizing rural areas, enhancing accessibility and connectivity, necessitating digitalization strategies encompassing open data principles, public platform support, and bottom-up creative approaches like future laboratories (CWS in our case), to accommodate hybrid spaces (Matern et al., 2020).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 *Data and Method*

Hybridization is examined through two cases from Alpine Italy and Austria. The qualitative case study method, often addressing ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions about contemporary events (Yin, 2014), is applied to test/explore the hybridization concept in non-metropolitan contexts.

The two cases are selected based on two distinct Alpine countries: one in the inner Alpine and the other in the pre-Alpine area following the Alpine Convention and EUSALP. Both are in non-urban areas defined by DEGURBA: one is in ‘rural area’ and the other in ‘towns and semi-dense area’ (OECD, 2021); both cases are from a dataset of non-metropolitan CWS, offering initial signs of hybridity through their online sources in terms of internal spatial-functional and social dimensions, particularly in socio-cultural activities.

Phase I conducts desk research, observations, and semi-structured interviews about CWS and their organizational structure, framed within interpretations of ‘hybrid’ in Table 1. Online secondary data (Table 2) and primary interview content (Table 3) are coded based on their relevance to physical, social, or digital dimensions, considering each dimension telling its own story (Paay et al., 2007), despite some dimension interactions not being explicitly clear.

Phase II is assessed through interviews and GIS tools (Open Street Map from Geofabrik) used for spatial analysis within 1 km and 500 m. A typical walking distance is 1 km, rarely exceeding 2 km, with accepted thresholds of 400 m for local facilities and 800 m for town centers (Fig. 1) (Azmi et al., 2012). Phase II considers ‘locational features’ (Di Marino et al., 2023) as favorable ‘proxies’ for hybridization dimensions (considering data availability), namely:

Table 2 Pre-interview features indicating cases' hybridity

<i>Code</i>	<i>BASIS</i>	<i>Steyr-Werke</i>
P1	N/A	N/A
P2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fourth place (hybrid place for living, working, socializing) (Morisson, 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second-third place (hybrid place for working, socializing) (Yang et al., 2019)
P3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hybrid type: coworking space (fix/ flex desks, kitchen, meeting rooms) and maker/fab lab (workshop/machinery room), creative space (atelier, photo/ video studio), bar, and coliving. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hybrid type: makerspace (workshop/machinery room with wood, metal, electronics, etc.) and coworking space (workstations)
P4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible communal areas (outdoors, casino, bar, exhibition hall, kitchen/café, lounges) used for various events. • Reusing historical building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible outdoor area and ground floor for gatherings
S1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal gatherings (aperitivo, after-work drinks), formal seminars/ meetings/workshops/ lectures/ talks (e.g., BASIS Gespräche), repair café, wellbeing, music, theater, arts and culture (e.g., Festival der Kreativkultur) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community gatherings, (e.g., monthly barbecue meeting, 'regulars table') workshops (e.g., monthly repair café, school workshops), festivals (e.g., public viewing)
S2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socializing images 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socializing images
S3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • freelancers, startups, creatives, artists, students, digital nomads, children, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • makers, adults, children
S4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration and ownership with the municipality • Collaboration with universities (events, trips) • Using/presenting local products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funded projects within Steyr (e.g., Makerspaces für Kinder) • Collaboration with funding associations • Supporters and sponsors • Using/presenting local products
S5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible 24/7 • Flexible membership • Public events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible 24/7 (for members) • Certain public open days • Public events
D1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet • Beamers for hybrid work/events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet • Advanced tools
D2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active social media, for promoting events (Facebook, LinkedIn) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active social media, for promoting events (Facebook)

Source: Authors' adaptation through online sources

Table 3 Exploring hybridity in CWS by interviews

<i>BASIS (April 2023)</i>	<i>Interpretations</i>
<i>“remote spaces, village offices will grow because of this push of decentralization and possibility of online meetings”</i>	P1,D1,D2
<i>“We have a café ...works with self-responsibility...It’s called ‘trust bar’.”</i>	P2,P3,P4, S2
<i>“ This is something we have in our DNA ... for 10 or more ... in reusing or repurposing out of situations...”</i>	P4
<i>“social innovation hub”</i>	S2
<i>“... accessible, inclusive... need of the diversification... ” users from Vienna, Puerto Rico, USA, London, and Holland...from kids, to 90 years old.”</i>	S3
<i>“Venosta research and development gave us money for two specialties, agriculture, food development ...and creative industries...what I needed to do here as a single soldier, in the beginning, is to create relationships and networks...I wrote a project for the local municipality and it was 100% funding from state money...we rent the building from the local municipality...have it for 30 years... we don’t pay rent... we act also as an incubator to make projects for the local corporates... Networks with “European Creative Hubs Network, TEH network, COWORKATION ALPS”</i>	S4
<i>“open workshop or atelier can be used by the public with low access budget.”</i>	S5
<i>“BASIS is public space...the public space is managed by us but everybody can have access.”</i>	S3, S5
<i>“the space is digitalized, but not too much and Covid-19 pushed some kind of online meetings more accessible...”</i>	D1,D2
<i>“... phot/ film studio... AR VR stuff, meeting rooms with beamer... ”</i>	D1
<hr/>	
<i>Steyr-Werke (March 2023)</i>	
<i>“... video calls on the beamer, one of our coworkers or two of them are remote working ...we avoid doing things online too much, besides our work”</i>	P1,D1,D2
<i>“a place where networking and coworking happens, it’s more the people and the network and the exchange...”</i>	P2,S2,S3
<i>“on the ground level, we have a big space for general gatherings or events... have summer party in front of our space, where people come and can see what we’re doing”</i>	P4,S1
<i>“the space is flexible.”</i>	P4,S1
<i>“Everything we do is public...”</i>	S5

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

<i>Steyr-Werke (March 2023)</i>	
<i>“repair cafes are the most important events ... people get aware of topics that they wouldn’t see if there would be no repair cafe, so they would just throw things away.”</i>	S1
<i>“users such as school students, teachers... coding group for digital stuff like home atomization and Internet of Things... We are three coworkers... 80 members, women and men...mainly from Austria, and from Netherlands, Germany ”</i>	S3
<i>“There was a call for ideas from public...they supported us in the beginning financially, after Covid we got a second Financial support...together with two others, we sent ideas to this competition...we started with public meetings, also put that in the newspaper and asked the people for their opinion to our idea... started with taking part in different activities...collaboration with schools... smaller collaborations...with the City Archive ... with the municipality...we attended the Maker Faire in Vienna and promoted our idea ... ”</i>	S4
<i>“... I use mainly Facebook because we reach most of the people there...”</i>	D2

Source: Authors

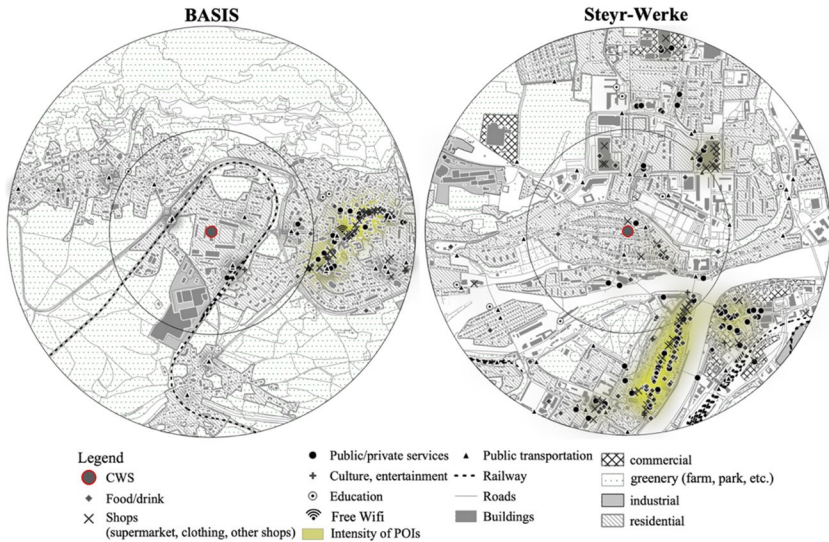


Fig. 1 Spatial analysis of the cases within 1 km and 500 m. Source: Authors

- (a) diverse surrounding services
- (b) mixed land use
- (c) public transportation access
- (d) IT infrastructure (e.g. Wi-Fi spots)

Feature A represents the physical, social (cafes providing a ‘third place’ experience) dimensions, and digital (cafés with Wi-Fi). Feature B is mostly physical, while Feature C, though primarily physical, also touches the digital through online ticketing and real-time transit maps. Feature D primarily focuses on the digital dimension, interacting with the socio-spatial dimension.

3.2 Empirical Setting

Case studies in this research are not necessarily best practices but are significant examples of spatial innovation in non-metropolitan areas, helping to better understand the hybridity phenomenon.

BASIS Vinschgau Venosta Silandro lies in Italy’s Trentino-Alto Adige region, within the province of Bolzano and is characterized as a rural area (village), according to the DEGURBA, with a population of 6,242 (in 2020) and employment rate of 79.52% (in 2019) (EUROSTAT). Positioned in the inner Alpine area, Silandro is within a ‘moderate innovator’ region (RIS, 2023). BASIS, the sole CWS in the whole municipality is located within 1 km of the village center. It opened in 2017 (ideation in 2015) and is a 2,300 m² ‘Social Activation Hub’, as a result of the conversion of a former military area, aiming for regional and social development across economic, cultural, and educational domains¹ as hybrid cultural-creative industries often occupy abandoned industrial buildings (Pacchi, 2017). Despite BASIS being located in the least economically prosperous valley in South Tyrol, it offers new insights to find tailored solutions to its rural setting (Psenner, 2022).

Steyr-Werke Located in the district of Steyr Stadt within the state of Upper Austria, the municipality of Steyr is a dense town municipality (at least 1,500 inhabitants per km²), based on DEGURBA. With a population of

¹<https://basis.space/en/space/#section6>. Accessed 1 April 2024.

38,056 in 2020 and an employment rate of 70.5% in 2021 (Statistics Austria), Steyr sits in the pre-Alpine zone and is part of a ‘strong innovator’ region (RIS-2023). Steyr-Werke CWS, with 172 m², was initiated in 2016 and moved to its current location in 2020 which was an abandoned pharmacy. It serves as a key innovative and collaborative spot within Steyr, supporting a mixture of productive and community-driven activities.

4 RESULTS: EXPLORING HYBRIDITY(IES) IN CWS AND THEIR ADJACENT LOCATIONS

Phase I Table 2 summarizes the cases’ characteristics and key hybridity indicators, based on website and social media analysis, for further exploration in Table 3. Table 3 provides insights into hybridity interpretations from the managers’ perspectives.

Phase II Figure 1 illustrates the spatial analysis of cases focusing on four locational features (A, B, C, D) “that may increase opportunities for hybrid conditions” (Di Marino et al., 2023, p. 3). Table 4 provides insights on Fig. 1, and interview content regarding the location.

5 CONCLUSION

This chapter considers hybridity as a positive phenomenon and adopts a planning and architectural perspective (physical, social, and digital dimensions of spaces and their surroundings), adding value by exploring hybridity in non-metropolitan areas, focusing on CWS, as their hybrid trends, like the presented case studies, are spreading in mountainous territories such as in the Alpine towns and villages. Despite hybridity being prominent in urban areas, it can also be explored in non-urban settings, influenced by land use, architecture, social, and digital dynamics, though most evident in socio-spatial aspects. Case studies exhibit hybridity across different dimensions, considering the place-specific context of CWS. A strong presence of hybridity within CWS and a subtle manifestation in their non-urban environments is illustrated. Location conditions help foster hybrid CWS, and hybrid CWS play as accelerators, working on the hybridity of their surroundings through various services and sociocultural activities

Table 4 Exploring hybridity in locational conditions

<i>Locational features</i>	<i>Explanation/reflections on Fig. 1, LAU data, and managers</i>	
	<i>BASIS</i>	<i>Steyr-Werke</i>
Diverse services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multifunctional area within less than 1 km • The manager highlights the pedestrian zone, parking space, hospital, schools, and library as quality services giving the village the attributes of a city and believes, BASIS enriches the village. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multifunctional area within 500 m to 1 km • The manager emphasized schools as key services due to student participation in the repair cafés.
Mixed land use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situated on a residential land use • Mixed residential, industrial, and green land use within 500 m. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situated on a residential land use • Mixed residential, commercial, and greenery in 500 m.
Public transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train station within 500 m (connection to large cities) • The manager refers to the excellent accessibility options (train, biking, driving), though being far from the town center. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bus stop less than 500 m and train within 1 km. (connection to large cities) • The manager mentions the complex accessibility, preferring biking/walking due to the rivers, as driving isn't practical despite decent parking, members living up to 50 km away drive, while most live within 5 km and bike.
IT infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wi-Fi in a park. • Cafés might provide Wi-Fi • Silandro's fixed network speed is slightly below, and its mobile speed above, the average for Italy's rural Alpine municipalities (Ookla® data (2020), source: JRC) • The manager states South Tyrol and the Silandro municipality have significantly invested in infrastructure (streets, train lines, internet). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Wi-Fi spots • Cafés might provide Wi-Fi • Steyr's average fixed and mobile network speeds surpass those of intermediate areas across Austria (Ookla® data (2020), source: JRC) • The manager states, that most people in the area are interested in "<i>smart solutions</i>" and are digitally savvy.

Source: Authors

engaging interested individuals, locals, and decision-makers. Functionally hybrid spaces attract diverse users and activities and revitalize the surroundings as they have recognition among locals. In non-urban areas, more hybridity is essential, as it enhances local development and vibrancy.

Challenges of societal acceptance and accessibility must be addressed by involving locals, to maximize their potential. This requires policy interventions that improve all dimensions by referring to the synthesized knowledge in this research. The tables in this chapter offer a ‘compass’ for policymakers, providing insights into how hybridity can be understood/improved/implemented. Future research could involve ‘temporality’ (Di Marino et al., 2023) and other hybridity features.

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Coworking as a Driver for Flexible Work in Sweden

Anna Rex and Hans Westlund

I INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concept of coworking spaces has gained considerable traction as a catalyst for entrepreneurial activity in urban and rural settings and has traditionally been linked to freelancers and entrepreneurs (Mariotti et al., 2024; Capdevila, 2021; Orel & Bennis, 2021). However, coworking spaces also cater to remote workers, sometimes called affiliated workers as their employer is elsewhere, which is a rising practice (Dell'Aversana & Massimo Miglioretti, 2024; Jeske & Ruwe, 2019).

Coworking spaces have been shown to provide more than just physical office space, as they also offer a supportive environment that nurtures

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innovation, collaboration, and business growth (Clifton et al., 2019; Orel & Bennis, 2021; Spinuzzi, 2012; Vogl & Ahkavan, 2022; Capdevila & Merindol, 2024). There are differences between urban and rural contexts (Capdevila, 2021; Hölzel & de Vries, 2021; Merrell et al., 2022) as coworking spaces fill different needs in different settings (Bosworth et al., 2023; Mariotti et al., 2023; Merrell et al., 2022). Moriset (2014) emphasizes urban coworking spaces as catalysts for innovation due to agglomeration economies, where dense populations facilitate creativity and business synergy. Capdevila and Merindol (2024) highlights their role in fostering collaboration across diverse industries, arguing that such spaces thrive in metropolitan environments with established ecosystems of start-ups and corporations.

Conversely, Merrell et al. (2022) and Bosworth et al. (2023) argue that rural coworking spaces address unique challenges, such as geographic isolation and limited access to professional networks (Spinuzzi, 2022). These spaces are viewed as community hubs that empower local entrepreneurs and freelancers, fostering knowledge exchange and innovation outside urban centers (RSA, 2021). They suggest that rural coworking can counteract rural depopulation by providing infrastructure for remote workers and entrepreneurs. While urban coworking spaces have been shown to increase innovation and strengthen cross-industry collaboration by building on agglomeration effects (Capdevila, 2015; Moriset, 2014). Proponents of rural coworking (Bosworth et al., 2023; Capdevila, 2021; Merrell et al., 2022) advocate for policies supporting rural hubs, as they have been found to support economic growth and also addressing professional isolation. Urban and rural coworking spaces are thus used by members for different reasons. Critics argue that rural coworking often faces sustainability challenges due to limited local demand, as highlighted by the New Zealand and UK case studies of rural coworking initiatives (RSA, 2021). At the same time, others suggest exploring hybrid models and public-private collaborations to maximize the socio-economic benefits of coworking in different contexts (Spinuzzi, 2022).

The overarching consensus seems to be that by bringing together diverse groups of entrepreneurs, freelancers, and remote workers, coworking spaces can foster a vibrant community where ideas are exchanged, partnerships are formed, and businesses are built (Bosworth et al., 2023; Clifton et al. 2019). In later years, the term affiliated workers has cropped up in the research, describing remote workers who are employed by a

company situated in another city or country (Dell'Aversana & Massimo Miglioretti, 2024), and this group is in focus of this study.

As the sector influences the future of work globally by offering post-bureaucratic organization models (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2021; Krauss et al., 2018), the economic realities will also affect the growth of the phenomenon of coworking (Johns et al., 2014). Coworking spaces also contribute to other spinoff-effects, such as equal access to networks and resources (Clifton et al., 2019) as well as having an impact on real estate market in the surrounding area (Vogl & Ahkavan, 2022). There is a growing body of evidence that coworking spaces both fill a certain need for primarily white collar workers and provide surrounding society with an increased social resilience (Zhurbas et al., 2024). This chapter links the phenomenon of coworking spaces to regional development and policy development, by exploring how coworking spaces work as landing sites for new establishments outside metropolitan areas in Sweden.

Sweden has a fairly established coworking sector in both urban and rural areas (Rex & Westlund, 2024), and there is also a publicly funded system of business incubators and science parks with a mission to accelerate innovation and growth in a number of fields. They typically offer business counseling, administration and access to investors and venture capital, and provide office space. This is however not an open environment, as entrepreneurs and startups have to apply to be accepted into an incubator program. This comes with certain conditions and time constraints that commonly translate into the accepted entrepreneur or startup being able to turn a profit in 1–3 years' time. Coworking spaces are in contrast open spaces that are available for all industries, with no expiration date. This study shows that coworking spaces fill a gap in the national innovation system by attracting new establishments of existing firms and that talent is the key driver in this practice.

By understanding the dynamics of coworking spaces, policymakers, community leaders, and entrepreneurs can better harness the potential of coworking spaces to stimulate local economic development and foster a culture of innovation in small and mid-sized cities. Increased knowledge will also help shape policies to support these effects of coworking spaces.

Our study centers on two research questions:

1. Why do firms choose to use coworking spaces when creating new establishments?

2. How do firms choose which cities and which coworking space to establish themselves in?

Section 2 presents methodology and data. We present our findings in Sect. 3. The results are discussed in Sect. 4. Section 5 contains conclusions, policy implications, and questions for future research.

2 METHOD AND DATA

This study uses mixed methods, using both national registers and interviews. Sweden is divided into 21 administrative regions, and the regional center of each region was selected. In one region, there are two cities that tie for first place as the largest, so 22 regional centers/cities were selected in total. The cities range in size from 60,000 to 145,000 inhabitants. A review of each cities' active coworking spaces was carried out and coworking spaces that had coworking as their core business were chosen (Fig. 1).

A total of 97 coworking spaces were contacted via email and phone with the question of whether they presently have or previously had any customers/members who would fit the description above, i.e., a firm

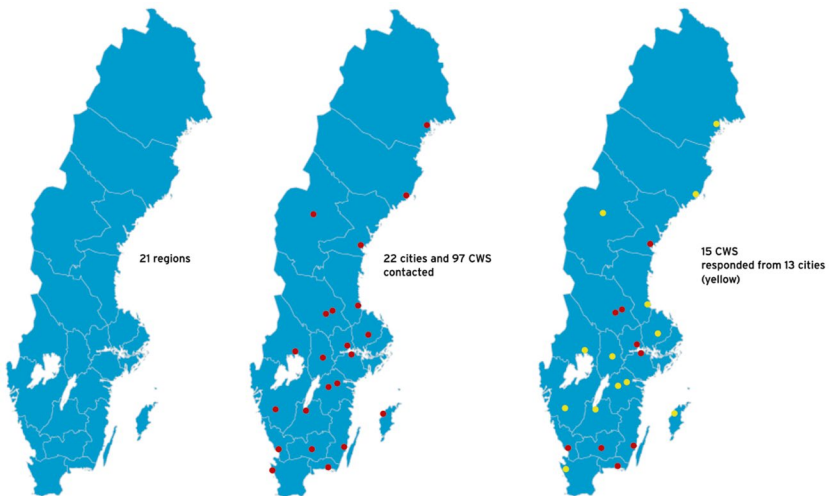


Fig. 1 Sweden's regions and their regional centers, as selected through for this study

based in another city that had placed employees at the coworking space. We received replies from 15 coworking spaces of the 97 (13.4%) which in turn gave 183 firms fitting the description. Starting with the list of 183 firms, we used national tax registers to sort them according to industry code (NACS/ SNI), which showed a dominance of consultants within management, tech and communication. In cases where the firm had multiple industry codes registered, we chose the one that seemed most representative of the core business proposal, based on what was communicated on the business website. We also used national tax registers to see where the firm was based (Table 1).

We selected 73 firms for interview proportionally to include as many different industries as possible per city in order to get as wide a spread of driving forces as possible. Of the 73 firms contacted, we received responses from and were able to interview 42 firms within the time frame of the study. The semi-structured interviews were conducted digitally January–February 2023, with one of the starting employees in the new establishment. To get a clearer picture of which factors played the biggest role in choosing a certain coworking space, we asked the respondents to rate a number of statements on a Likert-scale from 1 to 5, where 1 corresponded to “do not agree at all” and 5 corresponded to “completely agree”, regarding the driving forces behind the decision to establish the firm in the specific city and to use coworking spaces instead of renting and furnishing

Table 1 Distribution of firms within industry codes

<i>SNI industry code</i>	<i>Interviewed</i>	<i>Total</i>
10–43 Manufacturing and construction	3	13
45–53 Commerce, restaurant, transport	2	16
58–63 Information and communication consultants	10	38
65–66 Insurance and finance	2	10
69–74 Organization and tech consultants	16	56
77–80 Real estate service and rental	1	13
85 Education	7	11
94–95 Other service	1	8
Undetermined		18
TOTAL	42	183

their own premises.¹ The interviews were analyzed thematically around motives for establishment.

3 FINDINGS

The 42 interviews primarily dealt with the reasons why the firm chose to establish themselves in a certain city, why they chose a coworking space instead of renting their own offices, and finally why they chose the particular coworking space they did. The respondents were surprisingly unanimous, and the reasons why they had acted in this way were similar, regardless of industry. All of the 42 respondents had started the new establishment with 1–3 employees, and in February 2023, 24 of them (57%) had increased the number of employees in that particular location. A few describe being encouraged by leadership to recruit more people locally and grow, but the majority of those who have grown in number of employees have done so more randomly—people with the right skills have, for example, spontaneously applied to the company in the new establishment. In summary, it comes down to access to skills rather than access to the customer market, which is described in more detail below.

None of the interviewed firms had establishment date further back than 2017, indicating that the number of coworking spaces at that time in Sweden was relatively low, and the method of using them as establishing points was not common. Forty-seven percent established themselves before the pandemic, and the other 53% after the outbreak of the pandemic, of which 26% in 2021 (Table 2).

3.1 *Motives for Settling in a Certain City*

The respondents were asked why the firm chose to establish themselves in a certain city, and all 42 respondents describe that it was about talent

Table 2 Starting year of the 42 establishments

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of interviewed establishments	4	5	10	8	11	4

¹No sensitive or personal data were gathered in the conducted interviews

acquisition or retention in some form. The various descriptions can be sorted into three types of cases, which are described in more detail below. Less than a handful of respondents express that establishment in certain locations could also be beneficial to the overall corporate strategy, but the driving force behind the decision is the result of wanting to recruit certain people, or retain people who wanted to move from the city where the main office was located.

3.2 *Motives for Choosing a Coworking Environment for the New Establishment*

Three things stood out clearly: the central geographical location of the coworking space in the city (95% answered 4 or higher), the access to networks of people (67% answered 4 or higher), and the culture or “spirit” of the place, where 67% answered 4 or higher. On the other hand, the respondents assigned little importance to things like being offered reduced rates (e.g. trial period, discounted fee, etc.), nor whether the coworking location was the spatially the largest in the area, or whether there was a suitable office infrastructure. The latter should probably not be interpreted as office infrastructure and other resources being unimportant, but rather that such resources are ubiquitous in coworking places as a pure hygiene factor, and thus have less impact on the choice of a specific coworking space. The fact that the coworking space’s (central) location was the strongest factor in choosing a coworking space in a given city must also be noted. A central location in a city usually provides the greatest accessibility to both communications and amenities, i.e. service, culture, shops, and public life, in short, things that are not directly connected to people’s work.

Our analysis showed that the motive for choosing a coworking space for the new establishment could be divided into three type cases.

Type Case 1 – Moving with the Job (29%) There is an employee in the city where the firm is based, who wants to move (either back to their place of origin or to another place) and arranges with the employer to work remotely. Several of the respondents state that they have seen it as a great advantage to be able to take the job with them when they move and some mention that it became easier during the pandemic to reach this type of arrangement, because the employer could see that productivity did not deteriorate with employees working remotely. Respondents claim it simply

was easier to argue for continuing to do the same thing. In this group, 62% of the new establishments have grown with more employees since they established. I agreed with my boss to work from here because I wanted to move to my home town with my family. Person working in communication

Proximity to family for me and my husband, and what can I say, financial benefits in terms of being able to buy a house here instead of in Stockholm. Person working in tech consultancy

I wanted to move closer to the family and made a deal with my boss. In the last two years, we have recruited more people who already lived here. Person working in programming

Type Case 2 – The Remote Hire (40%) The need to recruit a person who lives in another place but does not want to move from there. This is the most common motive and it is especially organization and tech consultancies who describe that they recruit programmers in this way. In this group, 47% of establishments have increased the number of employees since they established by hiring locally. Several employees describe how they have applied for a position that has been advertised as remote, and being able to continue living in their present place of residence had been a key negotiation point in the employment contract. Employers also describe how location is clearly subordinate to talent, that it is the person and the person's qualifications that are absolutely the most important in a recruitment process. The firm had an open policy regarding recruitment, that Stockholm positions would not be filled only in Stockholm, and it happened that those of us who were looking for a certain job lived here and then we simply started up here. Person working in IT development

I started here because I lived here. Got the job during the pandemic and started by simply working from home. Now that I've worked for a while, we think we'll try to get more people here. Person working in IT development

We only recruit by person and skills and then we organize offices after that. Person working in organization consultancy

It was the easiest solution to be able to hire a person we wanted. Person working in education

I was already living here when I got the job, so we signed an agreement so that I could continue working here instead of moving to Stockholm. So I don't know if it was a strategy on the part of the firm, it's still only me who works here. Person working in sales

Type Case 3 – Talent Pools (31%) The firm knows that there is a pool of exactly the skills they are looking for in a certain area, and recruit either from universities or competitors in the industry who are active in that geographical area. Some educational firms described it as favorable to be in many locations given the clients they have and, above all, firms within SNI codes 58–63 (communication and information consultants) and 69–74 (management and tech consultants) describe the access to talent as absolutely vital, rather than the customer market—the customer can be anywhere. When they describe a pool of talent in a little more detail, it is more often existing industry clusters that exist in the area rather than existing university educations that are described as attractive. In this group, 67% of the respondents have grown with more employees since they established. Mostly to do with LTU (Luleå University of Technology), which is an important partner for our business, that academia is an important target group. Person working in education

Because it is an interesting market, both with customers and talent, and good synergies to nearby regions with more customers, and great upside in terms of the availability of talent. Person working in PR

We want to be in all places that are relevant to us, and Gävle was such a place. There has been a very good supply of skills here. Person working in manufacturing

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 *Why Do Firms Choose to Use Coworking Spaces When Creating New Establishments?*

This study shows that coworking spaces facilitate the geographical spread and growth of existing firms, a phenomenon that has not previously been studied in Sweden. The new establishments have no place in an incubator, suggesting that coworking spaces fill a void in the existing support

structure for the spread of growing firms. This result is similar to the findings that Merrell et al. (2022) have put forward, and their study also supports our findings that factors such as networks, central location, and community play a vital role in regard to choosing a coworking space.

In the interviews, a somewhat surprising result was that the choice of locations for new establishments were primarily guided by individuals' choice of place of residence and firms' willingness to employ these individuals/skills, regardless of their place of residence that drove the new establishments. Thus, recruitment is described as by far the biggest reason why a firm established themselves in a certain place, rather than the local customer market or strategic location. This can be interpreted as an effect of a shortage of skilled workers that prevails in many industries, and coworking spaces are seen by the respondents as a flexible solution to arrange a workplace for an individual who wants to start working remotely, much like the result found by Dell'Aversana and Massimo Miglioretti (2024).

In the majority of cases the new establishments have, since their inception, grown in number of employees from when they established themselves (57% of new locations have increased their employment). Drawing on theory put forth by Merrell et al. (2022), this can be interpreted as a sign that coworking spaces affect the local development by attracting firms via talent that would not otherwise consider that particular city.

It goes without saying that some of these new establishments would have taken place in any case and would have been organized in other forms than in coworking spaces. However, it is hard to ignore the argument that without the minimization of risks and costs, and the link to local networks that coworking spaces can offer (Capdevila, 2021; Orel & Bennis, 2021), many of these new establishments would not have occurred.

4.2 How Do Firms Choose Which Cities and Which Coworking Space to Establish Themselves In?

Despite the fact that coworking spaces are a phenomenon that lies completely outside the existing regional policy instruments in Sweden, they actually do function as a regional and localization resource—in offering both spaces and access to local networks and skilled labor.

Although establishment in coworking spaces took place within all industry codes, they were dominated by two branches: management and technology consultants, and information and communication consultants. Previous surveys in Swedish coworking spaces have shown that a very large

percentage of those who are members of coworking spaces have post-secondary education (Rex & Westlund, 2024). For the municipalities and regions that want to develop strategies for attracting new establishments, this can be an important circumstance. Are there, for instance, courses for these professions at the regional university? Are the leisure offerings and existing amenities (services, culture, shops, public life, etc.) in the municipality/region adapted to what these groups want? This study has shown evidence suggesting that talent attracts establishments and not the other way around.

Coworking spaces offer a simpler way to provide workers with an office environment that is readily available to more people, without creating a large initial investment cost for the employer. Most respondents describe the coworking space as a flexible “plug and play” solution, which means that it is a ready-made environment for the employee to work in. Several respondents emphasized the importance of there being other people on site and that there was a sense of a common context, and that it was important to have “colleagues”, even though they did not have the same employer. Hölzel and de Vries (2021) also found that a reason people are drawn to coworking spaces is to prevent social isolation and that it helps with keeping the personal and professional life separate (Dell’Aversana & Massimo Miglioretti, 2024). Some respondents pointed out that it is important that there is an office manager in some form, who takes responsibility for the environment, facilitates conversations between members, and makes sure that members are taken care of, as well as that it is clean and pleasant on the premises, which was also found by Orel and Bennis (2021). Contracts between coworking spaces and members typically have a 1–3-month notice period, making it easy to increase and decrease the number of employees housed within the coworking space, which provides a low risk for the companies and a high cost efficiency.

At the same time, a central location usually also means the greatest accessibility to professional partners and potential local customers. A central location in a regional center thus meets both the social and professional needs of the employees. This suggests that purely material values are subordinate to the context that a coworking space offers in the choice between different places, i.e. the very mix of people and networks that the companies are not capable of creating themselves. This is also described by Orel and Bennis (2021) under the collective term community, which they argue is a central selling point for coworking spaces.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKING

This study has shown evidence that suggest that coworking spaces fill a need in the market for flexible, post-bureaucratic workspaces and that they serve their surrounding communities with a service that is outside current public practices and policies for regional development. They provide networks and access to social and structural capital in the city where they operate. This data, taken together with the changed patterns in domestic migration (more people are currently moving out from the Stockholm metropolitan area than in) (SCB, 2023), make the case that regional policies could benefit from including coworking spaces as a possible attraction for establishments. One could argue that this implies a slow reversal of the brain drain from rural areas to urban areas.

This could be used as an argument that it would benefit regional development if governmental agencies and coworking spaces have better knowledge of one another and each other's respective operations, as there are clear common interests (e.g. increased population, economic growth, entrepreneurship, and more establishments). In the interaction between the local/regional environment and coworking spaces, there are many different forces that would ideally be part of and strengthen the local/regional development. Public actors, such as the municipality and the region, have a key role in supporting and streamlining these networks and getting the various actors to complement each other. Policymakers should also involve local communities in planning coworking hubs to ensure they address regional needs and foster inclusivity, as well as encourage coworking spaces in rural regions to integrate additional revenue-generating activities like cafes, event spaces, or consultancy services. Another approach could use tax breaks or grants for companies allowing employees to work from rural coworking spaces, which can attract talent to these areas, mitigating urban overpopulation while boosting local economies.

In a larger perspective, it would be interesting to raise the issue of an industry code for coworking spaces (as has been done in other European countries), to more easily identify these businesses and better be able to follow how the industry develops. In Sweden, this has recently been done in order to capture the emergence of the then new industries such as call center firms and temping agencies.

The results of this study raise new questions for research on the growth and development work of municipalities and regions, as it suggests that individual's life choices might in the end impact the economic

development of a region in a way that has not been previously documented, as taxes for the wages paid to remote workers benefit the municipality and the region, and the influx of skilled workers will affect the local labor market.

To what extent are municipalities aware that it is not only the case that companies attract talent but also that talent attracts establishments of firms—and what practical expressions does that take? To what extent do municipalities and regions have strategies for the creation and preservation of suitable amenities? To what extent is collaboration with coworking spaces part of the development work of municipalities and regions and a data point in policy making? The answers to these questions may have great significance for which municipalities and regions develop best in the future, and which policies that can be most effective.

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Organisation, Social Dynamics and Spaces of Experiences



How the ‘Middleground’ Is Leveraged to Foster Cross-Industry Innovation and Drive Socio-economic Development

Juan Diaz-Zagarra and Eleonora Psenner

I INTRODUCTION

Cross-industry innovation is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of economic development, as it brings together diverse knowledge and expertise to address complex challenges and unlock new opportunities (Hearn et al., 2014; Gassmann et al., 2011). Moreover, successful cross-industry innovation requires firms to exhibit an absorptive capacity from different ambits (Gassmann et al., 2011). Therefore, nurturing collaboration requires more than the co-presence of actors from different sectors—it demands a supportive environment where diverse actors can interact, build trust, and co-create solutions (Murphy et al., 2012). This environment is often referred to as the middleground, a concept introduced by

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Cohendet et al. (2010) as the intermediary space that bridges formal institutions (the top-down ‘upperground’) and informal grassroots initiatives (the bottom-up ‘underground’). The middleground plays a vital role in enabling connections, fostering trust, and facilitating the exchange of ideas across industry boundaries.

Despite its theoretical development, the middleground remains underexplored in the literature, particularly regarding how it operates and supports cross-industry innovation (Bathelt & Cohendet, 2014). For example, existing studies in regional innovation (Asheim et al., 2011; Maskell & Malmberg, 1999) often highlight the significance of networks, yet the specific mechanisms through which the middleground enables such interactions and knowledge sharing are not fully understood. When trying to connect the two different streams of literature, we observed that while the middleground literature focuses on local contexts and cultural dynamics, the cross-industry innovation literature often adopts a broader lens, exploring sectoral interactions without explicitly considering the role of place-based ecosystems or local commons. This disconnect raises unanswered questions about how the spatial and cultural dimensions of the middleground influence the success of cross-industry collaborations, shedding light on how diverse actors interact to create knowledge and innovative solutions. To address this gap, this research explores the essence of the middleground, examining not only what it represents but also how connections are forged across disparate industries by answering the central question: *how does an intermediary actor leverage the middleground to foster cross-industry innovation?*

Through an in-depth case study of the *Saxony Association of Cultural and Creative Industries* (SACCI), in Germany, this study provides empirical insights into the practical functioning of the middleground. SACCI exemplifies how regional intermediary actors can leverage the middleground to build connections between creative and cultural industries (CCIs) and traditional firms, contributing to regional socio-economic development. This case offers a perspective on how the middleground adapts to local cultural, economic, and social conditions, addressing challenges such as the brain drain and the need for stronger community ties in post-transition regions (Grabher, 2004).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *The 'Middleground'*

The concept of the middleground has gained significant traction as a lens to understand how innovation emerges from the interplay between grassroots initiatives and institutionalized structures. At its core, the middleground represents a space where the underground—characterized by unstructured, experimental, and often chaotic creativity—meets the upperground of formalized systems like corporations and government agencies. In their work about the creative city, Cohendet et al. (2010) argue that while cities often focus on either fostering grassroots cultural scenes or supporting large corporate players, the middleground acts as a connective tissue that allows these worlds to collaborate. Building on this, Cohendet et al. (2021) explore how these middleground spaces facilitate local knowledge creation, particularly through FabLabs. These are not just physical spaces but are emblematic of what the authors call 'local innovation commons.' This idea further develops the earlier portrayal of the middleground as a simple connector by emphasizing its role as a shared resource pool—a collective platform where diverse actors can experiment, share, and create.

This balancing act becomes even more evident when we consider the role of intermediaries, as discussed by Gassmann et al. (2011). These intermediaries (e.g., incubators, accelerators, and innovation hubs) act as translators and brokers within the middleground. They help navigate the cultural and operational differences between the grassroots and corporate worlds. Cohendet et al. (2021) argue that intermediaries could amplify rather than suppress grassroots innovation by ensuring resources and ideas flow freely, as seen in FabLabs. For example, Grandadam et al.'s (2013) study of the video game industry in Montreal brings an empirical angle to these discussions. Their findings show how creative hubs serve as physical and cultural manifestations of the middleground. These hubs are vibrant environments where developers, artists, and technologists from different worlds converge. Interestingly, this aligns with Cuntz and Peuckert's (2023) exploration of how hackerspaces evolve into entrepreneurial ventures. They paint a picture of the middleground as a transitional space, where raw creativity (the underground) gains the tools, connections, and legitimacy to scale into formalized enterprises (the upperground).

Perhaps the tension between grassroots ideals and market-driven pragmatism is best addressed in Grandadam et al. (2022) policy-oriented framework. They argue for a deliberate nurturing of the middleground through policies that protect and sustain grassroots innovation while enabling its connection to institutional structures. Their emphasis on local commons echoes Cohendet et al.'s (2021) earlier findings, suggesting that the most successful middlegrounds are those deeply rooted in local culture yet flexible enough to engage with global networks. Taken together, these perspectives form a lively dialogue about the middleground's role in cross-innovation. While some, like Enkel and Gassmann (2010), focus on the structured recombination of ideas across industries, others, like Cohendet et al. (2021), emphasize the serendipitous, community-driven nature of these spaces. The unifying thread, however, remains unclear. The middleground is depicted in the literature as more than just a bridge—it is an environment where creativity, knowledge, and resources converge.

2.2 *Cross-Industry Innovation*

Cross-industry innovation advocates for the blending of knowledge, practices, and ideas from different sectors to create opportunities for breakthroughs that no single industry could achieve alone. Scholars like Enkel and Gassmann (2010) have described this process through the lens of 'creative imitation,' where organizations take inspiration from other sectors and adapt those ideas to suit their own needs. However, this seemingly straightforward process offers many challenges. Transferring ideas across industries requires not just creativity but also a keen ability to translate concepts that may be rooted in completely different cultural, operational, or technological contexts. Here, intermediaries play a crucial role in bridging these gaps. Gassmann et al. (2011) expand the idea in which intermediaries—whether they're consultants, innovation hubs, or specialized agencies—act as translators and connectors, smoothing out the friction that inevitably arises when industries with differing logics and goals attempt to collaborate. Abi Saad et al. (2024) take this idea further by exploring how intermediaries operate across multiple levels, from the micro-level interactions within firms to the macro-level policy frameworks that shape entire sectors. Their study of digital technology adoption in healthcare shows just how critical intermediaries are in sectors resistant to change.

This tension between structure and creativity is a recurring theme in the literature. While intermediaries provide much-needed coordination, innovation also thrives in environments that embrace ambiguity and experimentation. Paris and Ben Mahmoud-Jouini (2019) describe creation as an iterative, often chaotic process that requires room for failure and unexpected outcomes. When juxtaposed with the more structured approaches discussed by Abi Saad et al. (2024), it raises the issue of whether intermediaries can provide enough support to facilitate cross-industry collaboration without limiting the necessary unpredictability that sparks innovation. This balance is particularly critical when we look at the larger ecosystems in which cross-industry innovation occurs. Bonomi Santos et al. (2023) propose a framework for orchestrating entrepreneurial ecosystems, emphasizing that innovation outcomes improve when diverse actors—startups, corporations, universities, and policymakers—are effectively coordinated. Their perspective aligns with Grandadam et al.'s (2022) focus on grassroots innovation and local commons. Both studies suggest that shared platforms, whether they are physical spaces like FabLabs or conceptual spaces like local innovation commons, are key to fostering collaboration. But the two perspectives also diverge in emphasis. While Bonomi Santos et al. (2023) are concerned with achieving ecosystem-level outcomes, Grandadam et al. (2022) focus on sustaining the bottom-up, community-driven ethos of grassroots creativity.

The cultural and creative industries (CCIs) offer a particularly rich ground for exploring this debate. Santoro et al. (2020) demonstrate how collaboration with CCIs enhances innovation performance in other industries, particularly when organizations have strong absorptive capacity—the ability to recognize and integrate external knowledge. But this collaboration is not without its challenges. Creative industries operate with values and processes that often clash with those of traditional industries. Where CCIs prioritize originality and emotional meaning, other industries may prioritize efficiency and scalability. This clash can either become a fertile ground for innovation or a source of friction that stalls progress. Murphy et al. (2012) discuss the learning that occurs when partners from vastly different contexts come together and caution that these collaborations require mechanisms for resolving conflicts and navigating power dynamics. Their work suggests that the success of cross-industry innovation depends as much on interpersonal and organizational dynamics as it does on the inherent compatibility of the industries involved. This idea

resonates with the broader issue of how intermediaries and ecosystems manage the diverse needs and priorities of their participants.

These perspectives paint a vivid picture of cross-industry innovation as a dance between structure and spontaneity, between the planned and the emergent. Intermediaries and orchestrators like those described by Abi Saad et al. (2024) and Bonomi Santos et al. (2023) provide the frameworks and tools necessary for collaboration, but the process behind the collaboration ultimately relies on the kind of creativity and iterative experimentation described by Paris and Ben Mahmoud-Jouini (2019). Therefore, we identify a growing need to design systems that balance structure and flexibility, enabling effective collaboration while fostering the creativity and adaptability essential for innovation. Such systems are particularly important as industries increasingly rely on cross-sectoral partnerships to address complex challenges and explore new opportunities.

2.3 Connecting the Middleground and Cross-Innovation

As mentioned before in the introduction, the middleground and cross-industry innovation converge around the idea of dynamic environments where diverse actors interact to create new knowledge and solutions. The middleground, as explored by Cohendet et al. (2010, 2021), emphasizes the role of shared spaces and intermediaries in bridging the grassroots creativity of the underground and the structured innovation of the upperground. Similarly, cross-industry innovation literature, such as the works of Enkel and Gassmann (2010) and Abi Saad et al. (2024), highlights the importance of intermediaries, ecosystems, and collaborative processes in facilitating the transfer and recombination of knowledge across sectors. Both streams recognize the necessity of balancing structure and flexibility to foster creativity, yet they explore this balance from different vantage points—one rooted in spatial and cultural dynamics, the other in intersectoral knowledge flows. In other words, while the middleground thrives on informal, open-ended interactions, cross-industry collaboration often requires structured processes to adapt and recombine ideas across domains. Our study highlights the role of intermediaries in leveraging the middleground to balance the need for flexibility with the demands of structure in cross-sector innovation.

2.4 *Cultural Embeddedness*

The concept of embeddedness makes a significant contribution to understanding the social quality of corporate networks and their social-institutional approaches to economic activity. Several economic geographers suggest that the social relationship between actors is based on the principle of local embeddedness (Gluckler, 2001). In particular, 'relational embeddedness' describes the relationship between two actors, whereby the economic relationship is not only based on opportunism but also based on trust (Gluckler, 2001). Trust arises between actors when positive experiences are made and the reliability of expectations of the other grows. This can involve both individuals and collective actors. Nooteboom (2000) emphasizes the importance of shared values and trust in fostering effective collaboration across diverse industries. Cultural embeddedness is a 'shared collective understanding in shaping economic strategies and goals' (Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990). Cultural embeddedness, being a versatile concept, can be analyzed at different scales and in a number of ways, as for instance to better understand industrial practices and competitiveness in different regions, or to investigate regional cultures, regional industrial cultures, or organizational cultures (Oinas, 1997). Cultural embeddedness reduces cognitive distance between participants and enhances relational proximity (Boschma, 2005). In this sense, our findings extend Boschma's framework by highlighting the role of cultural proximity in fostering cross-industry collaboration.

3 METHODOLOGY

This book chapter focuses on how the middleground is leveraged by regional intermediary actors to foster cross-industry innovation, demanding a deeper understanding of the actions and interactions taking place among actors. Such understanding is crucial for identifying the roles of various actors and their specific functions. To achieve this objective, a qualitative case study methodology was deemed most appropriate (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Flick, 2013). The research aimed to explore whether examples of cross-industry innovation could be identified and understood through interviews and participatory observation.

3.1 *Empirical Case Study*

The reason why this case was chosen is because there is an increased interest to foster local economies in peripheral and rural areas of Saxony, Eastern Germany, centered on creative and innovative approaches, especially after the impact caused by the brain drain phenomenon in the region in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin wall. Over the past 15 years, in the state of Saxony, a group of local leaders have been working to unite creative freelancers and startups under one umbrella organization called the ‘*Landesverband der Kultur und Kreativwirtschaft Sachsen*’ (in English: *Saxony Association of Cultural and Creative Industries* or SACCI). Under different projects, the association’s project managers, who act as intermediaries (Gassmann et al., 2011) across industries, provide consulting, skills training, and networking to over 300 entrepreneurs and companies that constitute the core strength and potential of Saxony’s creative sectors, in cities and towns such as Leipzig, Dresden, Chemnitz, and Annaberg and their surrounding rural areas. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic undeniably marked a pivotal moment in the dynamic trajectory of Saxony’s creative industries. The current economic landscape faces numerous challenges, including significant disruptions in value chains, shifts in demand dynamics, shortages of skills, and the pressures of transformation. Nevertheless, the creative industries persist in responding with a pioneering and innovative spirit. Industry-specific expertise and collaborative thinking among stakeholders contribute to generating regional value and fortifying Saxony as an attractive innovation and business hub, thus earning the nickname of *Silicon Saxony*. One prime example is the city of Chemnitz designated to run the program of European Capital of Culture in 2025. Given this context and tapping into their cross-sector innovation potential, the government of Saxony allocates significant funds to boost the creative sector and encourage collaborations between creative industries and traditional industries.

3.2 *Data Collection*

Data collection took place during two visits to the Saxony region: the first spanning from April to May 2023 and the second from October to November also in 2023. The fieldwork encompassed visits to key locations in Leipzig, Dresden, Annaberg, and Chemnitz. A total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 8 with SACCI project managers,

who function as innovation or orchestration intermediaries, and 2 with creative industry freelancers. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Participation in four different events was integral to the study, with one event being the closing ceremony of the initial phase of the 'Cross-innovation made in Saxony' project, during which results and reflections were shared. Informal interviews were also conducted during these events, engaging with policy makers, industry partners, SACCI project assistants, community members, and creative industry freelancers. These informal interviews were approximately 30 minutes each, and notes were diligently taken. Additionally, participatory observation was carried out during events and job sites, involving comprehensive notetaking. The research also involved an in-depth exploration of online content on the SACCI websites and a review of Saxony government publications focusing on the economic and social impact of creative industries in the region.

3.3 *Data Analysis*

Semi-structured interviews underwent coding using the qualitative data analysis computer software NVIVO, following the coding techniques outlined by Glaser and Strauss (2017), which included achieving theoretical saturation of categories. The notes from informal interviews were also subjected to coding. Furthermore, notes derived from participatory observations at events and job sites served as contextual bases to compare results from coding, facilitating the construction of a cohesive narrative to describe the investigation's findings. The in-depth exploration of online content on SACCI websites provided a clear overview of the impact of cross-innovation collaborations in Saxony across creative and traditional industries. The content on SACCI's website offers a comprehensive description of innovation projects over time. Lastly, official publications from the state of Saxony offer a wide picture about the impact of creativity on the development of the region.

4 RESULTS

The findings provide insights into how SACCI leverages the middle-ground to foster cross-industry innovation through dynamic relational structures, cultural embeddedness, and knowledge sharing. These dimensions help bridge CCIs and traditional firms in Saxony, answering how

intermediaries use the middleground to catalyze innovation by emphasizing place-based interactions and cultural contexts.

4.1 Connecting Unrelated Stakeholders in the Middleground Through Dynamic Activities and Events

SACCI's work illustrates how the middleground functions as a dynamic environment, constantly evolving through relational exchanges that span creative and traditional sectors. SACCI employs flexible relational structures that promote both informal and formal interactions, enabling diverse actors to engage in collaborative processes. A pivotal aspect of SACCI's strategy is the use of physical spaces, such as concert halls, cafes, and public venues, where interactions between traditionally siloed industries can occur. These spaces act as arenas for trust-building, where participants can forge relationships and share ideas in a less formal setting.

I think that bringing people that usually would not work together contributes to democratic practice and democratic values. (SACCI project manager)

This approach reflects the dynamic, adaptive nature of the middleground, where actors from different industries connect and establish trust through interactions in culturally resonant spaces. This fluidity is critical, as SACCI does not rely on rigid structures but instead creates opportunities for ongoing, evolving collaboration.

The idea behind the cross-innovation project was to bring the creatives closer to more traditional firms, to bridge those gaps, and to make the two sides talk to each other. (Industry partner)

By facilitating these interactions, SACCI fosters an ecosystem that encourages mutual adjustment and adaptability, key elements that sustain innovation over time.

4.2 Using Culture to Foster Collaboration in the Middleground

Cultural embeddedness plays a crucial role in SACCI's strategy for fostering collaboration across industries. SACCI's activities are deeply integrated into the cultural and spatial identity of Saxony, using the region's cultural heritage sites from the period post-reunification and other

common spaces to build trust and reduce barriers to cross-sectoral interactions. By holding events in culturally significant venues, such as repurposed factories and local punk clubs, SACCI draws on local identity to create a sense of belonging and shared purpose among participants from both creative and traditional industries.

The event is open to the public and it is a fun event at a traditional punk club, but it's actually a business meeting where professionals can establish connections. (Community member)

These spaces, embedded in Saxony's history, are not just physical locations but are also cultural symbols that facilitate boundary-spanning interactions. They reduce cognitive distance between industries, enabling participants to engage in more meaningful ways.

The core motivation for the makerhubs that I developed with my project is to create new spaces for common social practice while preserving cultural sites. They have a very strong integrating function. For example, there is an economic dimension, a business dimension, and urban/regional development dimension, a social dimension, and an innovation dimension. (SACCI project manager)

This cultural embeddedness enhances the relational proximity between industry actors and helps overcome the social and professional distances that often hinder collaboration. The blending of cultural identity and relational engagement positions the middleground as a uniquely effective space for fostering cross-industry innovation.

4.3 Progressive Knowledge Sharing Practices in the Middleground

SACCI's approach to knowledge sharing is central to its strategy of bridging creative and traditional industries. Knowledge flows in SACCI's ecosystem are initiated through informal interactions during events and further developed through more structured collaborations. In this process, tacit knowledge is shared in low-pressure settings before transitioning to formalized collaborations that enable the co-creation of innovative solutions.

I told SACCI about a communication problem in my company between areas of work. They organized a session with creative partners to teach about communication skills and we have implemented the teachings. Right now, I am collaborating with them to see how a new design in my products can improve my business model. (Industry Partner)

As these relationships deepen, SACCI facilitates longer-term collaborations, exemplified by the partnership between a 3D printing company and local designers. This collaboration led to the development of customized medical silicones for transplants, demonstrating how SACCI's platform enables tangible cross-industry innovations.

We don't just connect people; we help them see how their skills and knowledge complement each other. That's where innovation happens. (SACCI project manager)

This knowledge-sharing process, which transitions from informal interactions to formal collaborations, highlights SACCI's pivotal role as a knowledge connector, facilitating cross-sectoral exchange and innovation. SACCI's expertise extends beyond merely sharing knowledge; it also encompasses knowledge creation. As an intermediary, SACCI—and its actors—continuously accumulates new knowledge through its activities, which can then be shared and leveraged to refine and expand its knowledge-sharing practices. This iterative process not only sustains innovation but also shapes the dynamics of knowledge exchange, including determining who participates in these exchanges. However, the knowledge creation aspect may warrant further exploration.

5 DISCUSSION

The findings from SACCI's initiatives in Saxony address a critical gap in the literature, namely the intersection between the middleground and cross-industry innovation. While the literature on the middleground focuses on local, place-based contexts and cultural dynamics, the cross-industry innovation literature often emphasizes broader sectoral interactions without explicitly addressing the role of local ecosystems and cultural commons. This gap has led to unanswered questions about how spatial and cultural dimensions shape the success of cross-industry collaborations. Our study addresses this gap by exploring how the middleground is

leveraged by an intermediary actor—SACCI—to facilitate cross-industry innovation.

5.1 *The Middleground as a Dynamic Ecosystem for Cross-Industry Collaboration*

Our findings demonstrate that SACCI utilizes the middleground as a dynamic ecosystem, one that is not static but rather a fluid network of relationships and interactions that evolve over time. This aligns with existing literature on innovation ecosystems, which emphasizes the importance of ongoing interaction and mutual adaptation among actors (Gertler, 2003). However, what sets our study apart is the explicit focus on how SACCI actively cultivates this dynamic environment through the creation of informal, culturally significant spaces. These spaces, such as concert halls and cafés, are not only physical venues but also symbolic platforms for fostering relationships and knowledge sharing.

The findings highlight that the middleground is not a neutral space but one that requires careful orchestration of relational structures to foster collaboration. This perspective contributes to the growing recognition of intermediaries as crucial actors in innovation ecosystems (Powell & Grodal, 2005). By acting as umbrella for relational intermediaries, SACCI builds an adaptive network that enables both formal and informal collaboration, which is vital for sustaining innovation in a constantly evolving ecosystem.

5.2 *Cultural Embeddedness as a Catalyst for Cross-Industry Collaboration*

The findings highlight the centrality of cultural embeddedness in fostering cross-industry collaboration, supporting Gluckler's (2001) notion that trust, cultivated through positive interactions, underpins relational embeddedness. SACCI leverages Saxony's cultural identity to establish shared understandings, aligning with Zukin and DiMaggio's (1990) concept of cultural embeddedness, which facilitates trust and mutual comprehension among diverse actors.

SACCI's use of culturally resonant spaces, such as repurposed factories and punk clubs, reduces cognitive distance and enhances relational proximity, extending Boschma's (2005) framework by illustrating how cultural proximity strengthens collaboration. This alignment with Nooteboom's

(2000) emphasis on shared values and cultural coherence underscores the role of cultural dynamics in enabling meaningful interactions across disparate sectors.

Moreover, SACCI's dual capacity to engage with both institutional structures and grassroots networks reflects Oinas's (1997) insights into the role of cultural embeddedness in shaping regional industrial practices. SACCI balances the formalized expectations of institutional actors with the creative adaptability needed for community-driven initiatives, solidifying its position as a relational intermediary adept at navigating top-down and bottom-up dynamics.

5.3 *Knowledge Sharing as a Facilitator of Cross-Industry Collaboration*

Finally, our study underscores the importance of knowledge sharing in SACCI's mission to foster cross-industry innovation. SACCI's approach to knowledge exchange begins with informal interactions and progresses to more structured collaborations. This process is in line with Nonaka et al. (1996), who assert that informal exchanges are critical for the initial stages of knowledge sharing. However, SACCI goes beyond informal knowledge flows by facilitating formalized mechanisms for collaboration, such as innovation workshops and joint projects.

The role of SACCI as a knowledge connector is crucial in overcoming barriers between creative and traditional industries. By identifying complementary skills and matching actors from different industries, SACCI facilitates the integration of diverse knowledge bases and fosters innovation. This role of intermediaries as connectors of knowledge is highlighted in the literature (Powell & Grodal, 2005), and our study provides empirical evidence of how this function is operationalized within the context of cross-industry innovation.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This study advances the theoretical understanding of the middleground by providing empirical evidence to better assess its role as a dynamic ecosystem that integrates relational, cultural, and knowledge-sharing dimensions. While prior studies (Cohendet et al., 2010) have conceptualized the middleground as a more abstract construct, this research provides concrete evidence of how it operates in practice. By highlighting SACCI's

initiatives in Saxony, we offer a framework for the application of the middleground in regional and cross-sectoral contexts, where local actors leverage culturally embedded practices, events, and collaborative spaces to foster cross-industry innovation. Our findings also contribute to the literature on knowledge sharing by illustrating how the interplay between informal trust-building interactions and formalized collaboration mechanisms fosters cross-industry knowledge exchange. Existing research often focuses on homogenous or sector-specific contexts, but our study expands this view by showing how the middleground enables knowledge flows across diverse industries, driving innovation through both informal and formal stages of collaboration. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how knowledge is shared in dynamic, multi-sector ecosystems.

Additionally, the study enriches the discourse on cultural embeddedness in regional innovation ecosystems. By demonstrating how SACCI leverages Saxony's cultural heritage to foster relational proximity and collaboration, we underscore the importance of aligning innovation practices with local identity and values. Our findings extend the work of Nooteboom (2000) and Enkel and Gassmann (2010) by providing empirical evidence of how culture and place shape the dynamics of cross-industry innovation, reinforcing the idea that local identity can act as a bridge in fostering collaborative innovation across disparate sectors. Policymakers can leverage these insights by supporting intermediaries like SACCI by encouraging the use of culturally embedded spaces and fostering both formal and informal mechanisms of interaction can enhance regional innovation. Additionally, flexible policy frameworks that balance institutional support with grassroots initiatives can strengthen the middleground's role in driving sustainable, cross-sectoral innovation.

In conclusion, this study offers both theoretical and practical insights into the operationalization of the middleground and the socio-spatial dynamics that drive innovation. The potential for future research includes examining the long-term evolution of such ecosystems and exploring comparative case studies in different regional contexts. Ultimately, this research highlights the transformative potential of the middleground as a space for innovation, particularly in regions seeking to enhance collaboration across sectoral boundaries to foster socio-economic development.

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From Vacancy to Vitality: How ‘Meanwhile’ Spaces Shape Urban-Rural Socio-economic Dynamics in Oxfordshire, UK

Xiaojie Jessie Tan

I INTRODUCTION

How can collaborative workspaces (CWS) redefine regional development by fostering urban-rural connectivity and addressing socio-economic challenges? This chapter addresses this question by examining Makespace Oxford, a pioneering organisation with impact-driven initiatives in the UK. Unlike conventional coworking spaces focused on urban creative professionals, Makespace Oxford integrates local embeddedness and community-led practices to bridge socio-economic gaps between urban and rural regions. This approach contributes to broader discussions on inclusive regional development, neo-endogenous principles, and innovation diffusion (Bosworth et al., 2023; Ray, 2006). Makespace Oxford exemplifies neo-endogenous development by embedding local resources within broader support networks, creating socio-economic impacts tailored to regional needs. Traditional binary categorisations of urban versus rural CWS practices have limited the scope of socio-economic

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129

interventions. By transcending these binaries, Makespace Oxford demonstrates how adaptable models of CWS, particularly in the post-COVID era of economic uncertainty, can foster inclusivity and sustainability across diverse geographical contexts. Therefore, through examining Makespace Oxford's initiatives and CWS practices across urban and rural areas, this chapter offers detailed insights into the significance of local embeddedness in enhancing CWS's transformative potential and their potential to act as catalysts for inclusive and sustainable socio-economic impacts. To explore these ideas in-depth, the chapter begins by situating CWS within broader theoretical debates, examining their evolution and transformative potential for regional development. This sets the stage for an analysis of Oxfordshire's socio-economic landscape and the emergence of the 'Meanwhile' model as a response to regional challenges. Through a detailed analysis of the Makespace Oxford case study, this chapter explores how localised CWS practices grounded in neo-endogenous principles can foster urban-rural connectivity and community cohesion. Finally, the chapter concludes with actionable recommendations, offering advice for policymakers to replicate this success in diverse regional contexts.

2 TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACTS OF CWS IN URBAN AND RURAL REGIONS

2.1 *The Evolution, Prospects, and Limitations of CWS*

The coworking phenomenon began around 2005 and was associated with the tangible manifestation of the 'open source' movement, resonating with the collaborative economy (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). The 2007 and 2008 financial crises accelerated this movement, providing freelancers and small businesses with alternatives to traditional workspaces. Coworking advocates launched CWS's early forms within a global, often highly informal, and non-profit social enterprise network 'linked to activism and marginal to capitalist accumulation' (De Peuter et al., 2017). Over time, CWS evolved from informal social enterprises into diverse typologies, including makerspaces, incubators, and innovation hubs (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021). These spaces broke traditional organisational barriers, allowing individuals from diverse institutions and professional backgrounds to collaborate non-bindingly (Spinuzzi, 2012), fostering less hierarchical relationships

and more conducive to innovation and creativity (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018).

Coworking spaces are often associated with a range of motivations and benefits, including improved work-life balance (Gandini, 2015), reduced isolation and professional alienation (De Peuter et al., 2017), and enhanced opportunities for networking and business (Bacevice & Spreitzer, 2023). They can also provide social and emotional support (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Cheah & Ho, 2019), cultivate a sense of community (Garrett et al., 2017), and contribute to regional development and innovation (Capdevila, 2013, 2015). However, commercialisation and profit-driven models increasingly dominate coworking spaces, raising concerns about exclusivity and the erosion of grassroots and initial community-oriented values (Merkel, 2019; Spinuzzi et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, resilient and community-driven CWS have increasingly emerged, especially in rural and peripheral areas. They often endeavour to maintain the grassroots spirit of the early coworking movement (Reed, 2007). These spaces often combine entrepreneurial activities with social and political activism, illustrating a new phase of coworking that aligns with place-based development principles (Ray, 2006; Gandini & Cossu, 2021). The Makespace Oxford initiative, as discussed in this chapter, exemplifies how CWS can strengthen community ties and support local activism while maintaining economic sustainability.

2.2 Opportunities and Barriers of CWS in Regional Development

CWS can facilitate urban-rural networks and bridge knowledge exchange and innovation, enabling local regions to overcome geographic isolation and economic stagnation (Capdevila, 2021). Moreover, CWS often adopt hybrid models in the peripheral areas, such as coworking with incubator or accelerator programs, to boost entrepreneurial capabilities and address resource constraints (Fuzi, 2015). The potential for innovative mixing between sectors and professions adds a further dimension to rural coworking, as these spaces can serve as networks for diverse actors, enhancing local development capacity and economic opportunities (Naldi et al., 2015) and reducing social and professional isolation by meeting users' psychological needs (Merrell et al., 2021).

From a spatial perspective, CWS in mid-sized cities can contribute to local economic development and downtown revitalisation (Jamal, 2018;

Nakano et al., 2020; Buksh & Mouat, 2015). They could directly and indirectly impact the socio-economic environment, such as living costs, job opportunities, and business growth (Mariotti et al., 2021). With effective place-based and community-led strategies, CWS can serve as part of the ‘soft infrastructure’ (Bradshaw & Blakely, 1999) and play a crucial role in fostering local economic growth, social networks, and local entrepreneurial activities, thereby potentially contributing to ‘smart countryside’ development (Bosworth et al., 2023; Merrell et al., 2021). Therefore, the impacts highlight CWS’s role in fostering social integration and economic progress, suggesting that CWS can be part of a broader strategy to enhance community cohesion and growth (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020).

While the potential benefits of establishing CWS in urban and rural areas are evident, challenges remain significant, especially in the diverse socio-economic contexts in which CWS operates. First, the functions of CWS are shaped by geographic contexts. In urban settings, CWS often cater to affluent or technologically adept individuals, potentially excluding those who do not fit the typical coworking demographic (Lorne, 2020). In rural areas, challenges like limited infrastructure, digital connectivity (Cowie et al., 2013), social and professional isolation, limited job learning opportunities, and digital skills gaps (Merrell et al., 2021) also complicate the establishment of CWS. Regardless of urban or rural areas, CWS often prefers to be in well-connected areas; the appeal of rural CWS is usually framed by their ability to attract high-skilled professionals who emigrate from urban areas rather than serve the needs of existing rural communities (Thornton et al., 2023). This can lead to decentralising skilled labour, potentially exacerbating inequalities and marginalising less connected areas (Bosworth et al., 2023; Flipo et al., 2022). The mismatch between the local communities’ needs and the CWS can undermine its potential to support the most vulnerable communities locally and further widen urban and rural disparities (Flipo et al., 2022).

To better illustrate these differences and highlight the different roles of CWS in urban and rural settings, Table 1 below provides a comparative overview of their roles, impacts, and challenges, drawing from existing literature.

To address the challenges in rural CWS, a nuanced understanding of the diverse roles of CWS in different socio-economic contexts is essential, particularly in fostering regional innovation networks for urban and rural regions. Such networks are critical for overcoming the limitations of rural coworking, enabling these spaces to act as platforms for social innovation

Table 1 Comparative overview of urban and rural coworking spaces (Author, 2024)

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Urban CWS</i>	<i>Rural CWS</i>
Main Users	Freelancers, entrepreneurs, startups, and creative professionals (Gandini, 2015; Fuzi, 2015), lifestyle migrants, creative professionals, remote workers (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Gandini & Cossu, 2021; Fuzi, 2015)	
Potential Benefits	Networking, innovation, combating isolation, business opportunities, and regional development (Capdevila, 2013; Bacevice & Spreitzer, 2023; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016)	Community building, economic revitalisation, attracting skilled professionals, and combating rural isolation (Fuzi, 2015; Merkel, 2019; Cowie et al., 2013; Merrell et al., 2021)
Challenges	Commercialisation, reinforcing inequalities, affordability, and exclusivity (Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2019; Avdikos & Pettas, 2021; Spinuzzi et al., 2019)	Limited infrastructure, internet access, collaboration opportunities, risk of increasing inequalities, and superficial local embeddedness (Knapp & Sawy, 2021; Gandini & Cossu, 2021)
Transformative Potential	Can drive regional development but may exclude marginalised groups (Capdevila, 2013; Leung & Cossu, 2019; Avdikos & Pettas, 2021)	Can revitalise rural economies but may not serve existing communities effectively (Fuzi, 2015; Merkel, 2019; Bosworth et al., 2023; Flipo et al., 2022)

and local development, aligning with the principles of the ‘neo-endogenous’ model (Ray, 2006). To bridge this gap, this chapter aims to generate a more nuanced understanding of how CWS can transcend traditional roles and contribute to socio-economic resilience and community cohesion in diverse regional settings through the case study of Makespace Oxford.

3 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 *Data Collection*

This chapter employs primary and secondary data to explore the socio-economic impacts of collaborative workspaces (CWS) of Makespace Oxford. Primary data collection involved semi-structured interviews and fieldwork. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key

stakeholders at Makespace Oxford, including the Project Manager and two Community Managers, during August 2023 and February 2024. The selection of these participants was intentional, as they were directly involved in operational and strategic decision-making, making their perspectives and engagement critical to understanding the model's implementation and impacts. The interviews explored strategies for establishing CWS, operational challenges, and their perception of how the organisation generates local socio-economic impacts. The open-ended nature of the interviews enabled participants to share their experiences and perspectives, providing a comprehensive view of the multifaceted role of CWS in community development and regional revitalisation.

Fieldwork involved a three-day site visit from February to March 2024, covering various CWS locations with public access established by Makespace Oxford, including The Covered Market, The Community Works, Aristotle Lane in Oxford, The Old Stables in Wantage, and The Charter Studios in Abingdon. Observations of spatial configurations, activities, and informal conversations with residents, coordinators, and members provided a nuanced understanding of these spaces' daily operations and community dynamics in these CWS sites. Secondary data comprised digital materials from Makespace Oxford's website, social media, and published reports. Additional sources included Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford City Council websites and related reports, social media and websites of partner organisations, and local news. These sources were essential for contextualising the primary data, offering a broader understanding of socio-economic challenges in Oxfordshire and detailed insights into Makespace Oxford's 'Meanwhile' initiatives and their implementation. This combination of sources also provided a comprehensive dataset, allowing cross-validation of perspectives to strengthen the reliability of the findings.

3.2 *Data Analysis*

The study employed Grounded Theory as an overarching methodological approach to guide the data analysis without a predefined theoretical framework. This approach enabled the emergence of concepts directly from the data, making it particularly effective for exploring the transformative potential of CWS in regional development. Thematic analysis with selective coding was applied to systematically code and categorise interview transcripts and field notes. Selective coding enabled the identification of

key themes from the data while focusing on the overarching aim of exploring CWS’s transformative potential. Key themes such as ‘community engagement,’ ‘inclusion and equity,’ ‘urban and rural networks,’ and ‘socio-economic impact’ were refined iteratively. This iterative refinement ensured that emergent themes aligned with the study’s objectives and reflected the nuances in Makespace Oxford’s practices. This process ensured depth and consistency in the findings, aligning to identify practical strategies for regional development.

4 OXFORDSHIRE’S LANDSCAPE: HISTORICAL RICHNESS AND MODERN CHALLENGES

Oxfordshire, a historic Southeast England County with 723,000 residents, is among England’s most rural regions. While its economy is strong, growth remains uneven, with knowledge-intensive industries dominating over 70% of jobs in Oxford (Oxfordshire County Council, 2023). Moreover, it also faces substantial challenges, including geographical disparities, child poverty, and high housing costs. One Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) in Oxfordshire ranks among the UK’s 10% most deprived areas, highlighting significant inequalities (Public Tableau, 2024). Despite a predicted 20% vacancy rate for retail units in Oxford city centre (Bunce, 2020), many micro-businesses operate without formal business spaces, reflecting a shortage of affordable office space (Edwards, 2020). This challenge is particularly pronounced in Oxfordshire, the 6th most expensive county out of 55 counties in England and Wales by average property price (Plumplot, 2025). Inspired by Platform Places, a social enterprise promoting the sustainable reuse of underutilised spaces across the UK (Bosetti & Colthorpe, 2018), Makespace Oxford launched its first project at Aristotle Lane in 2019. They transformed a building owned by the University of Oxford into a hub space, after it had been vacant for four years.

As the project evolved, Makespace Oxford began to explore further ways to scale and formalise this temporary use of underutilised spaces across Oxfordshire. In 2021, in partnership with Oxford City Council and funded by the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP), they launched the ‘Meanwhile in Oxfordshire’ program. It transforms vacant shops and buildings across Oxfordshire into dynamic spaces like independent stores, social venues, creative studios, and collaborative workspaces

to revitalise the local high streets (Jennings, 2023). This initiative leverages underused buildings to respond to community needs, creating an adaptive model that can be applied across both central Oxford and peripheral regions in Oxfordshire. Aligning closely with the socio-economic needs of Oxfordshire, this program provides an innovative model for leveraging underused spaces to support local communities, addressing persistent issues like the shortage of affordable office spaces and sustainability of purpose-driven organisations.

5 FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from the Makespace Oxford's CWS across Oxfordshire. The finding data demonstrates the impacts of these hub spaces and their contributions to socio-economic challenges, community cohesion, regional development, and inclusivity. Table 2 provides an overview of Makespace Oxford's hub spaces, including their facilities, targeted users, and previous building usages.

5.1 *Local Embeddedness in Urban Centres: The Case of Aristotle Lane*

The strategic distribution of solo and hub spaces of Makespace Oxford spans urban and rural areas, such as Abingdon, Didcot, and Wantage, as well as central Oxford hub spaces like Aristotle Lane, The Community Works, The Source and Makespace Central. While hubs in central Oxford benefit from greater accessibility, rural spaces such as those in Wantage and Abingdon face challenges in access and inclusivity due to longer travel distances and limited public transport options. This reflects Makespace Oxford's role in fostering urban-rural connectivity and improving access to affordable workspaces and network resources across regions. As Makespace Oxford's first project, Aristotle Lane aims to provide affordable workspaces for purpose-driven organisations and individuals in Oxford. By transforming underutilised urban spaces, this project offers opportunities for community-focused organisations to cope with the various challenges in the capital-driven market. Since its launch in 2019, it has supported over 100 organisations and created 67 jobs, becoming a hub for organisations like Share Oxford, Inspire Sounds, and Good Food Oxfordshire. These organisations provide various services and support to the local community, from promoting sustainable living to supporting

Table 2 Overview of events and facilities at Makespace Oxford’s hub spaces (Author, 2024)

<i>No.</i>	<i>Hub space</i>	<i>Landlord/ previous usage/ length of vacancy</i>	<i>Overview of activities held in the hub space</i>	<i>Facilities</i>
1	Aristotle Lane	Landlord: University of Oxford; previously empty for four years	Summer parties, Repair Cafes, workshops on cooperative economies, art exhibitions, business breakfasts, launch parties, and Fundraising Dinner.	Private studios, desks (fixed and coworking), event space, meeting rooms, shared kitchen, pottery studio, wheelchair-accessible toilet, sensory and play kits for neurodivergent individuals and children.
2	The Community Works	Landlord: University of Oxford; empty for eight years, used to be a Chinese restaurant	Training, family-friendly funding workshops, community gardening, pop-up events, open mic events, play spaces for children, arts and cultural events feature exhibitions on social issues (i.e., homelessness, refugee).	Event space, gallery space, restaurant, café, storage, studio, play kit for children, and in-house catering.
3	Makespace Central	Not provided	The coworking space is adjacent to The Community Works, where most events are held.	Private offices, studios, and a shared kitchen.
4	The Source	Not provided	Spatial Justice Panel, workshops on dialogues around the Iraq War, activities promoting solidarity, racial and social justice, and multicultural fashion shows.	Event/meeting space, fixed desks, coworking, and a shared kitchen with sensory and play kits access.

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

<i>No.</i>	<i>Hub space</i>	<i>Landlord/ previous usage/ length of vacancy</i>	<i>Overview of activities held in the hub space</i>	<i>Facilities</i>
5	The Charter Studios	Landlord: Local authorities; used to be NHS building for public health and others	Caribbean Autism Family Groups, Oxfordshire Art Weeks, Open Day events, African Caribbean heritage cultural displays, exhibitions, music performances, and cake sales.	Shared workspace, single occupancy office, therapy rooms, artist studios, lift access, shared kitchen, and lounge.
6	The Junction	Landlord: Local housing organisation; used to be the office building	Silent Disco Events, Mental Health Workshops for children, Ramadan Gatherings, Community Consultation and Ownership Workshops, Social Activities for Children with Down Syndrome, and Film Screenings promoting social justice.	Private offices, large studios, community hall, shared kitchen, pottery studio, and meeting rooms.
7	Station Road Studios	Landlord: not provided; Used to be the warehouse	A coworking space adjacent to The Junction, where most of the events are held.	Large event/meeting space, shared kitchen, storage.
8	The Old Stables	Landlord: Local authorities; used to be a Daycare centre for elders and vulnerable individuals	Monthly Fruit Cake Queer Meet-ups, board game afternoons, a lunch club for retired individuals, Makers Events, Chop and Chat events and cookery classes.	Hot desks, fixed desks, private studios, community lounge, café, garden, meeting spaces and kitchen.

marginalised groups, such as refugees, young women, and women who have experienced domestic violence. These efforts illustrate how CWS foster social support, resilience, and equitable growth across regions (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016). Due to the competitive application process for

Aristotle Lane, Makespace Oxford prioritises organisations that align with its community and environmental impact values. For instance, they offer rent reductions of up to 30% based on the social value of businesses, redefining market norms to prioritise social returns over financial ones (Gandini & Cossu, 2021). This approach ensures that purpose-driven organisations and businesses are not priced out of the space, enabling CWS to act as catalysts for regional development by balancing economic sustainability with social impact.

5.2 *The Old Stables: Bridging Urban and Rural Needs*

The Old Stables in Wantage demonstrates how CWSs can address the challenges of rural communities as an adaptable community hub that responds to local needs while maintaining socio-economic inclusion. Rather than targeting typical urban coworking users, this CWS adopts a place-based approach, prioritising the specific needs of the local community with the carefully selected café. Transformed from a daycare centre, The Old Stables was set to continually serve older and vulnerable residents nearby, preserving previous community services. Moreover, the café uses ingredients and funding from local councils and organisations to support free community events and training programs, fostering collaboration among purpose-driven groups and contributing to a local support ecosystem. The café also offers volunteer opportunities and cooking skills training to help vulnerable individuals gain work experience and social connections. This initiative helps marginalised individuals, including those with disabilities, gain practical skills, reintegrate into employment, and participate in community activities.

The café’s role exemplifies how CWSs can evolve beyond traditional CWS to provide multi-functional services that address socio-economic gaps, fostering tailored integration with the surrounding community. Although both The Old Stables and urban CWSs like Aristotle Lane address the needs of marginalised groups, The Old Stables emphasises overcoming geographic and transportation barriers in rural areas, ensuring access and inclusion for underserved populations. The hub’s accessible design, which includes reading and play corners, a café, a community garden, an event space, and wheelchair-accessible toilets, caters to a diverse range of users, such as parents with young children, vulnerable individuals, and broader community residents, demonstrating that rural coworking hubs can serve as platforms for community engagement (Bock, 2016).

Without the local café and charitable support across Oxfordshire, many individuals would lack access to these inclusive community activities and spaces. According to the Community Coordinator, volunteers sustain weekly free lunches and attract residents who do not typically engage with the CWS. This highlights how rural CWSs act as adaptable hubs, addressing local needs and fostering social cohesion. The Old Stables faces challenges distinct from other rural CWSs, focusing on inclusivity and its geographic constraints rather than infrastructure or weak community ties (Cowie et al., 2013). Noticing that LGBTQ+ individuals travelled far to attend events in Oxford, the team organised similar activities locally, such as Monthly Fruit Cake Queer Meet-up. These efforts aim to improve accessibility and strengthen social infrastructure in rural areas (Knapp & Sawy, 2021). This place-sensitive approach can facilitate community belonging and resilience, supporting Naldi et al.'s (2015) view on socially embedded rural development.

5.3 *Expanding the Urban-Rural Network Across Oxfordshire*

Makespace Oxford's CWS initiative addresses socio-economic challenges across Oxfordshire by providing accessible and affordable workspaces for community residents, charities, and micro-businesses. This is particularly vital in a region like Oxfordshire, which faces significant challenges such as regional inequalities, housing affordability, and limited access to essential services despite its economic strengths. The county's rural nature and a high concentration of knowledge-intensive industries in Oxford City have created a significant divide between its urban and rural regions, indicating varying economic, social, and regional disparities.

The combined efforts and pooled resources between these urban and rural hubs enable Makespace Oxford to create a supportive ecosystem that benefits residents and organisations in various districts and communities. For example, events and workshops in central locations like Aristotle Lane can be adapted and replicated in rural hubs like The Old Stables, ensuring equitable access to resources and support across the region (Fuzi, 2015). This approach reflects Bosworth et al.'s (2023) viewpoint of how rural coworking spaces become crucial nodes that integrate local and extra-local networks, enhancing regional cohesion and socio-economic resilience. Coworking spaces like The Old Stables serve their surrounding community by combining social-economic infrastructures to bridge rural and

urban divides and facilitate social integration and collaborative opportunities.

As emphasised by the Project Manager, “We do not want to put money into those spaces in wealthy areas of Oxfordshire. Because there is no need for that kind of support.” This statement reflects Makespace Oxford’s deliberate approach to resource allocation, prioritising disadvantaged areas where socio-economic disparities are more pronounced. By focusing on underserved regions, the organisation addresses systemic inequities, aligning its efforts with broader goals of equitable regional development (Bosworth et al., 2023). Overall, Makespace Oxford’s CWS network showcases the transformative potential of coworking in tackling local socio-economic issues, fostering community cohesion, revitalising under-used buildings, developing regional networks, and supporting advocating for marginalised groups. This adaptive reuse and community-driven development model can serve as a blueprint for other regions facing similar socio-economic challenges (Capdevila, 2021).

6 DISCUSSION

The findings from Makespace Oxford highlight the role of CWS in bridging urban-rural socio-economic divides by acting as intermediaries in regional development facilitating knowledge exchange and collaborative capability (Bosworth et al., 2023; Flipo et al., 2022). This reinforces the transformative potential of CWS beyond conventional urban settings (Capdevila, 2013; Gandini & Cossu, 2021). By fostering inclusive, community-led, and accessible CWS networks, Makespace Oxford challenges the conventional view that CWS primarily benefit urban, high-skilled, and tech-oriented professionals (Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2019). Makespace Oxford’s ‘Meanwhile’ model actively integrates with diverse socio-economic contexts, fostering stronger local embeddedness and community resilience rather than being constrained by them. CWS serve as critical socio-economic infrastructures in peripheral regions, decentralising access to resources and opportunities that are typically concentrated in urban centres (Mariotti et al., 2021).

This research highlights the social value of CWS over profit-driven models (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021). By employing the ‘Meanwhile’ model, Makespace Oxford bridges gaps in local services and effectively supports marginalised communities. Unlike conventional CWS models that primarily focus on co-working as a commercial service, Makespace Oxford

leverages vacant spaces to prioritise community impact and regional development. This emphasis on adaptive reuse and social integration distinguishes it from other co-working initiatives that may be more market-driven. This innovative approach enhances the transformative potential of CWS in integration into regional development, mitigating inequalities and fostering socio-economic resilience.

By embedding itself in local socio-economic contexts, this model aligns closely with the principles of ‘neo-endogenous’ development in rural regions, which emphasise the integration of local resources with external support to achieve sustainable regional growth (Ray, 2006; Moseley, 1997). In particular, the neo-endogenous model underscores the importance of dynamic interactions between local actors, external agencies, and multi-level governance structures (Ray, 2006; Moseley, 1997). Makespace Oxford exemplifies this model by embedding its initiatives within local needs while leveraging external resources from institutions such as OxLEP, landlords, charitable organisations, Oxford City Council, and Oxfordshire County Council.

Through its multifaceted, locally embedded approach, Makespace Oxford transforms underutilised spaces into accessible hubs across Oxfordshire, a project that would be difficult for independent charity organisations to manage and deliver due to resource constraints and operational scalability. Such strategies enable Makespace Oxford to address the challenges of urban-rural connectivity in Oxfordshire by distributing CWS locations in urban centres like Oxford and peripheral areas like Wantage and Abingdon. This strategic placement strengthens regional networks and establishes a sustainable model for bridging urban-rural divides, ensuring that social innovation and economic opportunities extend beyond urban centres into peripheral areas.

Moreover, the neo-endogenous approach helps contextualise Makespace Oxford’s emphasis on inclusivity and social value. The initiative prioritises affordable and community-led solutions over profit-driven models, aligning with Ray’s (2006) and Moseley’s (1997) assertion that sustainable rural development must focus on local communities’ needs, capacities, and participation. For instance, the targeted use of ‘Meanwhile’ spaces to support purpose-driven organisations and marginalised groups in various local communities, such as individuals with disabilities, parents, and LGBTQ+ communities, illustrates how Makespace Oxford resonates with neo-endogenous principles in practice.

Moreover, the case study challenges the binary conceptualisation of urban and rural spaces, showcasing how CWSs like Makespace Oxford can serve as strategic connectors. By recognising the fluidity and interconnectivity of these geographical contexts, the model fosters cohesive regional networks that mitigate socio-economic fragmentation while addressing diverse localised needs. By establishing CWS in both urban hubs and peripheral areas, Makespace Oxford demonstrates how coworking models can bridge geographic disparities, enhance regional connectivity, and facilitate a more integrated development approach. This aligns with Capdevila’s (2021) observation that adapting coworking practices to rural settings requires a nuanced understanding of regional socio-economic context. For instance, Makespace Oxford’s inclusive activities and facilities, such as dedicated events for older people, parents with children, and individuals with disabilities, highlight the importance of creating spaces that cater to a broad spectrum of community members, thereby transforming perceived marginality into opportunities for social participation and inclusion (Knapp & Sawy, 2021).

7 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The success of Makespace Oxford provides valuable insights for policy-makers interested in leveraging CWS for regional development. One key policy implication is the need for supportive local government frameworks that facilitate the usage of local resources, such as underutilised spaces, which can be transformed into community usage. Policymakers should incentivise property owners to participate in similar ‘Meanwhile’ projects, thereby increasing affordable spaces with community-driven initiatives. Public funding mechanisms and technical support for CWS that prioritise social value over profitability are also critical. Such policies enable adaptive reuse of spaces and promote inclusive growth, particularly in regions with high levels of inequality or limited infrastructure. For example, Makespace Oxford’s practice of tailoring initiatives to local needs while leveraging external institutional support offers a replicable framework for other regions. By adopting similar neo-endogenous strategies, policymakers can mitigate rural-urban divides and foster socio-economic resilience. These efforts can further enhance the transformative potential of CWS as a platform for innovation, inclusion, and sustainable development.

8 CONCLUSION

While the Makespace Oxford model offers promising insights, its applicability in other regions might be constrained by the unique socio-economic context of Oxfordshire, which includes a well-established network of charitable organisations, a highly educated population, and strong local government support. Replicating this model in areas lacking similar institutional and socio-economic resources might not be applicable. Future research should explore the scalability and adaptability of the ‘Meanwhile’ model across diverse regional settings, particularly in areas with limited institutional support and financial resources. While the Makespace Oxford model has demonstrated success, its effectiveness in less resourced contexts remains uncertain, necessitating further comparative studies. This study highlights critical scalability challenges for CWS as a platform for socio-economic transformation, requiring further investigation into how these models can adapt to diverse contexts. Although Makespace Oxford has successfully integrated local needs into its operational model, the extent to which this can be achieved in more commercialised or resource-constrained environments remains uncertain. Future research should explore the adaptability of CWS models in diverse contexts. Therefore, it is essential to understand to what extent the specific conditions and values that underpin the Makespace Oxford model can be cultivated in other contexts where the socio-economic fabric and institutional support may differ significantly.

In conclusion, the Makespace Oxford case illustrates that with strategic community partnerships and focusing on social-economic impacts. Creating a CWS that challenges a profit-driven business model and contributes meaningfully to regional development is possible. Integrating neo-endogenous development principles into Makespace Oxford’s operational model underscores its transformative potential, demonstrating how CWS can serve as socio-economic intermediaries, bridging urban-rural divides and fostering community cohesion. As CWS continue to evolve, their roles in promoting socio-economic resilience and community cohesion will become increasingly significant. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers should further understand the transformative potential of CWS and build a tailored model with inclusive and sustainable goals for regional development. By fostering conditions that prioritise social value and community needs, CWS have the potential to act as transformative agents in their socio-economic landscapes. Their ability to bridge

urban-rural divides, promote inclusive development, and cultivate resilient local economies suggests a need for policy interventions that support their long-term sustainability across varying socio-economic contexts.

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Unlocking the Potential of Rural Collaborative Workspaces Through Short-Term Coworking Experiences

João Almeida and Maria Bastos

I INTRODUCTION

Rural areas have been suffering from various structural (social, economic, environmental, political, and technological) challenges that affect their resilience, and development potential, and threaten social and economic cohesion in European countries and regions (Almeida & Daniel, 2022).

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Despite these challenges, emerging technologies and increasing digital connectivity may mitigate the shortage of human capital and unlock entrepreneurship and innovation (OECD, 2018), especially through new forms of work and tourism (Almeida & Belezas, 2022) that presents a significant opportunity to attract and retain people in these regions (Bogason et al., 2024).

In response to this, several policies and initiatives have been developed by local and national governments. There has been a proliferation of new working spaces (coworking, co-living, third, hybrid spaces) in rural areas, both by private and public initiatives at local and national levels (Mariotti et al., 2024; Marmo & Avdikos, 2024a). Yet, despite the interest and investment, tangible outcomes are still scarce, with a large percentage of these spaces being empty or underused, with only a few managing to foster a dynamic and positive impact on their surrounding community.

These spaces have the potential not only to contribute to attracting and securing qualified talent but also to become a community meeting place, where social, cultural, and economic dynamics are promoted, thus having an impact on local social resilience (Bosworth et al., 2023; Marmo & Avdikos, 2024b).

Through a participant observation approach inside two short-term experiences in Portugal (Miranda do Douro and Vila Praia de Âncora), as well as by conducting three focus groups and ten interviews with both local actors and remote workers, this chapter discusses the importance of short-term rural coworking experiences to improve social capital, fight the current barriers to remote workers and CWS managers, and unlock the potential of CWSs in rural areas. Portugal was selected given its national strategy and interest in promoting rural coworking, specifically through its National Network of Teleworking Spaces, which involves over 100 rural municipalities. Besides, the fact that the researchers are close to this reality and to organizations working with rural coworking, namely the European Rural Coworking Project and Rural Move, helped to inform and better understand this phenomenon.

This chapter is organized as follows. Firstly, we describe the trends and opportunities regarding rural areas. Secondly, we discuss the evolution of collaborative workspaces in rural areas and the importance of social capital. Afterwards, we present the two case studies analysed and discuss the barriers found and the impact of short-term experiences on social capital. We conclude by exploring practical implications and presenting our findings.

2 TOWARDS A NEW RURALITY

Rural areas have unique geographic, social, and institutional characteristics (Korsgaard et al., 2015) and play an increasing role in today's societal challenges, such as the green transition, food security, circular economy, or biodiversity protection (OECD, 2018). However, rural areas and their inhabitants currently face many challenges. Declining and ageing populations, coupled with inadequate digital infrastructure, pose significant barriers to accessing essential services like education, healthcare, and recreational facilities. Furthermore, the decline in both private and public investments and the erosion of traditional employment opportunities have led to a brain drain to urban centres, which further weakens the development potential of local economies (Almeida & Daniel, 2022). However, it is important to acknowledge that rural areas are not homogeneous, while many regions face structural challenges, others—such as parts of Southern Germany or Nordic countries—are thriving, benefiting from robust local economies and effective governance.

Nonetheless, there have been some positive trends that may help to break this declining cycle. The growing interest in exploring new work arrangements within rural contexts, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, changed perceptions of work-life balance and affected the geography of work and living preferences (Akhavan et al., 2021; Manzini-Ceinar & Mariotti, 2021). As a result, the desire to relocate to rural areas from larger cities has been witnessed across several developed countries, blurring the boundaries between work and home life, an example of what (Bauman, 2000) conceptualized as “liquid modernity”.

This growing demand for places where people can find better quality of life, work-life balance, and lower living costs will have important implications for rural areas. Conventional perceptions of rural spaces as agricultural or tourist-centric hubs are evolving, and these territories can move from transactional/consumed places suffering from depopulation and identity loss towards a new reality, to become places to work and live again, attracting qualified young people and promoting long-desired economic and social revitalisation (Almeida, 2023).

3 COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACES IN RURAL AREAS

Collaborative Workspaces, such as coworking spaces or co-living spaces, have gained substantial popularity since the mid-2000s as an alternative to conventional office setups (Vogl & Akhavan, 2022). Essentially, these spaces represent dynamic, collaborative environments providing a platform where small businesses, freelancers, and entrepreneurs can gather to interact, share ideas, and collaborate on their projects. Initially focused on large urban centres due to their concentration of services and skilled professionals (Mariotti et al., 2023; Marmo & Avdikos, 2024a), CWSs are now emerging as drivers for rural revitalization, with policymakers integrating these facilities into public spaces, such as libraries, inactive schools, or tourism offices (Akhavan et al., 2021; Bähr et al., 2020).

Beyond conventional benefits, CWSs can have important implications in rural areas as they may help reduce commuting time, improve work-life balance, and encourage social interaction and knowledge exchange, leading to potential new ventures, positively impacting community cohesion and economic rejuvenation (Ciccarelli, 2023; Fuzi, 2015; Hölzel & de Vries, 2021).

Moreover, CWSs may also revitalize historic centres and attract qualified people from urban areas (Almeida, 2023). Rural CWSs are a community meeting place, where new residents meet the local community, and where social, cultural, and economic dynamics are created, taking on the role of other community spaces that have been disappearing in recent decades, such as small markets, central cafés, primary schools, civic centres, among others (Bähr et al., 2020; Marmo & Avdikos, 2024b).

However, establishing CWSs in rural areas differs significantly from urban settings and poses unique challenges, such as the lack of pre-existing collaboration networks and fluctuating demand in areas with few independent workers. Essential factors such as digital infrastructure, access to education and healthcare, and mobility infrastructure play a vital role in making CWSs attractive in rural areas (Mariotti et al., 2023), as well as the presence of community managers or ecosystem builders that help to put these strategies into practice (Kovács & Zoltán, 2017). However, given the network size and structural challenges affecting rural areas, these infrastructures and ecosystem builders may be difficult to access or acquire.

As the coworking phenomenon continues to evolve, this concept holds great promise for smaller cities and sparsely populated regions, an area which is still underexplored in the literature and needs further studies

exploring the implications of these spaces in rural areas (Vogl & Akhavan, 2022). Understanding these dynamics is imperative for ensuring the sustainability and efficacy of CWSs in rural contexts. There is a need for tailored policies and to understand how community-based initiatives can drive their expansion and impact in these territories while adapting them appropriately to local realities (Fuji, 2015).

3.1 *Social Capital and Community Building*

At the core of the discussion on rural development and collaborative workspaces, both in theory and in practice, is the recognition of the pivotal role that social capital and networks play.

Social capital is the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling society to function effectively (Putnam, 2000); it implies that individuals or groups with strong networks are more capable of mobilizing resources to achieve their goals (Claridge, 2018). It can be divided into three components. Firstly, bonding capital refers to the value of relationships in a tightly knit, often homogenous group, where strong personal connections and a shared sense of identity prevail. On the other hand, the concept of bridging capital is applied to social networks that connect individuals across diverse social groups, which can lead to greater information flow, broader community perspectives, and access to new resources. Finally, linking capital refers to the relationships among people or institutions at different levels of societal power hierarchy (Claridge, 2018).

The concept of social capital is highly relevant to rural CWSs, as these environments rely on building relationships, networks, and trust within communities to thrive. Leveraging the value of diverse rural assets requires the creation of networks that enable effective communication of their unique strengths, ultimately reinforcing the identity of the network nodes themselves (Bosworth et al., 2023).

The concept of community is the key binding element and a critical component for the long-term success of coworking spaces, especially in rural settings, as they tend to be more isolated and the need for relatedness is especially prominent (Bock, 2016; Merrell et al., 2021). In rural areas, the interactions between people and institutions are unique and different from urban areas, fundamentally shaping and narrating rural places (Bosworth et al., 2023). The smaller size of networks and density in rural areas lead to higher levels of social isolation and exclusion (Shucksmith,

2004) of rural workers, especially self-employed (Abreu et al., 2019). On the other hand, the network ties are usually stronger and with older connections, which can help community cohesion but hinder change or integration of new residents (Roundy, 2017).

Establishing trust and cooperation among a diverse group of users, connecting them with broader networks, and accessing resources from outside the local area require deliberate strategies and continuous effort. Thus, enhancing local social capital and involving the local community in the CWS activity are crucial for fostering valuable relationships between coworkers, institutions, and the local community, ultimately fostering local social and economic development (Bosworth et al., 2023; Cabral, 2021). To address the isolation often experienced by independent or remote workers, new working environments are being established (Bouncken & Marius, 2023).

4 CASE STUDIES

Given the difficulty of testing these strategies or having a sufficient number of users, rural CWSs have been promoting short-term coworking and co-living experiences. We argue that these types of experiences can benefit both the workers and the communities involved, with impact on bonding, bridging, and linking social capital.

To advance the discourse on this emerging topic, this chapter adopted a participant observation approach (Kawulich, 2005), collecting data from two case studies during the participation in these initiatives. Researchers were involved in the experiences as remote workers, living the experience from the inside and engaging daily with the remote workers. To enhance the robustness of the study, complementary data was collected through three focus groups with CWS users and interviews with key stakeholders actively engaged in the CWS ecosystem, namely CWS managers, coworkers, local public institutions, and entrepreneurs. The focus groups and interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the researchers. Secondary data including news articles, websites, reports, or statistical data also complemented the discussion of the findings.¹

Data was collected in two case studies in Portugal. Portugal has been an example of promoting coworking in rural and peripheral areas. The

¹The research followed the ethics guidelines of the University and the ethic code of Rural Move

national government has been promoting a National Strategy and Network of Teleworking Spaces in rural areas, with over 100 rural municipalities involved. Also, there are several success cases of regional strategies to promote digital nomadism and remote working in peripheral areas, such as the case of Digital Nomads Madeira (Almeida & Belezas, 2022).

Data collection had the help of the European Rural Coworking Project, an initiative led by the European Coworking Assembly that focuses on mapping, supporting, and fostering connections among rural CWSs in European communities with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants, and Rural Move, a Portuguese non-profit organization, created in 2020, focusing on social innovation in rural areas.

4.1 *Rural Experience—Miranda do Douro*

Miranda do Douro, a rural village in Northern Portugal with just over six thousand inhabitants, has been suffering in the last decades from several structural challenges related to young out-migration and an increasing ageing population. In 2020, the Municipality joined the Portuguese National Network of Rural Coworking Spaces, created by the National Government, aiming to attract remote workers to live temporarily or permanently in the region. However, the communication barriers and locational disadvantages led to an underused space with no permanent coworking users. To address this challenge, Rural Move, a local non-profit organization, organized a one-week pop-up co-living experience at the beginning of 2023 with the support of the Municipality, bringing 15 remote workers from diverse backgrounds and locations to Miranda do Douro. The experience engaged over 15 local partners who provided visits to local events and touristic sites. Besides, the remote workers had the opportunity to work in other “non-official” CWSs, with the potential to become one, and to engage with local remote workers and other actors during community dinners (Fig. 1).

4.2 *HYGGE Coworking and Co-living*

HYGGE Coworking, located in a coastal village of Portugal—Vila Praia de Âncora—is the result of transforming the old stables and pigsties of a family estate into comfortable workspaces. In addition to the individual spaces, there is also a meeting room, a yoga and training room, a coffee room, a shower room, and worktables on the terrace and in the garden,



Fig. 1 Remote Workers during the Rural Experience in Miranda do Douro (Source: Authors)

overlooking the vegetable garden and the mountains. In the words of the founder, “by combining accommodation (an existing hostel) with the coworking space, we have created a co-living regime, where we can welcome digital nomads and other remote workers.” Since last year, they have been organizing short-term co-living experiences to test the concept and engage with local partners. The Pop-Up Co-living Experience is aimed at contributing to a more sustainable form of “tourism” in the low season, as a longer stay allows for a more meaningful connection with nature and the local community. It is also meant to explore a specific local feature, the *Caminho* to Saint James of Compostela, as HYGGE Coworking is on St. James’ way.

5 RESULTS

5.1 *Main Barriers in Rural Collaborative Spaces*

In the first part of our discussion, we discuss the main barriers that hinder the potential of CWS to attract users, integrate into regional development strategies, and create meaningful connections between new and existing communities.

Barriers to Attracting Coworkers

One fundamental challenge lies in the lack of adequate infrastructure to support remote workers. Limited transportation options, insufficient housing availability, and outdated or inactive railway lines deter potential users. For instance, several participants emphasized that the difficulty in commuting to rural areas makes them less appealing for long-term stays. Additionally, digital infrastructure, although improving in some regions, remains unreliable in others, further reducing the attractiveness of rural CWSs.

Housing accessibility presents another significant barrier. The prevailing concept of private property and inflexible legislation as far as types and sizes of houses are concerned constitute barriers to shared property ownership models, which are important to create environments that are not only functional but also beneficial to the community and the individuals involved. The ongoing housing crisis, coupled with the perception that rural properties are not suited for coworking or co-living arrangements, adds to this issue. Remote workers, particularly international ones, also noted challenges in finding affordable and convenient accommodations.

Barriers to Regional Integration and Governance

A recurring issue is the limited engagement among local stakeholders and the lack of strategic alignment at both municipal and community levels. Interviews revealed a scarcity of collaborative moments for sharing ideas and aligning goals, with one participant remarking: “There is no strategy, there is no common ground” (P3). This lack of coordination prevents CWSs from becoming integral to regional development plans.

Another barrier lies in the disconnection between private initiatives and public strategies. Local authorities often fail to recognize the potential of private companies in fostering rural coworking ecosystems. This

misalignment prevents the scaling up of coworking strategies and inhibits their integration into broader regional development frameworks.

Lastly, bureaucratic inefficiencies at the local and national levels posed administrative hurdles for new residents, worsening the integration process. Bureaucracy involving business processes is another barrier to fostering communities that are inclusive, sustainable, and conducive to modern living and working arrangements.

Cultural and Communication Barriers

Cultural and communication issues further complicate the establishment and sustainability of rural CWSs. Language barriers were particularly evident among international coworkers, with some expressing difficulties in engaging with locals due to limited English proficiency. Furthermore, cultural differences in communication styles and expectations require careful attention to foster inclusion.

Local community integration also poses challenges. Newcomers often face initial resistance or distrust from long-term residents, who are hesitant to engage with outsiders or invite them into their personal spaces. For example, several remote workers described feeling isolated due to the closure of traditional meeting places or a lack of opportunities to socialize with locals.

Moreover, weak territorial branding and fragmented communication strategies hinder the visibility of rural CWSs. Local authorities and managers lack the tools to effectively convey the unique advantages of these spaces, leaving potential users unaware of their benefits. This gap is further exacerbated by insufficient staff training to meet the specific needs of remote workers, who “cannot be treated as another tourist” (P5).

5.2 The Impact of Short-Term Experiences on Social Capital

The first experience at HYGGE Coworking was organized in partnership with the Rural Move association and proved to have an important impact on the CWS bonding capital. Since the coworking community experienced busier and more dynamic days and took part in many activities, it made them feel they were part of the initiative and that they were welcoming the group and therefore gave them a sense of belonging to the wider CWS community. Besides, the focus group meeting was highlighted by the CWS users as an important activity since it made the group feel heard. In the case of Miranda do Douro, the feeling was similar. A local partner

of the experience stated that “the group’s interaction instilled the desire to transform this type of experience into the norm 365 days a year” (P6) demonstrating the positive impact of this type of dynamic on the local community. One of the remote workers also stated:

It was a very rich experience, which allowed us to work remotely, get to know the local community and the local reality. This experience was valuable for us to understand the importance of the concept of community in co-living and coworking projects and will also allow the municipality to understand the requirements of remote working in rural areas. (P4)

As for bridging social capital, the experiences provided opportunities to engage with local entrepreneurs on different occasions, through meetings, which contributed to driving local business projects. Besides, this was a good opportunity for them to interact with the remote workers from several countries, as well as to get to know what Quintas da Quinhas does and its values and it made them curious about what remote work, coworking, and co-living could mean for the community.

In both cases, the experiences planned to resort to local services and organizations, which not only strengthened ties with the local community but also shared the revenue of the initiatives. One particular activity, a visit to a rehearsal of the local folklore dance group, gave participants a real opportunity to connect, by sharing a spontaneous moment of the life of the organization (their weekly rehearsal), instead of a staged event. Similar activities occurred in Miranda do Douro, where the 15 remote workers participated in a weekly dancing class (see Fig. 2) and in a local religious festivity at the end of the week. Another example of the impact on bridging capital is the case of one of the participants, a product designer who during the experience visited local artisans and design studios, and after the experience, returned to the place to collaborate on new products inspired by local traditions.

Finally, these events were also an opportunity to improve linking social capital, as the Local Parish Council was also present. This proved to be valuable for them to understand the value of rural coworking and co-living to the local community and the local economy. In the case of Miranda do Douro, since the Municipality was engaged in the organization, it was allowed to produce a report about the barriers and opportunities to attract remote workers, as well as several practical implications that the



Fig. 2 Remote Workers participating in a community event (Source: Authors)

Municipality can put into practice with local actors to design a coworking strategy.

To summarize, short-term coworking experiences have a tangible impact on social capital, influencing bonding, bridging, and linking capital within CWS and rural communities. Table 1 summarizes the observed impacts and their practical implications, discussed in the next section, providing a framework for informed decision-making and strategic planning by CWS stakeholders. In the next section, four main strategies to improve social capital and unlock the potential of rural CWSs are described, namely community-building, collaboration, communication, and co-creation.

5.3 Unlocking the Potential of Rural Collaborative Workspaces

Short-term experiences in CWS yield valuable practical implications for CWS managers and local authorities, allowing them to verify the adequacy of CWS infrastructure, the perceptions of remote workers, and the

Table 1 Summary of the impact of short-term coworking experiences on social capital and practical implications

	<i>Impact of short-term experiences</i>	<i>Practical implications</i>
<i>Bonding Capital</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – strengthening the CWS community – engaging the local community, especially local remote workers, in the strategy to attract remote workers– contributing to the integration of new residents into the local community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the role of community managers in fostering community-building – the importance of social gatherings and joint activities for collaboration, community-building, and co-creation
<i>Bridging Capital</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – expanding trans-local connections between rural CWSs and other CWSs or remote workers’ networks– fostering connections between the local community and other stakeholders nationally or internationally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – territorial, horizontal and vertical integration of CWS strategies – collaboration with national and international networks of CWSs and remote workers
<i>Linking Capital</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – allowing local government to better understand remote workers and improve local strategies to attract them – improving connections between public authorities and other local stakeholders (such as hotels) allowing them to adapt and align their strategies to attract and integrate remote workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – discussion and co-creation sessions to stimulate the participation of local agents – strategic alignment between local actors – territorial branding – staff training

potential long-term impact and sustainability. Four main practical implications emerge from our analysis.

Firstly, fostering **community-building** is paramount. This involves nurturing a sense of belonging among members, as well as actively engaging with the local community, particularly local remote workers, in initiatives aimed at attracting and retaining remote talent. In both cases, the importance of hosts or community managers has been confirmed as a vital link between the new residents/users of the space and the local community and stakeholders (Kovács & Zoltán, 2017).

Secondly, **collaboration**, embracing territorial, horizontal, and vertical integration of the strategies. An interesting recommendation left by some participants was the involvement of more local partners, offering incentives such as discounts or promotional activities to attract users and foster community engagement. Besides, collaboration with national and

international networks of CWSs and remote workers, such as the European Rural Coworking Project or Remote Portugal, should be encouraged to share best practices and promote the spaces in these online platforms.

Thirdly, encouraging **co-creation** by stimulating participation from diverse stakeholders in local development strategies. By involving local, regional, and national players, CWSs can leverage collective insights and resources to drive inclusive and sustainable development initiatives. The focus group revealed that local actors need (and lack) these discussions, with strong participation and positive feedback about the sessions. Thus, CWS managers should try to promote more social gatherings that include this type of ideation and co-creation processes.

Lastly, effective **communication** is essential for both internal cohesion and external promotion. A suggestion given by some participants is to ensure staff readiness to answer and accommodate remote workers, since “they cannot be treated as another tourist” (P5). Furthermore, rural CWS strategies should extend beyond traditional economic benefits to communicate the advantages of well-being, aligning with broader societal aspirations (Merrell et al., 2021). Finally, the misalignment of communication strategies is identified as a local bottleneck, calling for more training and discussion about territorial branding.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Rural CWSs are gaining increasing attention from rural policymakers, as new working trends related to remote working and digital nomadism present themselves as a relevant opportunity for rural territories to attract and retain people, tackling the problem of depopulation and the lack of human capital. Besides, the social function of CWSs has been increasingly recognized, especially in rural areas, where they serve as cultural and social gathering spaces for the local community.

However, there are still a number of challenges related to the scale of these spaces to ensure their sustainability, the coordination of the various local players for this strategy, the marketing and territorial innovation strategies shared among these players, and, finally, better social integration of the new residents (permanent or temporary) who use these spaces.

In this study, we explored the relevance of using short-term coworking experiences as a way to test the interest of local actors and remote workers regarding coworking trends and opportunities. We acknowledge that rural areas are not homogenous and that these conclusions are drawn from

specific contexts. However, some of the ideas discussed here may be replicated or serve as inspiration for other rural areas.

An analysis using a participant observation approach in two of these experiences, along with interviews and focus groups involving participants and local stakeholders, highlighted the significance of these initiatives across the three dimensions of social capital. By engaging the local community and local institutions and by establishing connections with other CWSs and partners abroad, these experiences improve bonding and bridging capital. Besides, the involvement of local authorities allowed for testing and thinking about the importance of coworking for local development strategies, thus improving linking capital.

Having this in mind, we argue that there is a need to develop adapted policies to incorporate these CWSs into local and regional development strategies and to adapt them to the local context, going beyond traditional approaches that are usually based on urban projections, thus leading to ever greater artificialization of their rural identity. We propose four main practical implications regarding co-creation, collaboration, communication, and community building.

Both state and community institutions should be actively involved in these policy development processes. The Portuguese and European Networks of Rural Coworking could serve as a platform to coordinate efforts between local CWSs, fostering collaboration and communication, and ensuring that CWSs are integrated into broader regional strategies. Meanwhile, community organizations such as Rural Move, which encourage rural repopulation, align with the goal of using coworking spaces to attract and integrate new residents, thus being an important tool to promote these spaces, engage the local community, and enhance their long-term success.

These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of challenges facing rural coworking spaces and emphasize the need for tailored strategies to address barriers to their establishment and sustainability. Further research should continue to explore the role of short-term experiences and the mechanisms to expand these into a long-term rural development strategy. By attracting and integrating new residents, this approach can transform rural areas from spaces merely produced/consumed for/by occasional visitors into vibrant places where people can once again work and live.

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Exploring Women's Experiences of Wellbeing in Rural CWS: Evidence from Italy and Austria

Francesca Chiara Ciccarelli and Alexandra Wrбка

I INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality persists across Europe, influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors. The European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy (2020–2025) highlights ongoing challenges, including gender-based violence, gender pay, pension and care gaps, and gender segregation across sectors and occupations, which has not improved significantly since 2019. In rural regions of Europe, the disparities are accentuated by structural deficits such as limited access to infrastructure, including transport and childcare, significantly hindering women's employment opportunities. Furthermore, conservative family models and traditional gender relations, such as the male breadwinner and female homemaker and caregiver,

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167

often impede women's participation in rural labour markets (Wiest, 2016). Indeed, Eurostat data for 2021 show that the gender employment gap was overall lower in cities than in rural and suburban areas. Concerns about employment, housing, childcare, and leisure amenities seem to drive women out of the countryside (Fischer & Weber, 2014) to a larger extent than men (Franić & Kovačiček, 2019).

Rural areas in Europe are experiencing ongoing depopulation and ageing (Eurostat, 2023). Between 2015 and 2020, the population of younger and working-age individuals in the EU's predominantly rural regions decreased, whereas those aged 65 and over grew more than in cities. Depopulation results in a decline of "local socio-cultural hubs", including third places like bars and cafés that were formerly acting as social infrastructure (Bolet, 2021; Tomaney et al., 2023). Scholars point out a positive affective capacity of third places (e.g. Bell et al., 2018; Jeffres et al., 2009), which, by acting as socialising environments away from home and work, contribute to experiences of wellbeing. Third places can alleviate loneliness and isolation, by fostering social interaction, the formation of social capital, eventually enhancing wellbeing (Kelly et al., 2019; Svendsen, 2013; Vazonienė & Kiaušienė, 2018). However, these places have been predominantly frequented by men, relegating women to the domestic sphere and constituting "gendered spaces" (Spain, 1993). Fullagar et al. (2019, p. 12) note that women's access to and use of third places are inhibited by "patterns of work and family, but also by fears of safety, violence and harassment".

The continuous development of the knowledge economy and location-independent work facilitated by the diffusion of ICTs favours the emergence of new employment opportunities for women living in rural areas (Wiest, 2016), including a recent rise of collaborative workspaces (CWS) beyond urban areas (Capdevila, 2022; Mariotti et al., 2021). CWS, especially in rural and peripheral areas, may play a similar role to those of third places (Gandini & Cossu, 2019; Avdikos & Merkel, 2019) providing opportunities for social interaction, community building, and professional networking outside traditional work and home environments. The past years have seen an increase in female-oriented CWS and of female CWS users in general (Akhavan et al., 2022). Despite this rise, men predominantly hold ownership and founding roles, while the staff, often female, faces a gender pay gap (Foertsch, 2018; Foertsch, 2020).

With this chapter, we aim to address neglected reports of women's experiences in the CWS in rural areas of Italy and Austria. By adopting a

non-evaluative and process-based approach to wellbeing (White, 2015), we seek to explore experiences of wellbeing in CWS through the narratives of female users. After providing a short overview of the approach to the study of wellbeing we adopt, the chapter gives an outline of gendered experiences of CWS. We then describe our methodological approach before delving into the discussion of the findings. We end with a conclusion and outlook for further research.

2 WELLBEING, SPACE, AND GENDER

We use wellbeing as an umbrella term related to positive affects, emotions, and feelings. Literature emphasised the contextual nature of wellbeing (Atkinson, 2013), pushing scholars to look at the relationship between wellbeing and places, in particular at how certain environments could be conducive to experiences of wellbeing. The therapeutic landscape approach (Gesler, 1992) is probably the most used in this sense, and it has considered a variety of places, ranging from healing sites, care facilities to homes and green and blue natural environments. However, much of the research produced under this approach tended to consider the intrinsic characteristic of certain places as enabling of wellbeing, while some scholars, drawing on unfixed notions of space and place (Massey, 2005), have employed a reviewed version of this framework to look at how wellbeing may emerge from the encounter of different sociomaterial elements at a certain moment in time and space, considering the unique features of these encounters (Conradson, 2005). How Andrews et al. (2014) clarify, rather than “be taken from environment”, wellbeing “might emerge as the affective environment” (p. 210).

Standard evaluative approaches to wellbeing tend to treat the concept as mere satisfaction and are often based on data collected through cross-sectional designs that are unable to capture the complexity of the concept and its unfolding over time and space (Lewis & Purcell, 2007). In contrast, others (e.g. Conradson, 2005; White, 2015) look at wellbeing in relational terms, shifting from considering wellbeing as a measurable status to considering it as a process. Following this substantive approach rather than an evaluative one, we are going to explore “a particular context or individual in its own terms, rather than rank it against some other” (White, 2015, pp. 4–5).

Adhering to the perspective that both gender and space are socially constructed (e.g. Spain, 1993; Massey, 1994), feminist geographers and

sociologists who examined the gender division within urban and rural spaces have highlighted how societal norms and power structures influence women's access to resources and opportunities, contributing to shaping the gendered experience of spaces, including the way women experience wellbeing in these environments.

3 WELLBEING AND GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF CWS

Various studies have investigated wellbeing in CWS, some using a quantitative approach, therefore attempting to measure wellbeing and related dimensions (Merrell et al., 2021; Akhavan & Mariotti, 2023; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016), while others draw on qualitative methods to explore how users experience CWS and the process underpinning the production of positive feelings. In this sense, scholars have focused on different aspects and practices connected to wellbeing, such as the production of a sense of community (Garrett et al., 2017), social support (Wright et al., 2021), and care (Merkel, 2023).

CWS may facilitate experiences of wellbeing, especially for parents or people with care responsibilities, by offering a separate space away from home. Merkel (2023) considers working from a CWS as a possible "form of self-care" (p. 86), primarily due to its role in establishing clear boundaries between work and home, and fostering focused work environments (Orel, 2019; Robelski et al., 2019). In a study on self-employed women working from home and in CWS, Rodríguez-Modroño (2021) shows how CWS may help discard traditional gender roles and a gendered division of labour. Merrell et al. (2021), looking at how rural coworking spaces may facilitate wellbeing, emphasise the potential of CWS, through convenience, flexibility, and separating work and family life, in satisfying key autonomy needs.

Using a CWS may positively affect wellbeing by providing material and emotional support. For instance, Garrett et al. (2017) look at the process of constructing a sense of community in CWS, through three actions: endorsing, encountering, and engaging. Mutual aid and compassion may arise from social interaction with other coworkers and hosts, thereby easing highly individualised and often precarious work situations (e.g. Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Rådman et al., 2023). In Rodríguez-Modroño's study (2021), women mentioned they felt that social support encountered in CWS eased isolation and believed business networks resulted in better prospects for professional collaboration. Drawing on Tronto and Fisher's

(1990; Tronto, 2015) framework of five phases of care, namely *caring about, taking care of, care-giving, care-receiving, and caring with*, Merkel (2023, p. 88) identifies “situated practices of care” in CWS. For instance, for care-giving, she lists acts like making coffee or sharing food, cleaning, listening, or giving information beyond the CWS. The community manager or host often emerges as the caregiver through caring about the community and the space itself (Merkel, 2023), for example, by organising events or by creating a social atmosphere in the space (Bernhardt, 2021). The overrepresentation of women in hosting roles and the gendered, feminised nature of the care labour they perform has been recognised by scholars (e.g. Crovara, 2023; Papageorgiou & Michailidou, 2023; Merkel, 2023).

Wright et al. (2021), identifying the dark side of social support in CWS, observed how through gendered undertones of workplace practices in a CWS in London (i.e. through alcohol-centred social events), a “masculine form of camaraderie” was enforced (p. 11). Luo and Chan (2021) reported that female entrepreneurs encountered difficulties benefitting from collaboration and knowledge exchanges in CWS as they are often segregated into female-dominated fields, as well as experienced instances of sexual harassment. Women’s exclusion in CWS may be further reflected in material elements such as decorative items and gendered playing gear (Grazian, 2019). However informative, most of the studies mentioned focus on CWS in large urban agglomerations, a gap we aim to address by examining the often-overlooked experience of women in rural CWS. Thus, this chapter will address the following main research question: “How do women’s experiences of wellbeing unfold in rural CWS?”

4 METHODOLOGY

Data stems from 12 in-depth interviews with users of CWS conducted in the context of two broader PhD studies with different research questions and selection criteria regarding CWS and participants. Overall, the CWS displayed in this chapter were selected via pre-interviews with founders/managers to ensure the presence of regular users. The selection of participants was guided by purposive and convenience sampling (Bryman, 2012) targeting people who have been engaging with CWS for various durations, ranging from a few months to several years, and including users, managers, and founders. In both studies, interviews aimed to explore participants’ working lives and trajectories, their motivations for joining, and

Table 1 Participants' characteristics

<i>ID</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>CWS</i>
AT1	Mira	60s	Retired teacher, director of an NGO	Women Business Hub
AT2	Vivien	30s	Marketing expert	Women Business Hub
AT3	Katharina	30s	Social media manager	Women Business Hub
AT4	Timna	40s	Illustrator	Women Business Hub
AT5	Monica	40s	Designer	Life Lab
AT6	Jasmin	20s	Production technician and social education worker	Life Lab
IT1	Carla	30s	Visual artist	Creative Lab
IT2	Enrica	20s	Student and writer	Creative Lab
IT3	Emilia	40s	Copywriter	TalkTank
IT4	Delia	40s	Graphic designer	TalkTank
IT5	Gloria	30s	Graphic designer	CosmoHub
IT6	Margherita	30s	Researcher	CosmoHub

their experiences in CWS. The narratives presented here stem from a sub-sample of the interviews conducted (see Table 1). Although most interviewees hold cultural and creative occupations, we did not intend to sample for specific professions.

Interviews were analysed following a thematic approach facilitated by qualitative data analysis software. As interviews were collected in researchers' mother tongues (Italian and German), each researcher transcribed the interviews and performed initial coding based on self-declared feelings and emotions connected to a sense of wellbeing. A number of extended excerpts were then selected by each researcher and translated in English. Both researchers then iteratively discussed these excerpts to identify wider categories of analysis concerning experiences of wellbeing.

The considered CWS are located in municipalities in Austria and Italy classified as rural by the DEGURBA classification. The areas considered shared ongoing issues of depopulation and lack of access to essential services.¹ As for Italy, the three CWS selected offer a coworking service of

¹The Italian CWS considered were all located in the *Mezzogiorno* region and were all classified as *inner areas*, that is at a significant distance from essential services (transportation, education, and healthcare). The CWS were both located in municipalities counting around

which the women interviewed are either stable users or founders. TalkTank and CosmoHub offer open-plan areas with single or shared desks, while Creative Lab is made up of single small studios and two common areas for lunch and relaxing. The interviews in Austria were conducted in a female-centred CWS² (Women Business Hub) offering coworking services with shared desks and private offices, and in LifeLab, a blend of maker space and community hub.

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The presentation of the findings is structured according to the two themes identified, each of which is discussed in detail and illustrated with fragments of the narratives collected. The first theme concerns the experiences of female users in rural CWS as a *room of their own*, while the second pertains to experiences of *reciprocal care and sociality*.

5.1 *A Room of One's Own*

An aspect that emerged strongly in several of the narratives collected, coherently with the available literature, was the importance for women of finding in the CWS a separate space from home to focus on paid work without home-related distractions, as the excerpts below suggest.

I used to work from home but, what can I say, there was the noise of the washing machine, so I had to go and hang the laundry, or I would hear [baby] crying. So there were 1000 distractions that essentially did not create for me that situation of comfort of being able to really do, that is to start the creative act because I was anyway with my brain always full, active, of thoughts, of things to do, and instead here at least I have my corner [...] I mean it's a break for me, even if I come here and I don't do anything, *it's really a panacea for my soul*, I don't know, *my spirit is just... It's nice to be here.* (IT1)

10,000 inhabitants located in different NUTS 3 regions. While Women Business Hub is located in a municipality and region experiencing depopulation mainly due to an ageing population and declining birth rates, the region and town of LifeLab are experiencing a slight population increase.

²Female centred: CWS explicitly welcoming female users, often offering additional female-oriented services, e.g. networking events and further training for female entrepreneurs, or prenatal yoga classes. To be distinguished from women-*only* CWS.

Connected to this, interviewees' narratives conveyed a sense of tranquillity found also in being alone and having a space for themselves, something particularly significant for female interviewees who were living with other family members. Monica, a single mother of two, enjoys little alone time and carries all the burden of domestic and care labour alone, which may explain her desire for a separate space away from home where she could encounter other adults. She first recounted that she enjoyed her peace and quiet whenever she arrived first in the office:

In the morning, when I arrive, *I enjoy the fact that I'm on my own for once (laughs) and don't have to worry about anyone else, that it's just me for once.*" She then proceeded: "It's also just about *meeting people*, you know. Because I'm usually at home alone with the kids, and you *look forward to adult interaction* (laughs) or *adult conversation topics* [...]. (AT5)

Enrica refers explicitly to Virginia Woolf's (2004) *A Room of One's Own* when talking about her experience in Creative Lab:

As Virginia Woolf also mentioned [...] having *a room of one's own*. She was talking about her profession, saying that a female writer needs a room to write, but I believe that in general, *everyone needs their own space*. And here, I have truly understood what she was talking about, so *I'm happy*. (IT2)

Enrica had lived with her parents all her life at the outskirts of a large city in the South of Italy. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she decided to spend some time with her grandparents in their village and she eventually decided to stay for longer. She contrasts the messiness of being at home with the tranquillity the CWS provides to her:

So, at home, I was distracted even by the moral obligation to do something for my grandparents, even just remaking the bed, all this stuff, this whole situation, I don't know, there was a bit of a mess. Whereas here it's as if it were *a Zen space*. And I like that. (IT2)

For Enrica, a room of her own also meant a site for self-expression materialised into furnishing and personalising her space, something she could not fully do while living as a young woman with her parents and grandparents:

I've furnished it myself [...] these are the first things I bought because I have always lived with my parents [...] here are the things that I really like, the things I needed [...] so, *it gives me satisfaction too*, you know, because I earned some money and invested it in something I like. (IT2)

For self-employed women, a separate work environment from home represented a place where they could feel empowered in their professional identity (in line with Merrell et al., 2021). The work environment of CWS led to increased self-esteem and the perception as a professional by others and by themselves:

What I've noticed about myself is that *I also see myself more professionally*. Well, maybe I have a different appearance [...] I think I have a more professional appearance because I have a professional background [...]. So I think that *really does something mentally with the women*. When I'm sitting in my untidy study at home, so if I were only there, I don't think I would trust myself to accept some jobs, so *I have the feeling that I'm more official when I'm there, in the office. [...]* So the *self-image is somehow different*. (AT1)

Along the same lines, other women working at this CWS expressed the need for this separate professional working environment despite having a dedicated home office in their houses. Vivian, for example, reported feeling more professional when receiving clients at the CWS as opposed to at home:

You always have to clean before they come or walk all the way through the kitchen and back to get them a drink. Here, I don't have this problem, *it is more professional*. (AT2)

This quote also makes visible the wish to be a good host, having a presentable house to receive clients, and could be rooted in trying to stay true to the feminine stereotype of a "good housewife", whereas these elements cease to apply in the professional environment of the CWS.

Furthermore, women's narratives convey CWS as spaces allowing a flexible organisation of work, reconciling spheres, and satisfying the desire of women to spend time with their families and relatives. Prior to opening the CWS, the founders of Women Business Hub in Austria established a private childcare centre in the same town. With this, they sought to address the lack of such services in this rural area, especially for young children,

and to facilitate a reconciliation of work-family life for women using the CWS.

The geographical proximity of these spaces to women's homes was a crucial aspect to facilitate this integration. Emilia and Delia, co-founders of TalkTank, speak about seeing coworking as an activity allowing them to manage their time as they prefer, rather than as a space where to adopt an office-like routine. This permitted them to reconcile work and family, by being able to work from home or the CWS when they needed and wanted. In the words of Emilia:

At a certain point, we decided that *we no longer wanted to adapt to our work, but that our work had to adapt to us*, and we thought of *coworking as a flexible activity* [...] Today, I arrived at the office at 10:30. I will probably leave at the end of our meeting. And Delia was here from 08:30 until 10, then she went home. She might come back in the afternoon. Often, we are not even physically here, but we work from home. (IT3)

Several interviewees in Italy tended to report that grandparents often act as caregivers for their children, consistently with what Baylina et al. (2017) reported, looking at informal care networks for female professionals in rural areas of Spain. Our interviewees had the habit of going to their parents' homes for lunch to spend time with them and their children, something that was also facilitated by the CWS being located nearby.

5.2 *Experiences of Reciprocal Care and Sociality in CWS*

The second theme emerged in the analysis was reported experiences of wellbeing connected to the emotionally supportive and caring environment women we interviewed encountered in CWS. For instance, Timna talked about the shift in her sense of wellbeing when she joined the CWS compared to experiencing previous workplaces as a woman, and being a female solo-entrepreneur:

I had jobs that weren't as appreciative, where perhaps my opinion didn't count, where you couldn't evolve as a woman. [...] I put up with it back then because of my perhaps less pronounced self-esteem or self-confidence. [...] but here, that's not the case at all. *Here, it's really about being understood and feeling good all around.* [...] I was finally *out of this lone fighter role* and was able to *chat over coffee or complain a bit* [...]. *People are always there for an open conversation or to listen to you*, and that is actually very *enriching*.

[...] *friendships have developed, as well as collaborations* with colleagues, with creatives. (AT4)

Likewise, interviewees reported positive feelings related to the friendly and welcoming atmosphere:

Everyone is so *friendly*, so I think the *atmosphere there is super positive* and *you just feel good*. [...] You're greeted straight away or *you're somehow noticed* [...] So this social aspect [...] it makes a difference whether there's someone there or whether I'm there all alone somehow. [...] *you just feel welcome*. (AT3)

These caring atmospheres seem to be created through the enactment of specific practices such as check-ins during meetings, asking "*how everyone is feeling*," "*pay[ing] attention to each other's energy levels*," and being mindful of "*different needs*." (AT5 and AT6)

In addition, CWS seemed to counteract initial feelings of loneliness reported by urban returnees who had come back to live with their parents in their rural hometowns. Gloria returned during the Covid-19 pandemic to take care of her mother. She described her return as quite traumatic because her close friends had all emigrated. When the local CWS reopened, she found a group of friends who helped her overcome isolation.

It's a *welcoming space*, so *I feel good here*. [...] As soon as I came back to [town], I no longer had any friends, except those who left. Being here allowed me to create *new networks, new relationships, new friendships*, and so I have, perhaps after thirty years, *I have begun to truly feel part* of my village. Thanks to this structure here, that was also a *socialising place* for me. (IT5)

Another returnee attending CosmoHub spoke about the way this CWS helped her to overcome a tough period at work:

Well, honestly, *I needed some social interaction*. I mean, I was coming from a tough period, you know. [...] I was feeling down in Genoa, and I started feeling down at home [parents' home in her home village] too [...] and then I went to CosmoHub [...] the fact that this group was created with whom I share the workspace, study space, and the break space. It does a lot, it really does a lot [...] It was *truly a fresh start*, since I started going to CosmoHub, *I feel good*. (IT6)

A similar experience was reported by Carla who came back to her hometown after she ended an abusive relationship with her ex-partner. She talks about how difficult it was for her to re-establish social contacts, but that she was able to find in the CWS a place where she could feel safe in a family-like environment.

I came here, I gave myself the strength also to *regain social contacts* because I didn't have any anymore, I had, I mean, I couldn't even talk to a person, I mean to be able to have contacts, introduce myself, etc. And so I also took it as a challenge to introduce myself here. And then I started this fantastic adventure. Since I've been here, *I feel like I'm in a different family; I mean, I feel good. I feel like I've found my place.* (IT1)

In the female-centred CWS, reciprocal care was performed through mutual understanding and support, something seemingly connected to sharing the same gender, as Lewis et al. (2015) reported in their study on feminist women-only spaces. As Katharina puts it, “there’s always something special about women being together, and it’s somehow *empowering and positive*. And also something *motivating*. [...] or where you’re simply...*supported* [...]”. (AT3)

Women described feeling well taken care of especially because they could speak about women-specific topics in a humorous, judgement-free way, as the excerpts below show:

Women also understand each other on an emotional level. When I say, ‘Oh, today: PMS,’ *I don't even need to explain further, and everyone knows how you feel, and they take care of you.* So, you are simply *supported* here, and that indeed makes it *special*. (AT4)

I just appreciate the fact that there is a crazy *collegiality* [...] so *you can laugh about menopausal symptoms together* or about things like that, where I think maybe if it were mostly men, it would be a bit more difficult, *so it's these women-specific topics that you can actually talk about relatively taboo-free*, and I appreciate that. (AT1)

Another form of care practice identified in the rural CWS we studied was the creation of female-oriented services, which could benefit not only the internal CWS community but also the wider local population, thus acting as a “social infrastructure of care”, in line with Merkel (2023). Women Business Hub for example offered free monthly networking

events, classes, and workshops related to female health and career advancement accessible for any interested women living and working in the region. In a similar vein, Emilia talked about how at TalkTank they activated childbirth preparation classes in their village, in view of satisfying their own needs, but also allowing other women to benefit from such a service:

We talked about, I mean, the activities in the coworking space. When I was pregnant, I thought: Is it possible that no one is offering childbirth preparation classes? Alright, let's do it ourselves [...] It has been quite successful since many women are asking us if we will do it again, when we will do it. (IT3)

This emerges a form of care that, starting from a personal need, goes beyond the CWS and extends towards other women in the surrounding areas.

6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have explored how women's experiences in rural CWS contribute to their sense of wellbeing, a novel topic in existing literature. Experiences of wellbeing can be tracked down in the vocabulary employed by interviewees revolving around notions of family, friends, and collegiality, and the use of adjectives like "welcoming", "friendly", or "positive" to describe the atmosphere in the CWS. Women reported feeling noticed, empowered, motivated, and supported in CWS.

While CWS cannot remedy structural deficits of rural areas, they may play a significant role in women's wellbeing in several ways. First, for the women we interviewed, CWS seem to serve as versatile environments for organising work. In particular, CWS constitute a necessary retreat, providing a separation from the home environment whenever needed, but without imposing an office-like organisation of the workday. Having a separated workspace helps foster experiences of wellbeing in terms of tranquillity, focus, and self-confidence in their professional identities. While we investigated rural contexts, this finding can apply to urban areas as well. However, in small towns and villages, the physical proximity of CWS to workers' homes may facilitate further this work-life integration.

Second, our interviewees find in CWS sites for reciprocal care and support, appreciating their welcoming and caring atmosphere, thus counteracting feelings of loneliness. This CWS' potential may be particularly

relevant in rural areas often lacking socio-cultural hubs for making new encounters. In addition, female-centred CWS may produce a caring atmosphere through enabling judgement-free chatting about women-specific topics. Lastly, care practices could extend beyond the CWS walls through the provision of female-focused activities and services, thus addressing local gaps in resources, and professional, as well as social support.

Unlike some studies of women's experiences in urban CWS, the narratives we collected do not seem to suggest experiences of exclusion. However, we observed that women in precarious situations tend to frequent CWS that offer low-cost or free access. This suggests a need for an intersectional approach that considers not only gender but also age, occupation, and class, to ensure CWS can truly act as inclusive social infrastructures promoting equality rather than reproducing existing social divides.

The primary limitation of this research is that we were only able to examine the "positive" experiences of CWS for two main reasons. Firstly, CWS are unlike any other workplace. Joining a CWS and determining how often to frequent it is a deliberate choice. This implies that women who utilise these spaces tend to have positive experiences; otherwise, they simply would not attend. During our fieldwork, we had the opportunity to converse with, and occasionally interview, women who were not currently frequenting a CWS—either former users or those who had never used one. The reasons cited for preferring to work from home or a private office included the need for privacy and the perception of noise within CWS. Some found the social nature of these spaces distracting or were concerned about potentially distracting others while performing specific tasks, such as taking frequent phone calls.

This leads us to conclude that the extent to which a CWS can contribute to wellbeing is highly dependent on subjective perceptions of what constitutes a "good" workplace. Regarding the transferability of our findings, we would like to highlight two points. Firstly, a common characteristic of the CWS studied was the adoption of a caring approach, in terms of fostering a sociable atmosphere, curated either horizontally by a group of users or more vertically by officially identified hosts. Secondly, the CWS we studied varied significantly in their spatial layouts. Based on feedback from non-users, ensuring the availability of one or more private spaces within a CWS could potentially attract workers who require more privacy at times. Overall, while this research highlights the positive experiences female users can have in CWS, future studies could focus more specifically

on instances of discomfort or conflict by explicitly targeting former users and home-based workers.

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Roles, Identities and Imaginaries of
CWS in Regional Development and
Its Policies



Revitalizing Rural Landscapes Through Coworking Spaces: An Exploration of Narratives and Discourses on Place Identity

José Ignacio Sánchez-Vergara , *Marko Orel* ,
and Valeria Ferreira-Gregorio 

I INTRODUCTION

Expanding and localizing coworking services can significantly benefit regions' development and stimulate business activity. Past experiences in major cities have demonstrated the pivotal role that coworking spaces play in fostering business growth and improving the area in economic, financial, technological, and innovative terms (Orel et al., 2022; Waters-Lynch

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et al., 2016). While this phenomenon has traditionally been associated with the urban scene and commercial activity in metropolitan areas, the emergence of shared workspaces in small towns and rural environments over the past decade has redefined the sense of place and place attachment. Rural coworking not only facilitates collaboration among entrepreneurs and social actors but also serves as a driver of the territory in terms of image, business, and growth (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020; Boutillier et al., 2020). Research conducted by Capdevila (2021, 2023), Konecka-Szydłowska and Czupich (2022), and Merrell et al. (2022) highlight the increased visibility of the business ecosystem influenced by coworking, making them a focus of interest for initiatives aimed at boosting regional tourism and visibility (Liu et al., 2023), particularly among audiences such as digital nomads, entrepreneurs, freelancers, as well as local residents—especially pertinent during and after COVID-19 pandemic (Bosworth, 2023; Bosworth et al., 2021).

Rural coworking spaces represent a service offering with a dual competitive advantage for their environment: firstly, they promote environments of innovation and creativity in business, thereby enhancing the local brand and reputation (Asplund & Ikkala, 2011; Capdevila, 2018); secondly, they increase the value of the destination through regeneration actions and sustainable practices (Merkel, 2022), which has facilitated the creation of collaborative work environments. In this vein, this chapter seeks to answer the question: How do coworking practices enhance the place identity in rural environments and contribute to their development? An examination of the *Cowocat Rural* network—a collective of rural coworking spaces in Catalonia—has explored how coworking activity contributes to consolidating place identity and showcasing territorial assets and values.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Coworking Spaces in Rural Environments*

In recent years, particularly during the pandemic, coworking activity in rural environments has increased considerably (Vogl & Akhavan, 2022). Latter has had a positive impact on community building and the local development of the territory, notably in the consolidation of a business scene (Bosworth et al., 2021; Tremblay & Scaillez, 2020). New opportunities have emerged to regenerate and revitalize spaces as an alternative

to energize the entrepreneurial ecosystem and stimulate the local economy (Bosworth, 2023). Thanks to the capacity of rural areas to generate greater human interaction and a sense of belonging, the creation of social bonds is facilitated within creative environments with their own identity (Bosworth et al., 2023; Mariotti et al., 2023).

Furthermore, coworking has promoted rural tourism by allowing workers to immerse themselves in the daily life and culture of the territory while they work (Orel, 2019; Thompson, 2019), promoting sustainable lifestyles, and highlighting the connection with the natural landscape, its attractions and opportunities (Tomaz et al., 2022). The organization of communities is essential to consolidate a rural coworking space, standing as its most valuable asset for effective management (Capdevila, 2021, 2023). Attracting remote workers, both local residents and visitors, is increasingly recognized as a strategic endeavour within rural areas to diversify service offerings and enhance infrastructure that supports flexible work and the destination (Alonso, 2021; Voll et al., 2022). Consequently, this results in the creation of a sustained growth of inspiring and calm work environments, which are competitive elements of place brands in rural areas.

2.2 *Place Identity, Coworking Spaces and Business Development*

The meanings associated with the identity of a place are essential for understanding its social imaginary (Kalandides, 2011). In the context of rural environments, the deep ties to the area's history, culture, and geography have been central to the narratives built around the place brand (Castelló, 2021). However, tourism has also been a significant catalyst for economic development in these areas, leading to the emergence of new business opportunities (Liu et al., 2023), thereby reinforcing these places as emerging business hubs focused not only on economic development but also on addressing issues such as depopulation and brain drain (Bosworth et al., 2023; Hölzel & de Vries, 2023). In rural areas, perceptions are constructed around existing realities and imagined futures, with tradition often valued as an asset that should be preserved (Tomaz et al., 2022). A sense of belonging develops through emotional and cultural connections, shaping identity and generating pride in residents and visitors (Boisen et al., 2011; Mahnken, 2011). As Boisen et al. (2018) expressed, "the identity of a place serves to differentiate the place from

other places, but also to select what intrinsic material and immaterial elements fit with the place” (p. 7).

Apart from that, the interest of both public and private stakeholders in fostering local development extends beyond large cities to encompass rural environments, leveraging coworking activity to boost the business ecosystem and improve the quality of rural life (Capdevila, 2023). In this context, promoting business growth presents an economic opportunity and serves as a key strategy for communicating place identity and attracting new residents (Asplund & Ikkala, 2011; Mahnken, 2011). By highlighting business vitality in these environments, the city’s brand is reinforced as a dynamic and inclusive location with growth potential, thereby attracting investment, talent, and tourism.

In the context of rural coworking, the relevance of this phenomenon is particularly noteworthy. It has the potential to stimulate business activity, as well as contribute to the advancement of regional development and the enhancement of a sense of place. The communication of the coworking space, the promotional use of the natural landscape and the community as elements of attraction to future users are recurring themes. Nevertheless, these narratives about the place have been insufficiently examined, despite representing a key area of interest for the dissemination of the coworking concept and its associated practices.

3 METHODS

This book chapter analyses Cowocat *Rural*, the only network that comprises 44 rural coworking spaces in Catalonia (Spain). Initiated a decade ago as part of the Local Action Groups (GAL), the project aimed to foster rural development across different regions. Supported by LEADER funding (for its French acronym of *Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économie Rurale*) from the European Commission, the initiative aimed to enhance place management through participatory approaches, collaboration, and sustainable practices (Capdevila, 2018, 2022). Each of the spaces that make up this network is managed independently and autonomously. However, as part of the network, they benefit from consulting services in administration, promotional outreach, and connections with various local stakeholders. *Cowocat Rural* has sought to strengthen coworking activity in rural environments, promoting community building and revitalizing the contexts in which these collaborative spaces operate,

mainly through the design of policies and strategies to combat rural depopulation (Capdevila, 2022; Coll-Martínez & Méndez-Ortega, 2024).

For the purposes of this chapter, a review of all offices affiliated with the network has been carried out (refer to Table 1), and a thematic analysis has been conducted to investigate the multidimensional nature of these coworking in rural environments (Schreier, 2012). The webpages of each space were analysed qualitatively through thematic analysis, considering both text and images. The data were imported into MAXQDA software and then grouped into the most prevalent thematic categories, which are presented in the Findings section (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). This approach, grounded in the methodologies of Kuckartz (2019) and Braun and Clarke (2022), facilitated a systematic examination of both patterns of meaning and broader contextual characteristics (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The data collection process was carried out using the MAXQDA Web Collector extension, and the sample included coworking spaces in rural areas affiliated with the Cowocat Rural network. From this dataset, key categories were identified, and the most relevant codes were analysed within the established framework.

In the next section, some initiatives will be presented that demonstrate how the strengthening of businesses and collaborative workspaces influences the perception of the territory and fosters dynamic relationships between companies and communities.

4 FINDINGS

The analysis, coding, and organization of the data reveal three critical aspects regarding the relationship between rural coworking and place identity, as communicated through the websites. Firstly, the flexibility of the coworking concept in rural settings is a notable aspect, as it is able to adapt to local needs and the involvement of institutions and businesses that support it. Secondly, the role of the community and local residents in the formation of the coworking space is a key factor, with some spaces becoming a common project consolidated by organised groups. Finally, the importance of the natural environment is a crucial element, not only for locating a coworking space but also for promoting it and attracting new users.

Table 1 Coworking spaces that are part of Cowocat Rural network

<i>Name of the coworking space</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Target market</i>
La Nau	Castellterçol	Small companies, self-employed workers, and freelancers from the Moianès region and its surroundings.
Palau Cowork	La Seu d'Urgell	Freelancers and digital nomads interested in the natural environment, sports, and quality of life of the Pyrenees.
Espai coworking de la Conca de Barberà	Montblanc	Entrepreneurs and companies in start-up phase that need business support from Next Generation program and FEDER (European Regional Development Fund).
La Nova Coworking	Cardona	Professional and business initiatives incentivized by Cardona municipality.
L'espai cowork	La Seu d'Urgell	Digital nomads and local entrepreneurs from La Seu d'Urgell.
Fem Coliving and Coworking	Sant Joan de les Abadesses	Remote workers and nature lovers in search of long living and working stays.
Coebrelab	Móra d'Ebre	Social entrepreneurs and digital innovators from Ribera d'Ebre.
Espai 25 Coworking i Creació	Solsona	Self-employed and freelancers from Solsona.
Coworking Alfarràs	Alfarràs	Self-employed and entrepreneurs from Alfarràs.
L'oficina Berga Coworking	Berga	Self-employed and entrepreneurs from Berga.
La nou coworking	Artesa de Segre	Entrepreneurs and businesspeople from La Noguera region.
Esport Cowork	Esport	People who want to work and stay in the Pyrenees Park and do sport.
Espai Teuleria	Olot	Self-employed workers engaged in the professional geology sector in the Garrotxa volcanic area.
Centre d'empreses del Ripollès	Ripoll	Local companies fostered by Ripollès Development Agency.
CNS coworking	Cervera	Self-employed and entrepreneurs from Cervera.
Cal Monjo Coworking	Sant Privat d'en Bas	Environmental, social, and cultural entrepreneurs supported by Vall d'en Bas municipality.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Name of the coworking space</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Target market</i>
Abadia Senan	Senan	Local entrepreneurs and remote workers working in creative businesses supported by the municipality.
Cerdanya Coworking	Puigcerdà	Self-employed and freelancers from Puigcerdà and the Cerdanya region.
Cowork Pallars	Tremp	Sports and nature-oriented entrepreneurs.
Coworking Ateneu	Móra la Nova	Art entrepreneurs, emerging artists.
Ca-nyera coworking	Olot	Creative entrepreneurs and local craftwork promoters.
Núria Social	Olot	Local cooperatives working on education and environmental challenges
L'espai	Prats de Lluçanès	Local companies and entrepreneurs from Lluçanès region.
Espai Kowo	Amposta	Coworkers and digital nomads interested in sports and nature.
Zona Líquida	Riba-roja d'Ebre	Rural promoters and social innovators.
Lo niu d'idees	La Pobla de Segur	Self-employed and entrepreneurs from La Pobla de Segur.
CEI Balaguer	Balaguer	Companies in start-up phase looking for mentorship and consultancy.
Local coworking	Guissona	Self-employed and entrepreneurs from Guissona.
Qworking la QP	Ripoll	Cultural entrepreneurs and cooperative for wellbeing.
CO-61	Navàs	Self-employed and entrepreneurs from Navàs.
Nèctar-rural coworking and living	Vilanova de Sau	Art entrepreneurs, emergent artists in residence, art travellers.
Espai de cotreball Llotja de Bellpuig	Bellpuig	Local entrepreneurs and companies, students and candidates for public positions who are preparing official examinations.
Àneu Coworking	Esterrí d'Àneu	Professional and entrepreneurs supported by Esterrí d'Àneu municipality.
Mas Vinyoles hub	Sant Pere de Torelló	Rural entrepreneurs and local innovators.
Espai 9	Gironella	Companies or entrepreneurs interested in working in a quiet environment with privileged views of the Viladomiu Nou textile colony.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Name of the coworking space</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Target market</i>
Natural Coworking Ports	Prat de Comte	Local entrepreneurs related to the Parc Natural dels Ports.
Bressol d'emprenedoria de Besalú	Besalú	Local startups and business consultants.
Espai Cirera	Lladurs	Cooperatives, self-employed, and entrepreneurs from Lladurs.
Techworking Fes	Ripoll	Professionals and entrepreneurs from the technological and B2B sector.
Centre d'empreses de Flix. Espai de cowork i teletreball.	Flix	Small companies and freelancers.
Espai La Magrana	Valls	Self-employed and entrepreneurs from Valls.
La Cooperativa	Camprodon	Self-employed and entrepreneurs from Camprodon Valley.
Vitis espai coworking	Gandesa	Self-employed and entrepreneurs from Terra Alta.
L'Estudi	Montclar	Local startups and business consultants.

Source: Authors, 2024

4.1 Coworking Represents a Multidimensional Phenomenon Within Rural Environments

Both entrepreneurs and local governments participate in coworking activities, which are seen as opportunities to attract talent and promote regional investments. Town councils often emerge as pivotal allies for coworking spaces, providing economic support, infrastructure, and services. Offices such as *La Nova Coworking* (Cardona), *Espai coworking de la Conca de Barberà* (Montblanc), *Cal Monjo Coworking* (Sant Privat d'en Bas), *L'espai* (Prats de Lluçanès), *Coworking Ateneu* (Móra la Nova), and *Lo niu d'idees* (La Pobla de Segur) are examples promoted by institutional actors focused on bolstering the business ecosystem of their respective regions. When the local government supports rural coworking spaces management, there is a greater potential for development. This is mainly due to access to subsidies enabling investment in projects, events, and initiatives to generate social impact and foster local development.

Additionally, a distinct pattern emerges in rural coworking, emphasizing a blend of work and leisure known as “workation”, reshaping the

perception of the territory (Lange et al., 2022). Based on these ideas, efforts are directed towards attracting remote workers as a new audience. In contrast to publicly supported coworking, private rural coworking prevails in this scenario, without direct relations with the public administration. A notable example is *Fem Coliving & Coworking* (Sant Joan de les Abadesses), an old farmhouse that has been transformed into a collaborative space for both living and working. This establishment offers extended stays and integrates its guests into the natural environment through agricultural activities, gardening, and sporting events. It combines rural tourism with coworking, providing high-speed internet services to facilitate teleworking, as well as professional and social events.

The possibility of diversifying the work environment stands out as a significant advantage of rural coworking. This diversity fosters creativity, encourages the emergence of new businesses, and cultivates professional and personal networks, thereby enhancing worker productivity and their connection with the environment. While management approaches of coworking activity may vary (e.g. incorporating stays, community participation, etc.), the interest prevails in promoting sharing practices within an environmental context favouring well-being and respect for tradition.

4.2 *First Things First: The Power of Community*

Many of these initiatives have emerged bottom-up, often with support from public sector subsidies. In general, the presence of a facilitator is indispensable for sustaining the coworking space. This facilitator, often known as a coworking manager, assumes responsibility for the operational logistics of the office (such as managing accounts, coordinating payments to suppliers, relations with other stakeholders, etc.), while also facilitates the adaptation of both local residents and foreigners to the local business scene. This professional profile is responsible for the adaptation of the coworker, especially for those from a different territory and unfamiliar with the area. *Cowocat Rural* has defined the profile of this manager (see, for example, Capdevila, 2018), highlighting the strategic importance of its role in bringing the community together.

Community formation is crucial for the survival of the rural coworking space, given that user demand typically lags behind that of urban counterparts, and a strong community serves to mitigate feelings of isolation and reinforce social ties. In the cases studied, such as *Espai Teuleria*, located in Olot (Girona), its community is made up of specialists in geology and

volcanology who are in charge of addressing social-environmental problems in the area and share the workspace facilities, though they work independently. It is a consolidated group that, in addition to working, shares hobbies and leisure activities. Similarly, *Nèctar-rural coworking and living*, located in the municipality of Vilanova de Sau (Barcelona), is a collaborative project for creatives that combines coworking and coliving space, offering artistic residency programmes in a farmhouse with the high Pyrenees as the main landscape. Though its audience rotates periodically, demand remains steady throughout the year, attracting individuals seeking a “rural experience” that fosters connections with like-minded groups.

The revitalization of spaces within rural environments has emerged as a strategy to create competitiveness and foster place attachment. The transformation of deteriorating environments into vibrant, welcoming spaces cultivates a sense of belonging and community pride. Furthermore, active collaboration on local projects fosters stronger interpersonal relationships and greater social cohesion. Evidence of such transformative effects can be seen in the *Ca-nyera coworking* (Olot), an old fabric warehouse located in the old town, whose premises were unoccupied for more than two decades. After being acquired by the Olot City Council and being transformed into a coworking space, the site now hosts a thriving community of local entrepreneurs engaged in individual and collaborative projects, alongside active participation from neighbourhood residents in various organised activities.

4.3 *The Natural Environment as the Main Attribute*

In the conducted study, it has been observed that in rural coworking, it is not merely the workspace itself that serves as the central attraction, but rather the surrounding context in which the office is located. In the communication strategy employed by different offices, the natural assets of the territory are used to positively highlight the advantages of working in one of these places, and the product offering is constructed based on place identity. For instance, *Palau Cowork*, located in La Seu d’Urgell, in the province of Lleida, emphasizes its climatic conditions, sporting opportunities, historical significance, and the quality of life that is gained by living and working in that place. Similarly, the *Cerdanya Coworking*, situated in Puigcerdà (Girona), highlights its “open and cosmopolitan” quality and the possibility of enjoying mountainous landscapes, ski activities, and privileged valleys. The business strategy of this office is to position itself in

proximity to Barcelona, attracting a professional audience who seek to combine work with leisure throughout the year.

The restoration of heritage sites has facilitated the promotion of the creation of coworking spaces in rural environments, thereby revitalizing areas through collaboration between public and private entities. A notable example is the *Abadia Senan*, an ancient monastery acquired by the Senan City Council (Tarragona), and subsequently restored to promote collaborative work among the residents. Following its restoration, the site has been transformed into a community engagement centre for residents, hosting multifunctional spaces for sports, cultural events, and recreational activities.

Considering the importance of location and natural assets to potential coworkers, coworking spaces such as *Natural Coworking Ports* (Prat de Comte, Tarragona) focus on the richness of the rural context of the *Parc Natural dels Ports* to attract future coworkers. The environment is the main asset of this space, including local references such as festivals, traditions, and tourism offerings unique to Prat de Comte. Similarly, *Espot Cowork* (Espot, Lleida) offer the opportunity to work and reside in the Pyrenees National Park, with privileged panoramic mountain views and high-altitude amenities conducive to water sports and skiing activities. As demonstrated, rural coworking initiatives are closely linked to the environment and its opportunities. These collaborative spaces have the particularity that they take advantage of the territory as part of the benefits offered to both frequent and future workers. Thus, the more attractive the region, the greater the coworking space's potential for success and occupancy.

5 DISCUSSION

The results have revealed the importance of local administration in promoting and consolidating coworking initiatives, particularly when the office's location can enhance the territory as a tourist destination that is attractive to freelancers, families, and entrepreneurs in the area. The search for quiet locations, with greater environmental quality, safety, and leisure and work opportunities, represents an opportunity to attract new residents and skilled professionals to rural areas (Gandini & Cossu, 2019; Vaishar & Šastná, 2022). This initiative aims to energize the territory and reinforce its visibility; requiring the active participation of stakeholders such as local governments, companies, and promoters in a joint action strategy (Liu et al., 2023).

One of the key aspects of understanding how coworking drives place identity in rural contexts is the alliance between local stakeholders, who in turn act as place managers. This is an ongoing participatory relationship, aligned with local development agendas. Coworking activity is regarded not only as a catalyst for business development, but also as an opportunity to raise the profile of towns and cities. In this regard, as evidenced in Table 2, rural coworking initiatives involve a diverse range of actors from both the public and private sectors. Collectively, these actors endeavour to shape the identity of their respective places of operation and to generate socio-spatial impact (Mahnken, 2011). Although the primary audience of these spaces is independent remote workers, a strategic alliance with municipal governments is identified. Notably, 59% of the sampled spaces maintain an active relationship with public administrations (e.g. town halls, chambers, or local councils), operating under the institutional framework of government agendas. Consequently, these spaces are typically aligned with the values promoted by these entities and serve as allies in achieving shared objectives. Factors such as financing and institutional support play a pivotal role in the success and implementation of this type of project, as they provide support for both management and the procurement of spaces for their workforce.

In rural areas, the place identity is the most important element in attracting visitors, generating dialogues with them, and facilitating co-creation experiences. This contributes to the construction of new symbolic meanings, which, in turn, are transformed into the place brand (Ripoll González & Lester, 2018). Coworking spaces attract specific segments, particularly those inclined towards experiential engagement with the rural landscape and sensitive to the natural environment. For instance, the *Mas Vinyoles hub* (Sant Pere de Torelló, Barcelona) focuses on workers who enjoy outdoor sports, organizing groups to practice hiking, mountain biking, and more. In these cases, the inherent beauty of the environment serves as a backdrop for conducting and offering activities, with landscape assets aligning seamlessly with the offerings of both the coworking space and the city in which they are developed.

Table 2 Place managers involved in rural coworking development

	<i>Local actors</i>	<i>Who?</i>	<i>Place identity focus</i>	<i>Actions</i>	<i>Spaces</i>
Place management categories	Public sector actors	City managers, spatial planners, tourism offices, business developers, educational institutions	Projection of place identity through mechanisms of participation and co-creation with stakeholders to value the territory and its capacity for business development and social innovation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsidy to coworking offices and promotion of public initiatives. • Participation in the Rural Development Program of Catalonia. • Training of local facilitators and rural agents of the territory. • Collaborative work with tourism offices for the diffusion of the rural place brand. • Support for the regeneration of underutilized spaces in the territory and adaptation to shared offices. 	26
	Private sector actors	Tourism and hospitality developers, social and environmental agents, communities, coworking owners	Projection of place identity through the potential of the rural environment for the creation of new businesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of private coworking spaces. • Cooperation and alliances with small businesses and entrepreneurs in the local community. • Development of additional services and attractions to the coworking space (e.g. leisure activities, workshops, etc.) • Tourism promotion • Show the support received by recognize coworkers and entrepreneurs. 	19

Source: Authors, 2024

6 CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter has explored the role of rural coworking spaces in revitalizing local landscapes and shaping place identity narratives in Catalonia, Spain. The findings emphasize the multidimensional nature of coworking in rural environments through an examination of the Cowocat Rural network. The spaces serve as catalysts for business development, community building, and the showcasing of territorial assets. The natural environment emerges as a central attribute in attracting remote workers and fostering place attachment. However, the success of these initiatives relies heavily on local administrations' active participation and place managers' strategic efforts to integrate the spaces into the wider socio-economic fabric.

Community building is a fundamental aspect of rural coworking, crucial for fostering local identity, attracting users, and ensuring their retention, with space managers playing a pivotal role. In this line, Cowocat Rural has made significant contributions through key publications, such as the *Rural Coworking Guide* (2021) and the *Mapa Ocupacional Dinamitzador* (2018), which offer valuable guidance on space management while highlighting the importance of place in establishing strong connections between rural communities and coworking spaces. By emphasizing the role of local culture, history, and shared values, these narratives not only cultivate a sense of belonging among users while enhancing the appeal of rural coworking hubs. Furthermore, the success of rural coworking hinges on the integration of social, physical, and institutional capital, with many spaces collaborating with local councils to support business, cultural, social, and digital initiatives.

Coworking spaces have the potential to facilitate local economic and business growth in rural areas. Nevertheless, this requires the enactment of proactive municipal policies and the provision of adequate support. However, this is not always a viable option, and there remains a degree of scepticism regarding the potential developmental benefits that coworking spaces might bring to these regions. Despite Spain being one of the most dynamic markets in the coworking industry, with Catalonia among its leading operators, this growth is predominantly urban, with Barcelona acting as the sector's primary driver, in rural contexts, progress has been achieved through sustained and gradual efforts, yet considerable work remains to be done. In order to address this gap, promotional

communications are increasingly emphasizing rural tourism marketing in order to attract a more diverse range of visitors and stakeholders to these areas.

In conclusion, while rural coworking shares numerous similarities with its urban counterpart, particularly in terms of its emphasis on interior space and community as a central element, rural coworking places greater emphasis on forging connections with local administration and showcasing the distinctive qualities of the surrounding territory as a strategic advantage. In this context, place identity emerges as a pivotal differentiating factor, employed both for promotional purposes and as a competitive element in attracting and retaining members.

While this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of rural coworking, it is limited by its focus on a specific geographic context. A key limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on the specific local case of Cowocat Rural, while the reality of rural coworking spaces varies considerably, especially across different geographical contexts. Consequently, although the findings may not be directly replicable, this study highlights the importance of considering place identity as an essential component of rural coworking, encouraging further research into how local identity shapes and enriches these spaces. Future research could explore similar initiatives in other regions to identify cross-cultural variations and best practices. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could shed light on the long-term impacts of rural coworking on local development and place branding. As remote work continues to gain prominence, understanding the potential of coworking spaces in revitalizing rural areas and shaping place identities will be crucial for policymakers and community leaders seeking to foster sustainable growth and attract diverse talent. That being said, further research in this area can contribute to developing targeted strategies that leverage the unique attributes of rural environments while promoting inclusive and resilient local economies.

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Coworking from (and for) Which *Rural*? Spatial Imaginaries Within the Project “Spazi Generativi” in Piedmont, Italy

Samantha Cenerè

I INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has boosted the interest towards the capacity of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to enable new specialisations of work, with remote working being promoted even by corporations and public administrations (Tomaz et al., 2022). At the same time, the restrictions imposed by the various lockdowns and a growing interest among young adults towards leaving congested cities to start a new life path have shifted attention towards the possibility to work from rural and mountain areas. In some regions, these trends accelerated an already existing movement of *amenity migration* which especially affected people in their 30s and 40s who are attracted by the amenities of rural contexts (Membretti, 2021; Perlik, 2011; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). These new

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209

trends brought about by the pandemic have boosted the spreading of coworking spaces from urban to rural areas. The phenomenon has recently encountered political interest from many levels, leading to the growth of projects in which the opening of a rural coworking space (RCWS) is either launched or supported by public authorities.

As both research on urban coworking spaces and recent studies on their rural counterparts have shown, collaborative spaces of work could assume different forms, depending on factors such as their missions, hosts, communities, relations (see, for example, Bertelsmann-Stiftung, 2020; Görmar, 2021; Merkel, 2015). Within RCWS, this diversity is even more evident due to their immanent multifunctionality and their stronger connection to the local context if compared to the same facilities in cities (Flipo et al., 2022; Fuzi, 2015; Lange et al., 2022). Indeed, the availability of well-equipped facilities to work remotely has been considered an important asset for those rural areas in search for a new strategy of development and struggling with rising depopulation. For this reason, many public authorities have been exploring the opportunity to open RCWS not just as shared workplaces for local entrepreneurs and creatives but also as multifunctional socio-economic infrastructures providing response to various place-specific needs.

The present chapter argues that the spatial imaginaries adopted by the people involved in the design of a RCWS condition the specific form and function assumed by the latter. However, how these imaginaries may be incorporated in projects of RCWS and how these projects may contribute to reproduce specific imaginaries of rural and mountain areas is not investigated yet. Given the increasing interest for RCWS as potential tools for local development among local administrations and the EU institutions, the chapter claims for a constructivist approach to the understanding of how specific spatial imaginaries may inform strategies and policies that include coworking spaces as important socioeconomic infrastructures.

The chapter focuses on the project *Spazi Generativi* launched by the LAG (Local Action Group) Escartons e Valli Valdesi in Piedmont (LAG EVV), Italy. The aim of the project was to assess the demand for facilities both equipped for remote work and offering other services to the population and to potential new inhabitants. The chapter opens with a discussion of the increased interest in RCWS as tools for local development. Drawing on a theoretical approach informed by Cultural Political Economy, the section recalls the importance of exploring spatial imaginaries to understand how they inform strategies and plans of local development. For this

reason, the following section claims that place-based and participatory projects that include RCWS in rural development strategies could be analysed through the lens of spatial imaginaries, unearthing their role in defining the form and function of a RCWS in relation to the local context. Section 3 introduces the project and provides a brief overview of the geographical area on which the LAG works. Afterwards, and having presented the methodology employed for the present study, the discussion of the results shows that different imaginaries of rural and mountain areas inform the ideas, interests, and plans on RCWS of the participants to the participatory design process. The last section stresses the need for balancing pleas for place-based and participatory approaches to RCWS with an attention towards how the functions and role of these facilities are influenced by the spatial imaginaries that each actor involved associate to the local context.

2 RURAL COWORKING SPACES, LOCAL DEVELOPMENT, AND SPATIAL IMAGINARIES

The increasing diffusion of digital infrastructures in many rural and mountain areas and the growth of so-called amenity-led migration constitute the backdrop of the rising interest towards RCWS not just from potential users but also from policymakers, who see RCWS as relevant social and economic infrastructures to be included within existing or new strategies of rural development. Although a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon at the European level is still partial due to the high internal diversity of contexts, spaces, and practices, researchers have recently started paying attention to the inclusion of rural coworking within policy initiatives at multiple scales (Akhavan et al., 2023). Local and national authorities, together with the European Union, have shown interest in supporting the opening of RCWS, since they are considered tools for rural revitalisation to help overcome urgent territorial challenges which affect rural and mountain areas. A decreasing and/or ageing population, fragile local economies, lack of innovation and creativity, digital divide, and in some cases unsustainable growth strategies exclusively tourism-oriented are some of the main problems to which RCWS may offer partial solutions.

In particular, recent studies have looked into the capacity of RCWS to sustain local development by supporting local entrepreneurs and attracting professionals in so-called creative sectors. Within this body of work,

the relationship between RCWS and local development is interpreted as the capacity of shared workplaces to import in rural areas the potential of collaboration as a driver for creativity and innovation already experienced in their urban counterparts and to attract knowledge workers, focussing exclusively on business-oriented initiatives. As shown by Capdevila (2021), the development of the digital infrastructure in some rural areas has driven public authorities (such as the Catalan Government in the project “Cowocat Rural”, supported by the EU funds for rural development) to foster the opening of RCWS in order to replicate the advantages in terms of innovation and creativity brought by this new form of organisation of work in urban contexts. Looking at the case of Sweden, Rex and Westlund (2024) claim that RCWS may enable the creation of agglomeration economies at the micro level. In this kind of initiatives, RCWS “are expected to become drivers of economic change while retaining the creative class and knowledge workers in the periphery, thereby increasing the competitiveness and performance of rural areas” (Flipo et al., 2022, p. 92; see also Akhavan et al., 2021). On the contrary, Avdikos and Merkel (2020) insist on the difficulty experienced by RCWS due to the fact that they do not benefit from agglomeration economies as those in urban areas.

Exploring RCWS from a different angle, other studies frame them as fundamental infrastructures for both the already existing population and potential newcomers not just for their paramount role of working facilities but also as spaces in which other services and functions can be activated. Some coworking spaces in rural and mountainous areas may differ significantly from their urban counterparts because, on the one hand, they are (conceived as) more embedded in the local context and, on the other, they co-host multiple functions other than those merely connected to being shared workplaces, since “in rural areas [...] multifunctionality is needed because of the low-density context and of the specificities of the local labour force” (Flipo et al., 2022, p. 91). Indeed, RCWS areas may be designed as multifunctional spaces, able to host services and activities other than those strictly related to work (Fuzi, 2015; Lange et al., 2022), in a way similar to the Italian *presidi di comunità* (i.e. community hubs; cf. Mariotti et al., 2023). When planned as multifunctional facilities, RCWS may become “socially oriented collaborative spaces” which show a stronger territorial embeddedness compared to those exclusively business-oriented, since they mixed workplace functions with the provision of services that respond to the cultural and welfare needs of the population (Scapolan et al., 2022). Indeed, when included in rural areas, “third places

are also expected to counterbalance the territorial effects of the welfare State retrenchment (Courcelle et al., 2017), by offering multiservices hubs while rationalising public spending through the use of digitalisation (Courcelle et al., 2012)” (cited in Flipo et al., 2022, p. 88).

The multiple functions and missions associated with RCWS have made them an interesting tool for policymakers to boost socioeconomic development in rural and peripheral areas (Boutillier, 2018; Boutillier et al., 2020). Indeed, research has shown that RCWS rely more on public funding compared to their urban counterparts, mainly because rural areas have to face a lower demand for these services (Mariotti et al., 2023).

Looking at these experiences, recent studies have drawn attention towards the need for policymakers to address RCWS through a place-based approach, because of their inherently embeddedness in local communities (Avdikos & Papageorgiou, 2021). Thus, stressing the need for RCWS to “re-territorialize and re-integrate specific characteristics of shared workspaces such as openness and flexibility to the characteristics of their small communities”, Avdikos and Merkel (2020, p. 5) endorse place-based approaches such as those implemented by the EU Cohesion Policy for the ability of bottom-up methodologies to better integrate the collaborative functions with other needs and desires of the local community. RCWS designed through a place-based, bottom-up methodology become “community hubs that serve different socio-economic needs of diverse local communities” (ibid.).

However, an excessive emphasis on local communities as monolithic and static entities risks overlooking the multiple and sometimes conflicting interests, visions, and aspirations of both new and established residents with regard to local development paths. To overcome this pitfall, the present work espouses a Cultural Political Economy approach (Sum & Jessop, 2013), which stresses the importance of introducing a cultural perspective in the analysis of local and regional development. Within this body of work, particular attention is given to the role played by spatial imaginaries in shaping how places are planned and their future paths of development (Davoudi, 2018). Spatial imaginaries are “cognitive frameworks, both collective and individual, constituted through the lived experiences, perceptions, and conceptions of space itself” (Wolford, 2004, p. 410). Their capacity to act upon local development is due to their performative essence and their enmeshment with power relations. As explained by Davoudi, spatial imaginaries constitute “deeply held, collective understandings of socio-spatial relations that are performed by, give sense to, make possible

and change collective socio-spatial practices. They are produced through political struggles over conceptions, perceptions and lived experiences and performances” (Davoudi, 2018, p. 101).

Watkins (2015) contributes to the debate with a further clarification on the use of the term *spatial imaginary* among geographers, providing a distinction between imaginaries of places, imaginaries of idealised spaces, and imaginaries of spatial transformation. While the former refers to the characteristics that make a place unique, spatial imaginaries of idealised spaces work on the alleged features of a place that make it representative of a specific typology of places. Adding a further typology that connects the first and the second, Watkins claims that the imaginaries of spatial transformations describe general processes through which a place could pass from the current type of idealised space to another one. An idealised space does not include the features of specific places, rather it is built through the mobilisation of ideas, symbols, common lived experiences, and general conditions that apply to all places considered as specific instantiations of that idealised space (cf. Jaffe, 2012). Notably, imaginaries of both idealised spaces and spatial transformation are crucial for local development, since they “can evoke either positive or negative associations and support arguments either for a continuation of the development of specific places [...] or for a change from a negatively labelled space into something else” (Görmar, 2024, p. 6). In so doing, spatial imaginaries selectively pick some elements of a complex reality, thus offering a simplified reading of it made by either individuals or groups. These selective readings are usually accompanied by other types of imaginaries, such as political, cultural, and economic ones, which provide elements that support specific spatial imaginaries (cf. Hincks et al., 2017).

Although the relationship between imaginaries and local development has been explored mainly in cities, the same link could be traced in other geographical contexts. Small towns, for example, engage in processes of reimagination of their identity and development processes referring to discourses and narratives that shape the development strategies adopted (Görmar, 2023, 2024). Narratives are used to make sense of the world, by selectively choosing specific features of the history of a place and allowing for the reimagination of local identities and economies. At the same time, imaginaries hold a performative power, since through the production and circulation of imaginaries “socio-spatial relations are reproduced and contested, and political projects are consolidated” (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021, p. 54). Following this line of thinking, it is possible to contend that rural

places and mountain areas which have been recently looking at RCWS as tools of development undergo the same kind of processes.

Given that spatial imaginaries are imbued with power relations and produced through political struggles (Davoudi, 2018), research has usually been interested in the narratives and discourse circulated by powerful actors. However, I claim that, when it comes to place-based policies, participatory processes, and bottom-up projects as in the case of *Spazi Generativi*, it is important to investigate the spatial imaginaries mobilised by *each actor* involved in the process. Indeed, Community Led Local Development (CLLD) and the LEADER approach employed by the project aim at empowering citizens to actively participate in the design and implementation of local development strategies. For this reason, the chapter claims to unpack the “local community” involved in the project, in order to shed light on the multiple and diverse understandings of which form a RCWS may have, and which benefits it may bring. By unpacking this diversity, the different spatial imaginaries reproduced by participants emerge as an important factor whose capacity to inform strategies of rural development envisaging the creation of RCWS has to be acknowledged.

3 THE PROJECT *SPAZI GENERATIVI* OF THE LAG ESCARTONS E VALLI VALDESI

The area of the LAG EVV is situated on the South-West of Turin, and it extends to the French border. The LAG works on the following administrative areas: Susa Valley Mountain Union, Consortium of the municipalities of the Sangone Valley, Consortium of the municipalities of the high Susa Valley, Consortium of the Olympic municipalities-Via Lattea, Chisone and Germanasca Valleys Mountain Union, Pinerolo area Mountain Union. It is characterised by a high diversity in terms of socio-economic indicators, demographic profile, and landscapes.

The project “Spazi Generativi. Luoghi della comunità e co-working in aree rurali” (*Generative spaces. Community places and rural coworking spaces*) launched in March 2023 by the LAG EVV aimed at sustaining the provision of places both devoted to remote working and representing a new typology of local infrastructure through providing different services to residents and new inhabitants. As stated on the website of the project, “the goal is to create dedicated spaces for remote digital work in the LAG area, encouraging the adoption of innovative solutions on the Smart

Villages model. These will not only be dedicated to co-working, but also and above all to the interaction between people, activities and services active in the area. The aim of the LAG is to provide residents of the area – and not only – with a place of sociality, where it is possible to meet, discuss and increase their relational networks”.¹

The project was the point of arrival of previous lines of funding. Indeed, a previous activity of the LAG aimed at funding projects of “community entrepreneurship” (*imprenditoria di comunità*). This experience resulted in the acknowledgment of the lack of gathering places in the LAG area, able not only to meet the needs of local residents but also to welcome potential new inhabitants. In order to respond to this need, the project *Spazi Generativi* was launched as a tool to support the creation of multi-functional gathering spaces providing also facilities for remote working.

The implementation of the project was informed by the EU LEADER – CLLD approach, implemented through a survey and meetings with stakeholders and citizens. The survey and the meetings aimed at assessing the actual existence of a demand for collaborative hybrid spaces, in which the possibility of working remotely is matched with the provision of welfare services and cultural activities. The first meeting involved 13 people (public administration, local entrepreneurs, third sector) and aimed at exploring opportunities and ideas in terms of spaces, management, and activities for the *generative spaces*. The second one aimed at assessing the needs and potential typologies of users and services. Participants were gathered in smaller groups on a territorial basis. The results of all the steps of the demand validation phase were then collected in a public report.

Due to its core characteristics, the project perfectly suited the need for exploring two interlinked issues. First, how RCWS are increasingly part of place-based policies that aim at revitalising and repopulating rural areas. Second, the heterogeneity of the people involved provides an interesting ground for preliminarily exploring to what extent spatial imaginaries inform local development strategies, thus questioning the very notion of *place-based* policy.

The chapter presents preliminary evidence from a research project aiming at investigating how different imaginaries inform the creation of RCWS. Notably, the evidence is based on the analysis of 12 interviews. The sample was made by persons involved in the demand validation phase (either through the survey or the meetings) who agreed to be interviewed.

¹<https://www.evv.it/spazi-generativi-e-smart-villages/>. Last access: 5 April 2024.

The interviews aimed at (1) understanding the importance the interviewees attach to the opening of a *generative space* in (one of) the areas on which the LAG works in relation to the main strengths and weaknesses identified in the local context; and (2) identifying the narratives and imaginaries which frame their understanding of the potential role of *generative spaces*.² Evidence from the interviews was supported also by the analysis of reports and documents on the project produced by the LAG EVV and interviews with LAG officers working on the project.

4 RURAL IMAGINARIES AND PLANS OF *GENERATIVE SPACES*

Spatial imaginaries are implicit constructions that inform the vision and agency of individuals and communities and “exert influence on practical aspects of community planning and development” (Stokowski et al., 2021, p. 244). From a social constructivist perspective, imaginaries entail social, spatial, and cultural dimensions that could be revealed through the analysis of the discourses that people produce to think about future paths of local development. Notably, “spatial imaginaries are seen as the dynamic, strategic, and pervasive field where material spatial change is made possible and finds its justification [...] always able to manifest themselves into certain policies on one hand and into specific infrastructures on the other” (Bottà & Petrilli, 2023). Thus, when thinking about the potential role and form of a RCWS, new inhabitants and residents implicitly refer to ideas associated to what “rural” and “mountain” means for them. These ideas entail a performative power, since they are symbols and representations that inform the design and planning of RCWS, eventually producing material effects. The interviews have shown that, besides a common interest in the potential of opening RCWS and *tier lieux* (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982), participants to the project *Spazi Generativi* brought into the participatory process specific imaginaries of rural and mountain areas that inform the role and form of RCWS and their potential contribution to local development. The remaining part of the chapter will discuss the different imaginaries identified through the interviews.

² Supervision from the Privacy Office for the whole implementation of both interviews and surveys.

4.1 *Coworking from the Idyllic Mountain*

Respondents in the 30s are new residents (or, interested in moving to rural areas and mountains) who have been working remotely and/or who have already founded services for collaborative remote working. They read the relationship between rural areas and coworking as one that resonates with an idyllic vision of a mountain. According to them, opening a coworking space in the LAG area would respond to the need of young creatives looking for “nature” and “non-urban experiences”. In line with this imaginary, coworking spaces should be located in remote areas, from which coworkers may better profit from the quietness and uncontaminated nature. Some respondents within this typology have also looked for inspiration in already existing CWS, mainly exploring successful experiences out of Italy and/or non-European ones attracting international users. These people fall into the category of “digital nomads”, since they are either entrepreneurs belonging to the “creative class” (Florida, 2002) or employees of major international institutions and corporations, performing their work remotely by means of digital technologies. Thus, the relational space (Massey, 2005) of work that they inhabit does not coincide with the local context in which they chose to live, rather it is made of the relationships with distant others who share with them work and life habits. They mobilise “*in-between* imaginaries, built [...] to keep together through their plans and aspirations the rural and the urban poles” (Membretti, 2021, p. 197). The idealised space in which they locate a future RCWS is made by a selective identification of the best features of the place matched with the cultural vibrancy experienced in the relational space of work they already inhabit.

It's wonderful here, but people are not stimulating, there's no connection, you'll just find what is in the community... I look for some forms of life similar to us.
(A., male, 40s)

Indeed, they imagine the collateral services and activities that may be activated in a RCWS as filling the “*void of a cultural offer*” (F., female, 30s) which they long for being more similar to the one of urban areas (book presentation, concerts, yoga, art-therapy, etc.) and as an answer to loneliness, thus providing also co-living facilities. These people are “amenity migrants, creatives, neorurals, ‘politopical’ inhabitants who spend increasingly extended periods of time in places of second residence”

(Varotto, 2020, p. 152). Although these interviewees live in different valleys of the LAG area, these places share the fact of being small villages located in the high part of the most touristic valleys.

The rural imaginary that lays behind the characteristics and role of the RCWS imagined by these respondents is typical of the so-called creatives “that are increasingly sensitive to environmental amenities and to the values and narratives of contemporary neo-rurality” (Flipo et al., 2022, p. 89). The way these new residents imagine a RCWS resonates with a narrative of life change in which “the rural” and “the mountain” have to be equipped with what is needed in order to maintain a cosmopolitan lifestyle and to introduce practices of “rural urbanisation by importing urban lifestyles, practices and references in the countryside” (Flipo et al., 2022, p. 100; see also McCarthy, 2008).

The differences between the imaginaries related to the relationship between RCWS and rural contexts result also in different approaches to the theme of localisation. Those who see the possibility of opening a coworking space in the LAG area as a way to offer a working facility in a naturalistically beautiful place identify the ideal location of RCW as one that presents a beautiful landscape, in which “Nature” dominates and is situated in the high mountain.

4.2 *Shared Places of Care (Work) for Ageing Populations in Marginal Areas*

Respondents in their 50s and 60s who have been living in the area for long (mostly, but not exclusively, women) imagine the *generative spaces* as spaces in which the possibility of working remotely is almost residual. On the contrary, they look at these spaces in their capacity to support the local provision of welfare services. The spatial imaginary associated to this form of *generative space* corresponds to an imaginary of a place (Watkins, 2015) rooted in a vivid picture of the present situation of many rural areas, characterised by a dramatic lack of services. Notably, they stress the progressive decrease of public transport and healthcare facilities, which they see as a precondition for the areas to attract new residents.

Why should you move from Turin or other cities to work here [N/A in Susa Valley], when you don't have services? We need public services, you cannot think about public services for rural areas using the criteria of urban areas [i.e., number of people to be served]. (A., female, 50s)

At the same time, the present demographic profile of some parts of the LAG territory, dominated by old people in need of assistance and services, is a particularly urgent aspect to be tackled for these interviewees. The rural imaginary of this group of respondents can be traced through the analysis of what Owain Jones (1995) called “lay discourses”, which are “grounded in the everyday practice of life in the countryside” (Woods, 2011, p. 38) and through which specific meanings of the rural are constructed. Since “lay discourses frame the lived experience of rural life and the perceived needs of rural residents” (Woods, 2011, p. 39), once rural residents encounter discourses on potential new paths of local development such as those on RCWS and *generative spaces*, they mobilise their lay discourses on the rural in trying to make sense of how the latter may respond to local needs. Within these discourse on the rural, the role of a *generative space* is not just the one of a facility for remote working but also (and mostly) the one of centre for activities and services that respond to the needs of this part of the population, thus becoming places for care work. These respondents have already some projects of spaces in line with this idea, for example offering cultural activities that could facilitate the encounter between young and old people, such as knitting, providing facilities for relatives and caregivers of old people, or offering support in the access to digital services.

These spaces should be multifunctional, providing a small kitchen, a place for mums to meet after picking up their kids from school, a place for children to study and play... they should be a sort of “community gatehouse”, especially in peripheral small villages. (D., female, 60s)

According to the interviewees, the hybridisation of remote and collaborative working with cultural and social services seems to be particularly feasible for the *generative spaces* that may be opened in Val Pellice. Indeed, according to the interviewees living in the valley, the history of the valley deeply marked by the presence of the Valdese Church constitutes an important enabling feature, due to the rich network of associations present. Thus, the imaginary of the valleys they inhabit is linked, on the one hand, to the idea of marginality as distance from the provision of welfare services (Osti & Carrosio, 2020) and, on the other, to the stronger social ties that are usually attributed to rural communities. First, the areas of the valleys in which they live are marginal(ized) in that they experience a lack of key services and do not benefit from the tourism economy of the

mountains. Second, within this imaginary the marginality could be overcome by leveraging on the social capital of small villages.

4.3 *Coworking Spaces and Business Incubators for Lagging Behind and Fragmented Rural Economies*

Only few interviewees, mostly men in their 50s and 60s, look at the capacity of a *generative space* as a proper RCWS for professionals and as a sort of business incubator, thus offering entrepreneurial support to rural development. The rural imaginary that lays behind this type of projects is rooted in a vivid acknowledgment of the lack of jobs as main driver of depopulation dynamics, but brings with it also discourses on the local potentialities in terms of entrepreneurial capacity.

[In the meetings of the project] there were almost no representatives of the entrepreneurial community... No firms at all... there was a lack of key stakeholders. (G., male, 60s)

For those interviewees who look at the *generative spaces* mainly through the lens of new working facilities and business incubators, the perfect location should be “*barycentric for an already existing network of relations, it should not need self-promotion*” (S., male, 50s). A given example is Torre Pellice, located in the homonymous valley and centre of main services. According to one of the interviewees, a RCWS here would be another important service that would increase the current offer. This perspective is in line with previous research on the topic, which identifies the proximity to other services and shops as a key success dimension (Hölzel & de Vries, 2021).

However, the rural imaginary mobilised by these respondents is also one that acknowledges the fragmented nature of rural areas, seeing it as an obstacle to the actual capacity of introducing a successful RCWS.

Maybe you have an abandoned space in that village and residents know it very well, they may tell you all the history of the place... but their imaginary should account for the possibility that that place becomes something completely different, and that this transformation is cool.... Because we move on small or very small and fragmented dimensions of imaginaries. (S., male, 50s)

To guarantee a sufficient number of users, you need to have just one RCWS at the scale of the valley or even at a greater scale, otherwise you will risk scattering your efforts. (G., male, 60s)

It is difficult to go out from the small bubble of your community, people are linked to their own story... For example, even the project of merging two small municipalities has failed...” (B., male, 60s)

This rural imaginary stresses some negative elements, in which residents of a small village may feel to have completely different histories, resources, and needs from the ones of another village of the same valley. In the discourses of interviewees mobilising this imaginary, parochialism and the internal diversity that emerges as a side-effect of a high sense of belonging appear as key elements of rural areas that have to be acknowledged when thinking about RCWS as a business infrastructure whose user base comprehends a whole valley.

5 CONCLUSION

The literature on RCWS has highlighted that the increased possibility to work remotely may open new opportunities for the social, cultural, and economic revitalisation of rural and mountain areas. For this reason, a growing political interest towards RCWS has been identified among national and local administrations, often supported by *ad hoc* programmes and initiatives led by the European Union.

The main difference between RCWS and their urban counterparts is identified with the greater embeddedness in the local context of the first. Recent research has stressed that RCWS are a “place-based phenomenon well rooted in local and regional communities’ needs and development preferences” (Avdikos & Papageorgiou, 2021). According to this vision, RCWS are able “to set out practices of organization that adapt to the context they inhabit and exist in harmony with it” (Gandini & Cossu, 2021, p. 435), thus being also community hubs that host multiple functions and offer various services.

The participatory design of the project *Spazi Generativi* fits with a place-based approach to RCWS which considers them as “institutions of change and socio-economic infrastructures” (Avdikos & Papageorgiou, 2021, p. 10) and represents an interesting case of place-base policy implemented to employ RCWS as tools for rural development. However,

preliminary evidence from the interviews warns against acritical assumptions of an approach based on the needs and characteristics of the place. Rather than assuming concepts such as “place”, “community”, and “local context” as uncontested and homogenous categories, interviews have shown that they need to be unpacked in order to look for the multiple and heterogeneous ways through which a RCWS may respond to the needs and aspirations of new inhabitants and local residents.

Notably, the discussion of the preliminary research evidence has highlighted that each actor involved in the participatory process brings with her a spatial imaginary that informs the way she thinks about the goals and forms of a RCWS for the LAG EVV area. Rural imaginaries related to the possibility to open RCWS in the LAG area are related both to the life path and professional experience of interviewees and to the specific geographical area in which they live and/or work. Through the interviews, three main imaginaries were identified that inform the plans for a *generative space* for the LAG area. First, the romanticised and idyllic imaginary of the mountain *qua* Nature and isolation informing the activities of new inhabitants in their 30s and 40s. This imaginary resonates with plans and ideas on RCWS as sites of retreat in places perceived as idyllic, from which to work remotely while also remaining connected to other persons who share the same lifestyle and experiencing a typical urban cultural offer. Second, a rural imaginary in which marginality emerges as a key aspect to be tackled and social capital as a powerful resource. The interviewees whose practices and discourses fall within this imaginary think about a *generative space* for the area of the LAG which they belong to primarily as a community service and a place dedicated to care work. Third, rurality corresponds for few respondents to lack of jobs, disconnection to key business dynamics, but also untapped entrepreneurial potential. The same group of respondents also mobilises another rural imaginary that acknowledges the inherent fragmentation of rural and mountain areas, in which parochialism and strong sense of belonging may hinder the opportunity of a new path of local development represented by RCWS.

The chapter has stressed the need to look deeper into the place-based nature of RCWS, in order to shed light on how multiple and sometimes conflicting imaginaries of the rural and the mountain may inform projects and processes of creation of a RCWS.

In thinking about RCWS, their roles, and functions, the “rural” and “mountain” should not be conceived as indistinct and static background. Rather, the actors involved in the creation of RCWS bring with them

specific spatial imaginaries that not only shape RCWS but also materially contribute to reproduce a certain form of rurality. Especially when it comes to participatory place-based strategies for local development, it is crucial to dig into how the variegated constellation of actors taking part in the process contribute with heterogeneous spatial imaginaries to the design and implementation of those strategies. The present research will engage further with the role of imaginaries in place-based policies for local development which pivot on RCWS, paying closer attention to internal power relations. This further step will enable to understand which spatial imaginaries survive the processes of selection and translation into specific material practices (Watkins, 2015), thus showing which visions of RCWS are retained within the participatory processes implemented by the LAG and if and how bottom-up approaches may be able to overcome conflicting imaginaries. This endeavour is crucial for both scholars and policymakers, in order to understand if specific funding streams in place-based policy approaches (LCCD-Leader, Smart Village, etc.) may prioritise specific imaginaries that match the priorities of the Cohesion policy (e.g. rural entrepreneurship) instead of other priorities potentially more urgent for the implementation of a sustainable and just local development of rural areas.

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Collaborative Workspaces Enhancing Youth Employment in Rural Areas

Dimitrios Manoukas and Ilaria Mariotti

I INTRODUCTION

Collaborative workspaces (CWS) can improve local and regional sustainable development through promoting near-working strategies that reduce commuting, congestion, and out-migration (Mariotti et al., 2023a, b; Merkel et al., 2023). Within the rural areas, a key aim of CWS is to improve access to and use of digital technology for residents and businesses, thereby making rural living a more viable proposition and coupling it with employment and training services (Flipo et al., 2022). In European rural areas, CWS have been specifically established to (i) help retain and attract residents, remote workers, and businesses (Slee et al., 2017; Bisello & Litardi,

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2024; Eurofound and European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2024), (ii) train young people and Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEETs) to reduce brain drain and enhance brain gain, brain and knowledge circulation (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024; Manoukas, 2024); support young start-ups and entrepreneurs (Bosworth et al., 2023; Manoukas, 2024; Mariotti & Sasso, 2024). Besides, they can also offer mentoring to young people to get public incentives and access to funding. By providing support, mentorship, and a professional network to various actors, CWS in rural areas can promote local (entrepreneurial and innovation) ecosystems, besides, can mediate, acting as a bridge between users and the external actors of the larger local ecosystems (Bosworth et al., 2023).

The literature exploring CWS in rural areas,¹ aiming to enhance youth employment, is still scant. The only existing studies, at least to our knowledge, focus on CWS networks which have been founded by private, public, and mixed initiatives in some European countries. This chapter aims to fill the gap in the literature by presenting and discussing to what extent the CWS networks described in the literature, and subsequently explored by the authors, aim to enhance youth employment in rural areas, which are characterised by high shares of NEETs. The initiatives selected and analysed are (i) National Connected Hub Network in Ireland; (ii) Tiers-Lieux in France; (iii) FUNDECYT-PCTEX in Extremadura, Spain; (iv) National Network of Telerwork and Coworking Spaces in the Inland Territories in Portugal, (v) South Working in Italy. These five initiatives have been selected because they are heterogeneous in terms of workspace typology, geographical extent, funding sources, and how to promote youth employment.

By highlighting both achievements and enduring difficulties, the selection of these initiatives attempts to offer a fair assessment of how well CWS and related programs work to combat youth unemployment. The five areas hosting the initiatives concern the entire country (Ireland, France, Portugal, and Italy) and a particular region (Extremadura in Spain). They are characterised by high NEET rates and significant unemployment levels. These socioeconomic settings also make it possible to investigate how various approaches might be tailored to local conditions to assist young people in their transitions to training, education, and employment.

¹Rural areas in the present chapter are defined according to the Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA) classification.

To achieve this aim, desk research (e.g., website information, papers and reports describing the case studies, policy papers) and quantitative analysis (e.g., quantitative data on youth unemployment and NEETs in the areas of interest) have been carried out.

Four sections compose the chapter. A literature review on CWS and their role in enhancing youth employment follows the introduction. Section three presents the data on youth unemployment and NEETs in the five countries and describes the initiatives. A comparison of the cases is presented in section four; section five concludes the chapter and puts forward future research questions and policy implications.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our literature review has identified the following intertwined aspects of the programs' operations: *administrative (core-periphery networks and funding sources)*, *political (promotion of inclusivity)*, *technological (integration of digitalization)*, and *operational (hybridization)*. These four topics will be presented in this section.

Beginning with the administrative aspect, CWS, including coworking spaces and digital innovation hubs, have been mainly located in urban areas, boosted by the introduction of large multinational real estate corporations in the market (Gandini & Cossu, 2021; Avdikos & Papageorgiou, 2021; Mariotti et al., 2024). In the second half of the 2010s, and during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, their presence started to slowly expand in non-urban areas promoted by the intensified European public support for regional development and digital upskilling, by the growth of remote workers, digital nomads (Mariotti et al., 2023b), and precarious workers (Marinos et al., 2025). According to Avdikos and Papageorgiou (2021), the majority of CWS received funding to support local and regional development and entrepreneurial growth. This network-building aspect of CWS is also promoted by the Startup Village concept (Goodwin-Hawkins et al., 2023), which argues that the initiatives in rural areas should be place-based but not place-bound, as rural communities must take advantage of urban-rural networks to foster brain circulation and brain bank² (Agrawal et al., 2011; Mariotti & Sasso, 2024).

²Rural and peripheral areas can take advantage of *brain circulation* when locals who leave their home area in search of employment or educational possibilities return home with the information and skills they have gained and share them within the local ecosystem (Agrawal

The COVID-19 pandemic rendered CWS vital pieces of an infrastructure of local resilience (Gandini & Cossu, 2021; Manzini Ceinar & Mariotti, 2021; Akhavan et al., 2023; Biagetti et al., 2025), while their role in addressing failures of the market economy has also been highlighted by previous research (Curry, 2021). The CWS outside urban areas are becoming increasingly *hybrid on the operational level*, offering several services to improve local socio-economic development, including the supply of mentoring and training courses, and tertiary education programmes for young people and NEET. Indeed, in 2022, the percentage of NEETs was highest (12.6%) in rural areas than in cities (10.9%), and towns and suburbs (12.2%) (Eurostat, 2024). The term ‘hybridity’ “reflects the combination of digital, physical and social aspects of the workspaces” (Migliore et al., 2021; Di Marino et al., 2023). In rural areas, hybridity and multi-functionality is needed because of the low-density context, the specificities of the local labour force (Flipo et al., 2022; Bosworth et al., 2023), and the higher demand of well-being (Fuzi, 2015; Mariotti & Lo Russo, 2023). Ivaldi et al., (2018) also agree that most coworking spaces are hybrid forms and that there are many variations of community and collaboration narratives.

Continuing with the definition suggested by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), the characteristics of rural hubs and coworking spaces are further analysed while their *technological aspect* is highlighted: “*Rural digital hubs offer physical spaces with fast, reliable internet access that provide a whole range of business and community support services in rural areas. The activities offered by digital hubs depend both on whether their target is businesses, the community, or both and whether they provide space or also specific services to their target groups. Most digital hubs cannot be categorized within a single category of activity but carry out a combination of these*” (ENRD Thematic Group on Smart & Competitive Rural Businesses, 2017, p. 1). As shown by the ENRD policy brief, successful CWS development in rural areas includes investment in *digitalisation*, which is also supported by EU and national policies. For example, an Interreg VB North Sea Europe Program focused on testing innovative solutions to the *Urban-rural digital divide* by improving

et al., 2011). The concept of brain banks (Agrawal et al., 2011) highlights the potential contributions and knowledge transfer those skilled individuals originally from non-urban areas but based in urban ones can contribute to their places of origin (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024).

digital skills and delivered a “Guide to developing a rural digital hub” (Slee et al., 2017, Price et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the political aspect of CWS is often discussed in the literature in connection with their promotion of inclusivity and the creation of safe spaces. Some CWS mediate between government agencies managing subsidies to promote entrepreneurship and beneficiaries from the surrounding communities (Manoukas, 2024). CWS, especially the ones located in rural areas, aim to attract workers from large cities to enhance brain gain and offer mentoring and training courses to local youth and NEETs (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024; Bisello & Litardi, 2024). Research has indicated that a municipality’s likelihood of establishing a CWS is positively correlated with its unemployment rate for the following reasons: (i) people may be more likely to consider entrepreneurship as an alternative to regular employment (the so-called necessity entrepreneurship, Van der Zwan et al., 2016) in situations where unemployment is high (Faria et al., 2010); (ii) for people wishing to start their firms or independent projects, CWS offer crucial networking and collaboration venues; (iii) businesses with limited resources frequently look for tiny office premises to begin operations, and CWS offer a professional and social structure that might alleviate the loneliness (Block et al., 2014). CWS promote the creation and maintenance of such networks, facilitating the exchange of information and access to unexpected professional opportunities (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016). Finally, local authorities in areas with high unemployment may support the creation of CWSs as a strategy for local economic development and revitalisation (Ross et al., 2017). These spaces can be perceived as investments in human capital and social innovation, leading to a more resilient and diversified economic fabric (Tomaz & Henriques, 2023).

Only three studies, at least to our knowledge, have directly or indirectly analysed initiatives enhancing youth employment involving CWS. Bisello and Litardi (2024) explored five networks³ supporting the expansion of CWS outside large urban centres. The study underlines that most of the initiatives enhance youth employment by offering young people and NEET mentoring, training courses, and tertiary education programmes; some also provide facilities and services for start-up and support post start-up clients through scaling and investment stages.

³The initiatives are National Connected Hub Network in Ireland, Tiers Lieux in France, Kupland network in Southeast Estonia, National Network of Telework and Coworking Spaces in the Inland Territories in Portugal, and South Working in Italy.

Mariotti and Sasso (2024) explored five initiatives (private and public)⁴ aiming at training, retaining, and attracting talent in rural areas. Among those, three (Connected Hubs in Ireland, RAISE Youth in FUNDECYT-PCTEX in Spain, and Incubatore SEI in Italy⁵) developed or used coworking spaces or innovation to host training for youth and NEETs, support, mentorship, and professional networks for the ecosystem actors, thus representing as a mediator between users and outside players in the broader local ecosystems (Bosworth et al., 2023; Mariotti et al., 2023c; Bisello & Litardi, 2024). The study stresses that, albeit to varying degrees, all projects work in partnership with public authorities, businesses, organisations, and higher education institutions to improve human capital formation and population skills and competencies. Urban-rural networks are essential for creating and overseeing projects (Goodwin-Hawkins et al., 2023).

Mariotti et al. (2023c) explore the South Working initiative in Italy which concerns a network of CWS, named Presidi di Comunità (community garrisons). These CWS are established in the Italian inner areas,⁶ with a prevalence in Southern Italy, and aim to foster the regional creative ecosystem and create a mutually beneficial connection between remote workers and local communities. The authors describe the following three policy measures enhancing the development of CWS: (i) labour-oriented, (ii) social innovation, and (iii) local economic development policies. Among the CWS, Civico Trame in Calabria region, Southern Italy, promotes the CivicUP project that encourages community involvement and active citizenship, particularly for young people between the ages of 16 and 26. These spaces and their relation to the youth constitute what Farrugia and Wood (2017) describe as “*youthspaces*”. This concept attempts to explore how young people negotiate, inhabit, and transform spaces, while raising the diversity of experiences across various spatial and cultural contexts. As such, an interplay between space, culture, embodiment, and social relations comes forward, thus enhancing inclusivity. However, the concept

⁴They are Lärcentrum in Sweden, Connected Hubs in Ireland, RAISE Youth in FUNDECYT-PCTEX, Extremadura, Spain, Rural Move in Portugal, and Incubatore SEI in Italy.

⁵Incubatore SEI belongs to the Southworking network.

⁶According to Barca et al. (2014, p. 7), the Inner Areas are “areas at some considerable distance from hubs providing essential services (education, health and mobility), with a wealth of key environmental and cultural resources of many different kinds, which have been subject to anthropization for centuries”. In the present paper, the term “rural areas” comprises “Inner Areas”.

of youthsaces should take into consideration spatial inequalities and marginalisation in already underdeveloped territories, and the need for targeted interventions should be highlighted (Avagianou et al., 2022).

The above literature review supports and frames the following research question the chapter aims to answer: How do collaborative workspaces (CWS) attempt to enhance youth employment and contribute to supporting local economic and social development across different European regions?

3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

The five initiatives have been analysed through desk research (e.g., information from websites, papers, and reports summarising case studies, policy papers) and quantitative analysis (e.g., quantitative data on youth unemployment and NEETs in the areas of interest). Table 1 compares youth unemployment and NEET rates in the countries hosting the initiatives: Ireland, France, Spain (Extremadura), Italy, and Portugal. Many reasons can explain the selection of the case studies, including the heterogeneity of youth unemployment and NEET rates. Ireland and Portugal constitute examples of recovery from the 2012 European economic crisis. Specifically, Ireland experienced a sharp decline in youth unemployment, dropping from 24.4% in 2012 to 8.6% in 2023, with a NEET rate falling to 8.5%. Similarly, youth unemployment in Portugal fell from 37.9% in 2012 to 14.2% in 2023, with corresponding improvements in NEET rates. To further enhance this improvement, these countries have initiated policies supporting coworking spaces in conjunction with youth employment such as the Connected Hubs in Ireland and the National Network of Telework and Coworking Spaces in Portugal. France and Italy, despite improvements, continue to face significant challenges. France's youth unemployment rate remains high at 13.6% in 2023, as does its NEET rate at 12.5%. Italy has a youth unemployment rate of 16.6% and a NEET rate of 16.1% in 2023, showing persistent structural issues in its labour market. These cases highlight different degrees of success in tackling youth unemployment and how CWS and associated infrastructure can form part of broader strategies to address these challenges. Lastly, Extremadura, Spain, was chosen because of the extreme youth unemployment and NEET figures, with youth unemployment as high as 52.6% in 2012 and still at 29.9% in 2023. Extremadura represents the challenges faced by sparsely populated regions, emphasising the value of regionally focused interventions, such as the FUNDECYT-PCTEX program (Table 1). This region offers an

Table 1 Unemployment and NEET rates in Ireland, France, Extremadura-Spain, Italy, and Portugal

Country/ region	Overall unemployment rate (2023) (%)	Youth unemployment rate (15–29, 2023) (%)	NEET rate (15–29, 2023) (%)	Youth unemployment rate (2017) (%)	NEET rate (2017) (%)	Youth unemployment rate (2012) (%)	NEET rate (2012) (%)
Ireland	4.3	8.6	8.5	11.5	12.8	24.4	21.6
France	7.3	13.6	12.5	23	15–17	25	15–17
Extremadura, Spain	17.4	29.9	12.6	~40	>20	52.6	>20
Italy	7.7	16.6	16.1	34.7	23.1	35.3	22.1
Portugal	6.5	14.2	8.9	24.9	14.9	37.9	18.3

example of how CWS can support not only cities but also rural and under-developed areas.

The selection of these countries and regions aims to provide a balanced understanding of the effectiveness of CWS and similar initiatives in addressing youth unemployment, illustrating both successes and ongoing challenges. Significant unemployment levels and high NEET rates characterise the five areas that concern either the whole country (Ireland, France, Portugal, Italy) or a specific region (Extremadura in Spain). These socio-economic contexts also allow for exploring how diverse strategies can be adapted to local conditions to support youth through employment, education, and training transitions. Their varied labour market outcomes offer a basis for policy recommendations and future directions for CWS in rural and semi-rural regions of Europe.

Besides, the five case studies were chosen because they feature CWS networks that also extend to rural areas and promote youth employment, although at different extents. The networks of Connected Hubs in Ireland and Tiers-Lieux in France promote training for young people and NEETs via a collaboration between the public and the private sectors. FUNDECYT-PCTEX implements the RAISE Youth program only in the sparsely populated region of Extremadura and constitutes a publicly funded organisation while the Southworking Network helps young beneficiaries connect with the job market via the member spaces website, with an original and specific focus on the south of Italy, attempting to face the social and economic differences between the North and the South (Daniele & Malanima, 2007). Lastly, the National Network of Telework and Coworking Spaces in the Inland Territories in Portugal aims at reducing territorial inequalities between rural and urban areas by promoting brain gain and remote working initiatives. The five initiatives are presented in the following sections along with their contribution to the local contexts and they will be comparatively discussed in the concluding part.

4 DESCRIPTION OF THE INITIATIVES

4.1 *National Connected Hub Network, Ireland*

The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and the Western Development Commission (WDC) were introduced in 2021 the National Connected Hubs Network (from now on, Connected Hubs) (Bisello & Litardi, 2024). It is a component of Ireland's National Remote

Work Strategy,⁷ which is part of the country's Rural Development Policy 2021–2025, promoting the “Digital Skills for Everyone” programme. In this context, Connected Hubs launched the pilot Digital AEC⁸ programme, which collaborates closely with five hubs to upskill hub managers to increase the economic impact of their hub within their locality through digital growth (Connected Hubs, *n.d.*).

By educating, attracting, and keeping talent in the area, limiting brain drain, and fostering brain gain, Connected Hubs seeks to support the growth of rural communities. As of June 2023, 334 hubs belong to Connected Hubs, which is dispersed throughout Ireland. Considering places that solely offer desks and offices, the total rises to 725 spaces, with 12,000 users; 153 of the 725 spots are found in rural areas (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024). Through its website Connected Hubs offers a free service that allows users to access government-run hubs throughout Ireland that are managed by community organisations, social entrepreneurs, or local governments. Connected Hubs manages training and mentoring specifically designed for leaders in community development, with an emphasis on youth from 18 to 25 years old. Through the “Learning in the Hubs” project, which started in 2023, Connected Hubs accredited postsecondary education programmes, which are provided at designated hubs by the Technology University of the Shannon (TUS).⁹

The network seeks to reinvigorate rural communities by fostering an entrepreneurial ecosystem that supports company start-ups and fosters participation and collaboration among entrepreneurs, thus can be regarded as socially sustainable and inclusive (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024). Additionally, several hubs created custom training programmes to meet particular needs. For example, an International Scale Up Programme for businesses in the north-west and west regions is held in Galway (GTC, *n.d.*).

⁷Connected Hubs implements the National Remote Work Strategy of the Rural Development Policy 2021–2025 by hosting workers to work from the hubs and for students to attend classes there. This encourages the recruitment, training, and retention of skilled workers in rural areas.

⁸AEC stands for Atlantic Economic Corridor.

⁹The following two programmes are offered: (i) A Bachelor of Business (Hons) (Level 8) degree programme with the goal of expanding participation in third-level education through general business, and (ii) A Certificate in Business in Entrepreneurship (Level 6) programme designed to assist aspiring entrepreneurs, start-ups, and others with an interest in the world of entrepreneurship.

4.2 *Tiers-Lieux, France*

Tiers-Lieux, which translates to “third places”, serves as CWS network and can include coworking spaces, cultural centres, libraries, and more (France Tiers-Lieux n.d.). In France, there has been significant growth of third places, with 3500 identified in 2023, and a notable presence outside major urban centres, including rural areas, which host 34% of Tiers-Lieux. The motivations behind the rise of third places include a desire for less urban living and shorter commutes. In 2019 the French government supported the creation of national agency *France Tiers-Lieux* (Flipo et al., 2022), and in 2020 the development of Tiers-Lieux was included in the National Recovery Plan (France Relance) in response to the Covid-19 crisis, providing funding for network development, professional training, and civic service missions (Bisello & Litardi, 2024; Bourdin et al., 2024).

The first five objectives of Tiers-Lieux are (i) the creation of 100 local factories (Tiers-Lieux dedicated to production), (ii) the development of professional training in Tiers-Lieux, (iii) the financing of 3000 civic service missions (10 in Tiers-Lieux), (iv) the training of France Services digital advisors in Tiers-Lieux, and (v) strengthening the national and territorial network of Tiers-Lieux (with a budget of €4 million over 3 years). Specifically, the French government’s Service Civique project seeks to provide young people with the chance to grow personally through voluntary work and personal development. The main types of third places include coworking spaces (55%) and cultural hubs (31%), managed mostly by associations. These spaces play a crucial role in community development; 57% offer training and apprenticeships to over 377,000 individuals, primarily focusing on digital skills, entrepreneurship, and other topics. Training topics primarily cover digital and programming, entrepreneurship, digital manufacturing, and computer science, with additional sessions on art, well-being, agriculture, languages, among others. Fifty-two per cent of beneficiaries are unemployed individuals, predominantly entrepreneurs. In Ardèche county, the CWS have been partly funded by a scheme of rural youth support (Flipo et al., 2022). Partnerships with educational institutions and job centres are common, and third places serve a wide range of users, including employees, job seekers, and students. According to the Observatoire des Tiers-Lieux, 50% have partnerships with educational bodies and 47% have partnerships with job centres and employment inclusion structures. In addition, 58% of third places are developing training and apprenticeship initiatives. Specifically, the users of

Tiers-Lieux are diverse and inclusive: jobseekers, people undergoing vocational retraining, beneficiaries of minimum social benefits, students, family with children, people in labour market inclusion process, and refugees.

4.3 *FUNDECYT-PCTEX, Extremadura, Spain*

FUNDECYT-PCTEX is an innovation hub located in the rural areas of Extremadura (Badajoz and Cáceres), the most sparsely populated region of Spain, with a new office opening in Mérida. It can be labelled “university hub” since it is publicly funded by the University of Extremadura. The organisation of FUNDECYT-PCTEX, settled in 2013 in Extremadura, joined, in 2018–2024, the Rural Action for Innovative and Sustainable Entrepreneurship (RAISE) Youth project—funded by a call for the EEA (Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment) and GTF (Initiative for Sustainable Growth). RAISE serves as a pilot initiative aimed at devising new and innovative methods to improve the employment prospects of NEET. RAISE employs a vertical strategy for policy intervention, emphasising digitalization, tourism, and agriculture (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024).

The project’s focus is on human capital formation and training programmes. RAISE comprises two elements contributing to talent formation, attraction, and retention: Raise Skills and Competencies and the RAISE Youth Demonstration (Demo) centres. Demo Centres are hybrid spaces and provide access to funding, training, mentoring, meeting rooms, workstations, and the opportunity to be part of a collaborative community that develops novel learning and knowledge-sharing methods (FUNDECYT-PCTEX, n.d.). A range of programmes are designed and run at the RAISE Demo Centres to assist NEETs in their transition to self-employment and entrepreneurship. Training sessions, one-on-one mentoring, experiential learning opportunities, and group and individualised methods for skill development are some of these activities.

In addition to Demo Centers, FUNDECYT-PCTEX is a key partner of the Better Incubation (2021–2023) project, coordinated on a European level by LIAISE (Linking Incubation Actors for Inclusive and Social Entrepreneurship). Better Incubation is kickstarting an “eco-systemic” change by bringing incubation and business support services closer to society as a whole and promoting entrepreneurship and self-employment as means to create jobs, develop skills, and give the unemployed and vulnerable an opportunity to fully participate in the economy and improve the inclusivity of our societies. Better Incubation mobilises and empowers

Business Support Organizations (BSOs, including EUBICWS, IHUBs, investors for impact) to grow their capacities and expand their outreach to inclusive and social entrepreneurship, helping social entrepreneurs and potential entrepreneurs from Under-Represented Groups (URG) to access available financial tools and increase their businesses' chances of survival and growth.

4.4 *Southworking, Italy*

In March 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Italy, the bottom-up cultural movement and association *South Working – Working from the South* (South Working, n.d.-b) was developed by a group of young professionals who promoted the idea of returning, at least for some periods, to their land of origin from abroad and, in particular, to the South and inner areas, continuing to work remotely for their employers and clients, particularly from coworking spaces called *presidi di comunità* (community garrisons). The *presidi di comunità* are public and private CWS, located in the Italian inner areas with a concentration in the South of Italy. Most of them are located in public buildings, which are usually offered free of rent. They aim to stimulate the local creative ecosystem, establish a fruitful relationship between remote workers and local communities, and reduce the outflow of human capital from the inner areas. In addition, Southworking aims to tackle the problem of underutilised or vacant structures in inner areas.

As of January 2024, approximately 230 CWS were part of the network. These CWS offer facilities like high-speed internet workstations, printers, communal lounges, childcare, maker spaces, exhibition spaces, event spaces, meeting rooms, and kitchens, among other amenities.

Southworking has promoted in July 2023 with other partners (South Working, n.d.-a) the project DIGICHAMPS to train free of charge young NEET between the ages of 18 and 34 in the IT and digital professions among those most in demand by companies. Each of them will follow a training path in the digital field, choosing from five key profiles: (i) Web Front End Developer, (ii) Full Stack Developer, (iii) Data Analyst, (iv) Cybersecurity Specialist, and (v) IT Specialist. Once attended the courses and achieved the certificate, the trainees will be put in connection with companies to place them in the world of work through paid internships and/or other work relationships or collaboration. At the beginning of September 2024, about 340 NEET have been trained. The association's

role is to promote the project and recruit companies to ensure employment in the technology sector. The network of CWS serves as a community support system for participants. Several CWS aim at enhancing youth employment through offering training courses and mentorship—as in the case of Incubatore SEI (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024)—or acting as a mediator between the beneficiaries (NEET) and the government body—as in the case of Make Hub in Licata (Manoukas, 2024).

4.5 *The National Network of Telework and Coworking Spaces in the Inland Territories, Portugal*

The National Network of Telework and Coworking Centres in the Inland Territories (Governo de Portugal, n.d.), launched in June 2023, aims to attract and retain people and companies in low-population areas to reduce territorial inequalities. It is part of the Economic and Social Stabilization Programme and aligns with the Programme for Inland Territories Enhancement. This measure was created by the Ministries of “Territorial Cohesion” (*Coesão Territorial*) and Labour, Solidarity and Social Security (*Trabalho, Solidariedade e Segurança Social*) and its main objective is to promote and extend teleworking to support businesses in rural areas. The measure involves the creation of rural coworking/telework centres, technological infrastructure, incubators, and R&D infrastructures. In 2023, the National Network covered 92 municipalities in rural areas, 78 CWS and 249 users.

Most of these spaces are located in vacant municipal buildings or rehabilitated for this purpose (Gato & Haubrich, 2024).

These CWS are properly equipped with computers, printers, and internet access. They are available to all citizens, Portuguese or foreigners, who wish to work remotely, regardless of their employer, public or private, employed or self-employed. Besides, the Municipal Councils are responsible for the operation of these spaces, accept use requests, and define the annual calendar, timetable, and rules of use. The network also supports research projects, scientific infrastructures, higher education through TeSP (Electrotechnical Skills Partnership), and advanced training and scholarships. According to the last data, CWS have trained 5398 trainees and maintained/created 30,456 jobs (Secretaria de Estado do Desenvolvimento Regional, 2023).

5 COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The characteristics of the five initiatives allow us to provide tentative answers to the research question, thus showing evidence of how CWS enhance youth employment and contribute to engagement policies taking advantage of digitalisation, as recommended by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD). The collection and visualisation of the data show that all the initiatives share some main characteristics (Table 2). They concern the following aspects of the programs' operations: *administrative (core-periphery networks and funding sources)*, *political (promotion of inclusivity)*, *technological (integration of digitalization)*, and *operational (hybridization)*.

All case studies show a strong focus on *retaining and attracting talents* (and remote workers) in rural areas. Although at different extent, CWS play a key role in promoting and hosting mentoring and (professional and higher education) training courses for people, including young and NEET, thus giving the unemployed and vulnerable an opportunity to fully participate in the economy and improve *inclusivity* (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024).

The networks offer opportunities for training in various fields, ranging from vocational education to entrepreneurship while taking into consideration the young beneficiaries' social and economic restraints. As a result, they attempt to overcome economic and political spatialities (Avagianou et al., 2022) by focusing on local economy (Connected Hubs), offering place-based training (Tiers-Lieux), understanding the rural-urban divide (National network in Portugal), implementing a bottom-up approach (e.g. SouthWorking), and by adopting a reach-out approach (e.g., FUNDECYT) and visiting the beneficiaries in their communities instead of inviting them to the urban centres. The focus on attracting and retaining talents in rural areas is confirmed by the fact that four initiatives out of five have been *publicly subsidised*, while South Working is a bottom-up initiative concerning a network of private and public CWS, which occasionally receives local and national grants. Thus, this common characteristic aligns the initiatives with national and EU-level policies that aim to enhance peripheral and rural developments, reducing inequalities and defending the local communities from brain drain.

All the initiatives are characterised by *core-periphery networks*, involving universities and training centres, thus enhancing and creating a collaborative environment that allows local and external entrepreneurs to network and connect. The analysis of the cases shows that *brain circulation* can be

Table 2 CWS characteristics of the five case studies

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Typology</i>	<i>Geographical extent</i>	<i>Funding source</i>	<i>Digitalisation</i>	<i>Measures to enhance youth employment</i>
National Connected Hubs	CWS network	Country level (Ireland)	National	CWS platform Digital AEC programme	“Learning in the Hubs” project offers postsecondary education programmes, which are provided at designated hubs by the Technology University of the Shannon (TUS). The pilot Digital AEC programme to upskill hub managers to increase the economic impact of the hub within their locality through digital growth.
Tiers-Lieux	CWS network	Country level (France)	National	CWS platform	Training and apprenticeships, primarily focusing on digital skills, and entrepreneurship.
National Network of Telework and Coworking Spaces	CWS network	Rural areas in Portugal	National	Promotion of remote working as a lever for brain gain	Training, supporting micro-entrepreneurship, supporting higher education through TeSP, advanced training and scholarships

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Typology</i>	<i>Geographical extent</i>	<i>Funding source</i>	<i>Digitalisation</i>	<i>Measures to enhance youth employment</i>
South Working	CWS network	Inner areas in Italy	Local	CWS platform	Train free of charge young NEET in the IT and digital professions through DIGICHAMPS; training programmes in collaboration with high schools, technical institutions, and universities; initiatives to promote entrepreneurship and innovation, including a Hackathon for inner areas development; acting as mediator between the beneficiaries (NEET) and the government body.
FUNDECYT-PCTEX	CWS network	Extremadura NUTS2 region	Regional, European	Smart specialisation in the region	Training and mentoring, experiential learning opportunities, incubation (Better incubation project) and business support services.

a condition to foster rural development but also an effect related to the CWS operation (e.g., training, mentoring, etc.) in rural areas (Merrell et al., 2022). Indeed, the initiatives, although to a different extent, facilitate remote work and improve the development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem to help business start-ups and encourage interaction and cooperation with other entrepreneurs. In addition, they can stimulate business, and retail activity and rejuvenate rural regions. As concerns *digitalisation*, both Connected Hubs and Tiers-Lieux are digital networks that promote the digital connectivity of the CWS through their websites that function as platforms. Specifically, Connected Hubs promoted the pilot Digital AEC programme to upskill hub managers to enable them to increase the economic impact of their hub within their locality through digital growth. FUNDECYT-PCTEX focuses on digital skills and the promotion of digital literacy by implementing a “reach-out” approach to young citizens in remote areas of the region and organising physical and online workshops. Digitalization in rural regions extends beyond mere access to technology; it embodies social innovation strategies to tackle the brain drain. Integrating digital infrastructure helps maintain the unique “sense of place” for rural residents during transitions in socioeconomic class structures. The case of Extremadura, as highlighted in the paper by Angela Wigger (2023), is particularly revealing of the challenges in implementing Smart Specialisation strategies within the EU, which aim to boost regional innovation by supporting regions in identifying and developing their competitive advantages through research and innovation investments. In any case, all initiatives seem to highlight the importance of digital tools to empower young individuals, especially NEETs while facilitating access to broader social and economic opportunities. Leveraging technology to support the social dynamics of rural communities ensures participation in the global information network while conserving a sense of local identity.

As most cases are being publicly funded, it can also be assumed that there is a political focus on the *digitalization* of rural areas that can provide new avenues for social and economic participation, especially for NEETs in remote areas, and support the social fabric of rural communities while opening them to a globalised information system (Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). All five initiatives start from the assumption that in rural areas digitisation is necessary and needed. Even though the initiatives implement digitalisation and smart specialisation strategies to different extents, from the digital interconnection of hubs in Ireland and France to

broader Smart Region strategies in Extremadura, they all take into consideration that these strategies constitute a prerequisite for brain retention and circulation.

The CWS of the networks present different levels of *hybridity* to be able to provide services and facilities to their users (NEET, students, remote workers, entrepreneurs, start-up, etc.). CWS in rural areas requires a certain extent of hybridity to be economically sustainable (Migliore et al., 2021; Mariotti & Lo Russo, 2023; Di Marino et al., 2023). As the chapter described, CWS networks serve as a bridge between users and the external actors of the larger local ecosystems. To be a vehicle for social integration and economic growth, these CWS must be embedded into the local community, making use of their urban-rural linkages to promote brain circulation and feed brain bank (Mariotti & Sasso, 2024). This observed hybridity reinforces the idea that the spaces supported by these networks constitute “youthspaces” whose identity and operations are constantly evolving and being negotiated between the actors involved (Farrugia & Wood, 2017).

6 CONCLUSION

The creation of hubs and CWS can revitalise small towns and villages in rural areas, making them an important resource to assist the growth of the national economy. Because policymakers have acknowledged their importance, CWS are receiving subsidies to lessen the disparities that define rural areas, as in all the described cases.

As a mediator between users and external players in the larger local ecosystems, the initiatives created or utilised CWS or innovation to host training for youth and NEETs, support, mentorship, and professional networks for the ecosystem actors (Bosworth et al., 2023; Mariotti et al., 2023; Bisello & Litardi, 2024).

The cases described in the chapter offer policymakers essential insights for designing more inclusive and adaptive planning policies to strengthen the resilience of territories in the face of future crises. The initiatives have been characterised by the following aspects: administrative (core-periphery networks and funding sources), political (promotion of inclusivity), technological (integration of digitalization), and operational (hybridization). These are fundamental to the success of the strategies and can be used as a reference for the development of future initiatives to reduce youth unemployment and NEET rates in rural areas.

Besides, to decrease young unemployment, a dual strategy that combines proactive and reactive actions is also considered essential. Effective implementation, according to Mascherini (2018), depends on the necessity for multimodal policy interventions that address the various issues that the NEET population faces. Ex-post impact assessment should also be the main focus of future research to examine the initiatives' strengths and weaknesses and support tailored policy instruments.

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Impact of Makerspace on the Socio-economic Sphere in Peripheral Areas in Poland

Karolina Kapustka

I INTRODUCTION

The interest in creating, designing, and making objects while sharing knowledge and experiences has developed the maker movement, which is an attempt to organize makers into a creative community, working together under the ideas of ‘do-it-yourself’ and ‘do it together’ (Peppler & Bender, 2013). A physical workspace dedicated to providing a meeting place for makers is known as a makerspace (interchangeably referred to as MS). Aforementioned space provides an opportunity for users to communicate, share knowledge, co-create, and solve problems together (van Holm, 2014; Taylor et al., 2016; Furlong et al., 2019; Shi & Chen, 2022).

The occurrence of the spaces in question is noted in large urban areas (Rafaj et al., 2024) as well as in small towns and villages (Apel, 2018),

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255

which are referred to as peripheral areas (Micek, 2020). Definitions of these territories are mainly determined by comparing socio-spatial indicators with those of metropolitan areas (Lang, 2012); however, it should be noted that peripheries can be defined in different ways depending on the national context, as well as terminology and concepts (Özdemir, 2005). This chapter focuses exclusively on the example of MS located in peripheral areas, focusing on their definition as located in rural non-metropolitan areas and in small and medium-sized cities (Micek, 2020).

Researchers on regional inequality issues point out that the periphery faces several challenges that affect regional quality of life (Wardenburg & Brenner, 2020). It is important to note that firms in the periphery lack the capacity for local knowledge transfer, and in the literature, the periphery is characterized as less energetic and missing innovation capacity (Graffenberger & Vonnahme, 2019). Furthermore, as Halverson and Sheridan (2014) point out, lower-income rural communities are exposed to inequalities in participation and engagement in digital innovation. At the same time, Grabher (2018) indicates that peripheral regions can be areas of great creativity and engage with external actors through 'global pipelines' (Pugh & Dubois, 2021). Thus, makerspaces, due to the capacities discussed, become important entities that can help to reduce the indicated development problems and strengthen positive processes in peripheral areas.

The subject of this chapter addresses the impact of MS, which the author defines as the ability of a given space to implement and encourage change in its environment. Referring to the above definition, the matter of the impact of MS located outside the zones of large cities on the economic sphere can be established on the foundation of the elements that van Holm (2017, 2021) introduces. The author points out that MS has the ability to introduce and promote a culture of entrepreneurship among residents, through the organization of numerous training courses that use the tools provided by MS. Furthermore, they allow small businesses to grow, as well as have a positive impact on the retention of educated employees. In terms of social impact, one can point to the influence on social activity, welfare (Halbringer, 2018), and interactions, understood as societal opportunities. Hence, in the chapter, the context of the impact of peripheral MS in terms of socio-economic refers to the aforementioned themes.

Peripheral MS topics, particularly those located in rural areas, have been raised by numerous researchers, the results of which have shown the

socio-economic impact of the spaces analyzed. Subjects of the role of rural makerspaces were addressed by Nixon et al. (2021), who identified a significant role in terms of disseminating STEM knowledge to young residents. Apel (2018) showed how rural MS can contribute to boosting innovation and creativity, while Vones (2021) identified their contribution to making high-tech tools accessible. The issues of multi-generational education in peripheral makerspaces were raised by Wang et al. (2016), while Hughes and Boss (2020) debated their beneficial impact on economic development.

Referring to the analysis of Kraus et al. (2022), the issues related to the impact of MS still need to be explored more comprehensively, based on peripheral MS, the number of which is growing (Rafaj et al., 2024). Thus, the chapter focuses on filling the indicated research gap by extending the analysis to the socio-economic impact of makerspaces based on Polish MS located in peripheral areas. Given the complexity of the topic, the author distinguishes the impact of MS on three levels: the individual user, the local level, and the regional level. Local level is enclosed in the area of the locality where the MS is situated, while regional level describes the scope going beyond the designated locality to include its border areas. The individual user level is understood to include members of MS and those using and working in it. The main research question is to determine how peripheral MS influences the socio-economic sphere of the areas of their occurrence, divided into three levels.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Latest research on MS (Micek et al., 2024) indicates a dual definition of the discussed spaces: a broader one (*lato sensu*) and a narrower one (*sensu stricto*). Makerspaces *lato sensu* include fab labs, hackerspaces, and open worklabs, which are understood as workshops providing space and tools for work and collaboration. Makerspaces *sensu stricto*, on the other hand, are understood as ‘community-driven workshops that offer a variety of tools and equipment to support different making activities’ (Micek et al., 2024, p. 26). The Polish MS examined in the publication by Gądecki and Piziak (2022) is one component of the so-called creative workshop spaces linked to creativity and manufacturing.

MS researchers have considered their impact at various levels, which fall within the ranges discussed in the chapter. Their socio-economic impact, in particular, is evident at the local level. The makerspace is intended to

serve as a place for users to spend time and socialize (Taylor et al., 2016) and is considered a third place where community engagement activities occur (Slatter & Howard, 2013). Users of rural MS report that they provide social spaces for them to gather, engage socially, and learn from each other (Barniskis, 2014). Literature highlights that the community operating in the space is sometimes considered to be one of its most important resources (Lindtner et al., 2014) due to its involvement in the activities carried out in the MS and its willingness to be active in addressing the needs of the local community (Taylor et al., 2016).

MS fulfill an important role as a place to access specialized tools and equipment for manufacturing (van Holm, 2015, 2017; Beltagui et al., 2021), which was also recognized in a study by Wang et al. (2016) in the peripheral makerspaces. As Barniskis (2014) highlighted in her analysis of rural libraries, MS encourage people to try out tools that would be unavailable in the areas mentioned. These spaces are designed to provide support for residents as a linking element between access to equipment, community, and education (Sharma, 2021), which reflects the high capacity for prototyping and production of objects. Worth noting is also the diverse range of MS offerings, relating to disciplines often traditionally disconnected (Sheridan et al., 2014), allowing users to explore tools and materials and gain experience in their application (Mersand, 2021). It is also important to highlight the role of MS in the development of innovation, which manifests itself through the implementation of numerous projects by individual users based on the use of modern digital technologies (Beltagui et al., 2021). Hence, their impact on the entrepreneurial sphere of the population is noticeable, mainly at the level of the individual user, through training and support in self-development.

Other functions of makerspaces are marked by an orientation toward carrying out educational activities directed at improving the technological skills of the community (Cattabringa, 2019). Frequently, the aforementioned activities are carried out in a multi-generational format, providing opportunities to combine family life with education. In particular, this issue is evident in peripheral MS, where there is a focus on creating shared learning experiences for youth and their families (Wang et al., 2016). Additionally, skill-building workshops are often conducted in rural MS, with topics that drift into collaborative and interpersonal skills (Nixon et al., 2021). In this regard, it is important to mention the research of Assaf et al. (2021), who recognized the role of rural MS in developing creativity and imagination among residents. Moreover, in most

makerspaces, a number of workshops are implemented where participants ‘have the potential to be a learner, mentor, and leader’ (Mersand, 2021, p. 175), focusing on users interests and allowing for multidisciplinary content. Given the above examples, it is possible to conclude that MS has the ability to have an impact at the level of the individual user, which translates into improving his competence and knowledge. However, such socio-economic impact does not close at the mentioned horizon, but also extend to the local level. Makerspaces are recognized for generating interest in diverse areas of education or supporting the creation of new forms of knowledge transfer (Rosa et al., 2017). The form of the classes taught in makerspaces enables the development of soft skills that involve critical thinking, establishing collaboration and communication, and working together to find solutions to a given topic (Furlong et al., 2019).

Research by Kim and Copeland (2021) shows that makerspaces located in small towns and rural libraries help to ensure that residents have equal access to technology. Similar conclusions were drawn by Nixon et al. (2021), who indicated the willingness of rural MS in the diffusion of STEM knowledge. Furthermore, we know from the research of Miller et al. (2018) that peripheral makerspaces support the development of mentioned skills through learning modern technologies. Confirmation of this role can be found in the literature that identifies makerspaces as a STEM development environment (van Holm, 2015), which is derived from makerspace-based learning practices (Sharma, 2021). New educational opportunities (Hsu et al., 2017) have been recognized in the activities offered by MS that build on their role in overcoming learning barriers (Sharma, 2021). Given the link between the indicated activities and entrepreneurship growth, as well as the possibilities that such activities provide for MS users, the impact of MS is again drawn at two levels—user and local.

Discussed spaces are considered access points to human and social capital (Beltagui et al., 2021) due to the openness of users in transferring knowledge and creating diverse networks and forms of collaboration (Taylor et al., 2016). MS establishes partnerships with other affiliates (Tan et al., 2020), engages in networking, especially at the local level, but also at the regional level, which helps to provide connections (Cattabringa, 2019). The spaces in question have the potential to create a multi-level structure in which it ‘plays the role of knowledge element at the macro level, knowledge community at the meso level, and knowledge population at the micro level’ (Shi & Chen, 2022, p. 13).

Studies of MS spaces indicate that they help the economic development (van Holm, 2017, 2021) of local communities, as also highlighted in the case of peripheral spaces discussed by Hughes and Boss (2020). The way of working in MS stimulates users' creativity, which can translate into the desire and need to create their own business and new jobs (Peppler & Bender, 2013). The creativity component is also evident in the users' encouragement of adaptive problem solving (van Holm, 2015) and their motivation to take on manufacturing challenges and explore possible solutions. Thus, the literature review shows the dominance of peripheral MS's impact at the user level and the local level, with a minor impact at the regional level.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The chapter focuses on the narrower definition of MS (Micek et al., 2024), defining it as an open physical space that provides access to innovative tools, whose mode of functioning refers to a DIY style and in which educational activities are carried out. Given the above criteria, PAKT studios occurring in the country were included in the analysis.

The periphery in the chapter is understood according to the definition of Micek (2020) discussed in the introduction. However, following the arguments of Özdemir (2005), those rural non-metropolitan areas and small cities with a population of less than 20,000 inhabitants were included in the analysis, which corresponds to the urban delimitation used in Poland (STAT, 2009). In addition, the definition has been expanded to include medium-sized cities with between 20,000 and 40,000 residents, referencing the Orange Foundation's policy of creating MS. The indicated organization is important for the development of the Polish MS, and this contributed to the decision to broaden the range of localities included in the analysis.

Data used in this chapter were obtained through desk research and an online search of websites designed for members of the maker movement and was complemented by a list of creative workshop spaces in Poland identified by Gądecki and Piziak (2022). The acquired information was aggregated in a database that was updated in June 2023, which included geographic coordinates to enable spatial analysis of MS distribution using QGIS software. The aforementioned database included the number of inhabitants of the locality, date of formation of the MS, and ownership of the space. Through analysis, 7 MS situated in areas matching the

definition of peripheral areas adopted in the chapter were identified. To confirm the validity of their discussion within the chapter, selected socio-economic statistics of the settlements in which they are located were analyzed. This operation was linked to the delimitation issues of peripheral areas (Miczek, 2020), providing more insight into their socio-economic challenges.

Four of the seven localities where MS are located are facing a negative migration balance, including two villages and two small towns (STRATEG, 2023). In parallel, 6 of the 7 localities have seen a significant decline in the working-age population (18–59 for women and 18–64 for men) for several years (BDL, 2023). Data for the pre-working age population (up to 18 years old) also show that only in two localities the number of people in this age bracket is increasing (BDL, 2023). At the same time, the number of people over the working-age is rising in all localities (BDL, 2023). Taking this into account, it is necessary to focus on providing conditions for the educated labor force to remain in the locality, as well as adjusting leisure activities for the elderly. Thus, for the Polish peripheral areas, demographic challenges are distinguished, which result from the overall declining population, as well as challenges related to the aging of the population in these areas (Ślusarz, 2017). In addition, there has been a decrease in the number of newly registered national economy entities in the REGON register per 10,000 population in 4 units, with no significant increase in the remaining 3 units (STRATEG, 2023). It is worth stressing that in as many as 5 analyzed areas, the number of primary and lower secondary school pupils per 1 computer with broadband Internet access is decreasing (STRATEG, 2023). The above correlations allow concluding that there is a need for measures that will increase entrepreneurship in the areas in discussion, as well as activities that will enhance access to ICT in schools.

In addition, the study used in-depth interviews conducted with representatives of peripheral MSs in 2022 and early 2023 using online or telephone methods, thus obtaining 7 interviews covering all studied MS. The mentioned interviews were based on a detailed questionnaire addressing topics such as events held, activities carried out in and by MS as well as community activities. Their analysis was developed using MaxQDA software by coding the issues determined during the analysis to correspond to the research questions.

4 CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIZATIONS DEVELOPING POLISH MS ON PERIPHERY

The Orange Foundation is establishing Pracownie Orange which are workshops in small towns (up to 40,000 residents) that serve as free multimedia community centers with internet access. Beginning in 2020, the Foundation launched the Makerspace in Orange Workshops project, where institutions that host Orange Workshops can apply for grants to upgrade their facilities with equipment. This has resulted in the creation of interdisciplinary and diverse MS, whose principles of financing and operation are strictly defined in the Regulations of the Orange Foundation. Training and workshops conducted in MS strengthen the leadership competencies of participants, provide access to modern technologies for people living in small villages and towns, and offer development opportunities in digital competencies. It is important to emphasize that the project mentioned above is a continuation, indicating the development of MS in peripheral areas of Poland, emerging with the support of the Orange Foundation.

Another form of MS developed in Poland is the so-called PAKT (Pracownia Aktywnego Korzystania z Technologii, in English: Workshop for Active Use of Technology) studios, which are being established with the support of EU funds. They are stationary spaces for learning modern tools and technologies based on the creation of projects by participants during organized workshops. As of 2023, there are six PAKT laboratories located in large metropolitan cities, two of which are mobile and run by the Robisz.to Association. The Association implements classes in mobile workshops (fully equipped buses), called mobiPAKTs, whose operation covers two provinces in Poland (Fig. 1). MobiPAKTs support groups from localities where access to stationary studios is limited, including peripheral areas belonging to the provinces in which they are located. Their operation allows residents of hard-to-reach areas to access specialized knowledge, which contributes to reducing disparities in digital skills and access to technological infrastructure.

The entities indicated above are supportive of makerspace development, both financially and in an advisory capacity. In addition, their activities are directed at increasing access to free classes for local communities, including those focusing on STEM fields.

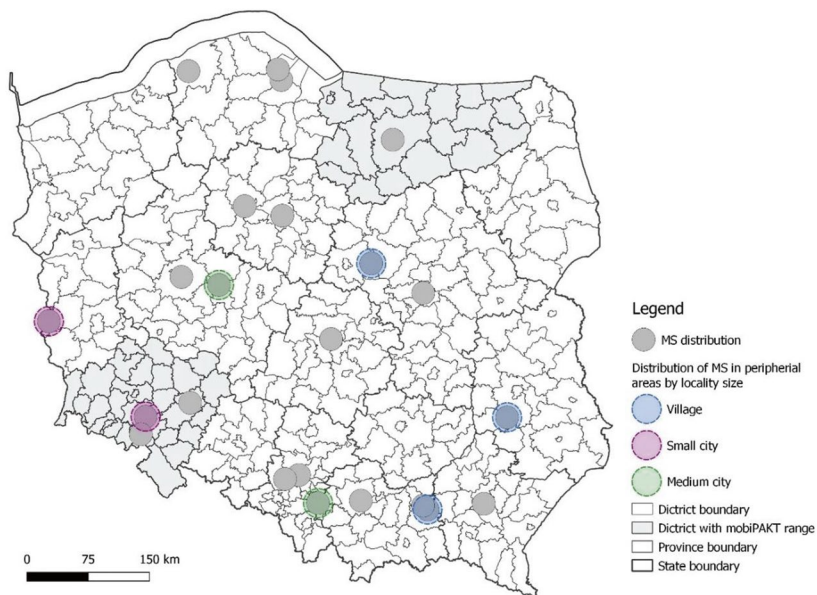


Fig. 1 Distribution of makerspace in Poland, with identification of peripheral areas

5 CHARACTERISTICS OF POLISH MS IN PERIPHERAL AREAS

By the end of 2023, a total of 31 Makerspaces were operating in Poland, mainly in large cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Only seven MS were recorded in areas identified as peripheral, with three MS each in villages, two MS in small towns, and two in medium-sized cities (Fig. 1). All of the five MS identified in the analysis in the areas of villages and small towns were created by the Orange Foundation. Moreover, numbers of MS in the country have been increasing in recent years, with a slight decrease during the pandemic period (from 2020 to 2021); thus, it is possible to conclude that the growing trend in MS numbers is forecast to continue.

Polish peripheral MS often operate alongside libraries, kindergartens, and community centers and therefore support the activities of these entities as part of their mission. Only a small number of MS use their own premises, often obtained from the city government. Moreover, they

exemplify a grassroots initiative, which refers to strong bottom-up efforts to create a space conducive to knowledge sharing and high-tech learning. They were established by local leaders who saw the need for an MS in their neighborhood and then, in cooperation with the local community, engaged in fundraising and launching workshops (e.g., in the form of projects). One should also emphasize that Polish MS located in peripheral areas are public spaces and are therefore available free of charge (non-profit) to interested users in accordance with their internal regulations.

Conducted in-depth interviews indicate that the main users of MS are regular members who attend workshops on a regular basis. In addition, the vast majority of the analyzed MS are oriented toward activities aimed at the youngest—children and adolescents—although they do not have a predetermined age range in terms of users. The reason for this may be the location of the MS at the establishments, which mainly target the indicated age groups. At the same time, in all analyzed MS, program offerings are led by center staff and supported by volunteers who provide specialized activities. In addition, the classes and activities conducted in MS are aimed at anyone interested in participating, regardless of whether they belong to the local community or live outside the area of their location. Examined MS mainly obtain financial support from foundations, such as the Orange Foundation, in case they are affiliated with a designated authority, and occasionally from donations. In addition, they have the support of local entities such as government offices.

6 SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF PERIPHERAL MS

Based on the in-depth interviews conducted with MS representatives in Poland, a significant impact of MS on the development of users' skills was noted, dictated by the organization of numerous workshops and educational meetings. Among the topics of the workshops, the predominant ones were those related to the use of modern technologies, such as 3D design, computer science, robotics, and programming (which fall under the categories of STEM fields). The aforementioned classes are conducted on a regular basis and allow participants to improve their computer skills while developing their creativity and curiosity about the world. They also support the development of self-confidence, critical thinking, and problem-solving. These skills are advancement through self-directed tinkering, which can involve participants designing and assembling robots,

requiring not only specialist knowledge but also the ability to overcome technological challenges encountered during the work.

Frequent practice in conducting workshops is to engage volunteers—i.e., young people with extensive knowledge in a particular field, e.g., creating graphics or programming. The value of the classes run at MS is also noted by the organizers themselves, i.e., “*we teach people, retrain them, help them gain new experience and knowledge, learn about modern technology (...)*” (R2). In addition, they encourage whole families and multi-generational groups—“*from kindergarteners to seniors*” (R4)—to participate in the offered activities and workshops. Moreover, the development of an offer in which the oldest generations pass on their knowledge to the youngest, such as “*sewing buttons*” (R3), “*so that the offer is addressed to everyone*” (R5), has been observed.

Due to the fact that a significant part of the MS consists of spaces that are part of the Orange Foundation, their form is linked to foundation requirements. Activities performed by such MS are aimed at disseminating access to new technologies and developing the digital competence of residents and MS employees. The last-listed action is significantly emphasized by respondents, who have had the opportunity to learn the techniques of using modern equipment, including a 3D printer and a laser plotter, because “*together with other Makerspaces and Orange Workshops, they participate in trainings*” (R7). Due to training, employees are educated in the direction of modern technologies, which allows them to conduct workshops on their own, based on the acquired knowledge and experience. An important point raised by respondents is also that the Orange Foundation “*(...) supports our leadership competencies. Not only in terms of just management, but also skills (...)*” (R3). The cooperation of MS associated in the Orange Foundation network allows for the exchange of know-how based on “*we share knowledge, we share good practices*” (R4) and provides integration and access to growth opportunities.

The unique function of MS, which can be described as building a local community, is noteworthy. It was found that the presence of MS positively influences the formation of new connections, as a kind of “*third place (...)* where (users) can also spend time socializing” (R1), thus providing a space for informal and formal meetings, which may be lacking in peripheral areas. Value of MS is recognized by residents as “*something cool, necessary, unusual, modern that develops this community of ours (...)*” (R3). Another noted function of MS is the involvement of the space to support the local society through charitable outreach to the disadvantaged, such as “*we*

created projects and made various gadgets that were auctioned off” (R4) or raising funds for people in need. The relevance of MS was particularly recognized during the Covid-19 Pandemic (marked in Poland from March 2020 to July 2023), during which Polish makerspaces collaborated with medical institutions, schools, and aid centers by donating “*visors that we printed, that we assembled and distributed*” (R4).

Results of conducted in-depth interviews show that MS are involved in social and cultural events, both in terms of organization and supporting in their conduct, e.g. concerts, festivals, exhibitions, and tournaments (R6). However, it should be noted that these activities may be dictated by the presence of MS in libraries or cultural centers, where the differences between functions, as respondents stressed, are often blurred. Additionally, cooperation between city authorities, residents, and MS aimed at improving the spatial quality of the city is also evident. Such activities include replanting and creation of murals, often resulting from grassroots initiatives by MS themselves, e.g. through ongoing projects. Such partnership enables the creation of new networks between MS representatives and the local community.

MS representatives indicate support for local organizations in terms of their experience in obtaining funding, i.e. “*we help various associations with grant writing*” (R5), to which the Orange Foundation spaces contribute. Synergy is also evident in MS support aimed at local entrepreneurs, i.e. “*we also help other organizations that have some needs there to produce something that can't be bought or to fix something that has broken*” (R1). In addition, it is common to lend space to organizations, for their own purposes, but such support is possible for MS with large workspace, which are a small fraction in Poland's peripheral areas.

Primary recipients of MS are residents of the location where the maker-space operates, but among the participants of workshops and trainings, there is no shortage of communities living in other localities in the municipality. This form of open workshops allows peripherally located MS to be attributed with the ability to transfer knowledge. In addition, mobiPAKT's extensive activities are marked, which allow to equalize opportunities with access to technological education in hard-to-access areas. Besides, one of the spaces has established cooperation with a foreign Makerspace in organizing 2D/3D printing training, thanks to the support of the Orange Foundation.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Findings of MS analyses in Poland’s peripheral areas, relating to their socio-economic impact, confirm van Holm’s (2015) thesis that their presence alone cannot address the needs of small cities and regions, and thus be a source of fundamental changes in the environment. In order to better understand the impacts of MS on the socio-economic sphere at the three chosen levels indicated in the chapter, a figure that constitutes the main summary of the chapter was created (Fig. 2).

Answering the research question, it is noticeable that MS has the greatest socio-economic impact on individual users, including facilitators and volunteers involved in the operation of MS. Moreover, numerous interdisciplinary educational workshops that relate to STEM technologies positively influence the improvement of skills and knowledge of MS users, especially the youngest. However, their operation does not particularly contribute to entrepreneurship but supports local organizations in their

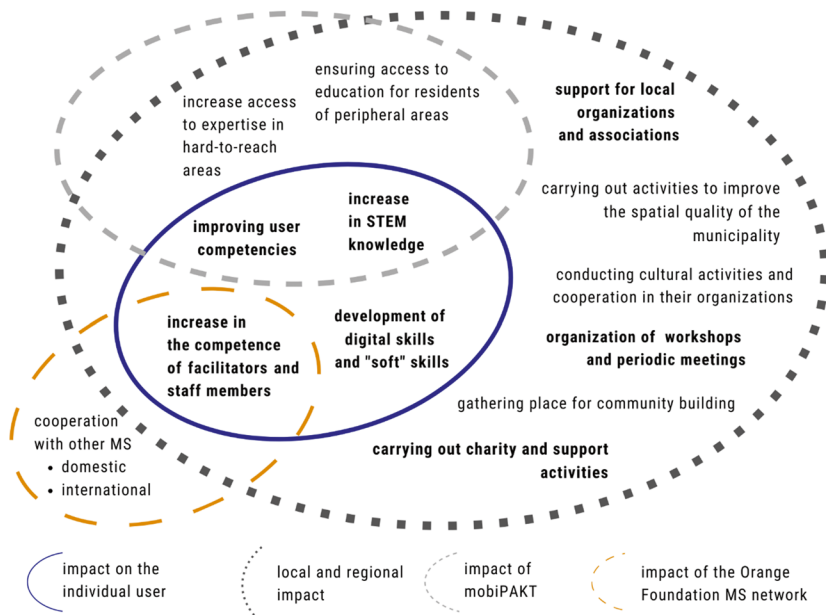


Fig. 2 Distribution of MS influence in Poland’s peripheral areas including organizations. The bolded text represents the greatest impact of MS

development as well as providing access to the necessary tools for prototyping. Thus, it is true in the context of Polish MS that the statement identified by van Holm (2021) that MS are a worthy resource that broadens horizons and enables the acquisition of practice to implement one's own ideas and projects.

One of the ways MS can positively influence socio-economic issues at the local and regional level indicated by van Holm (2015) is their involvement in social activities, with an emphasis on cultural and charitable functions. According to the results of the interviews conducted, Polish MS are engaged in charitable services, as well as proactive in terms of implementing supportive actions for the local community (Fig. 2). Noteworthy is mobiPAKT, as a workshop that can contribute to bridging the gap between regions in terms of digital skills and access to technological infrastructure. In particular, the role is valuable in terms of supporting the education of residents of peripheral areas, which will help promote their self-development and create new opportunities for residents of hard-to-reach areas. Also noteworthy are the key elements of MS's peripheral impact (shown in Fig. 2 as bold content), mainly emphasizing the development of digital and STEM skills, as well as the inclusion of MS in community activation during workshops.

Operations carried out by mobiPAKT studios and the Orange Foundation's MS network contribute significantly to the three levels of peripheral MS impact, as shown in Fig. 2, which illustrates the intersection of peripheral MS impact by makerspaces operating in Poland. The activities carried out go beyond only the level of impact on the individual MS user to the local and regional level, as can be seen in the Orange Foundation's activities, which provide support in establishing contacts with foreign MS.

Taking into account the results of the analysis, it is possible to conclude that Polish peripheral MS have a significant impact on the three levels discussed in terms of the socio-economic sphere. Furthermore, considering the challenges of peripheral areas, which may include demographic challenges as well as raising entrepreneurship and accessibility to information and communication technologies in schools, they have opportunities to counteract the identified issues. They also make it possible to reduce the inequalities discussed by Halverson and Sheridan (2014) or Graffenberger and Vonnahme (2019), while supporting the positive processes of peripheral areas (Grabher, 2018)

As there is an increasing focus on introducing MS to educational, creative, or innovative institutions (Pepler & Bender, 2013; Gądecki & Piziak, 2022), it can be argued that the number of discussed spaces may increase in the future. Thus, given the efforts of the Orange Foundation and its focus on increasing access to modern technology and education in small towns, the forecast for Polish MS has an upward trend. A steadily growing Orange Foundation MS network, which includes both rural and urban MS, is a kind of forerunner in identifying cooperation between the areas indicated. Thereby summarizing the above statements, further research is needed on how MS can contribute to regional development. As proven in the chapter, they influence the socio-economic sphere at the three levels indicated, hence further research should focus on possible forms of MS involvement in the development of a settlement unit, in cooperation with city authorities and planners. In addition, the Orange Foundation's efforts, in terms of the creation of MS networks, are also worth a broader analysis, as they can serve as an example for other MS operating in the country.

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How to Engage with Local Communities for Regional Development in Rural Areas? Participatory Formats in Outreach Hubs

Iciar Dominguez Lacasa and Dana Mietzner

I INTRODUCTION

Collaborative workspaces (CWS) have the potential to become shared social infrastructures with a distinct role in rural areas, but they need to broaden their capacities, knowledge development, and participatory local development actions (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020). Furthermore, studies of regional development have highlighted the potential of participatory approaches and its integration of public society in the process of regional transformation and development (Roman & Fellnhofer, 2022). Beyond that, the literature clearly indicates the role of universities in promoting economic development in peripheral and rural regions (Benneworth & Nieth, 2019; Fonseca & Nieth, 2021). Interestingly, universities have been establishing off-campus facilities to support sustainable development, university–industry interaction, and social inclusion (Migliore et al., 2024, p. 47). Migliore et al. (2024, p. 49) identified in their research a

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specific type of off-campus facility—the university hub, “with spaces to study, work and/or socialize outside of a campus and sometimes at a considerable distance from it.” Nevertheless, the phenomenon of university hubs or outreach hubs can be considered as a trend but is weakly understood, and the literature is fragmented (Migliore et al., 2024, pp. 47, 49).

Drawing on these strands of research, this study explores a university-based outreach hub—as an expression of a collaborative workspace—established in a peripheral and rural region. We define the university hub as an outreach hub and a collaborative workspace established by one or more universities in collaboration with local actors to implement university outreach activities for knowledge and technology transfer in a location distant from the university’s campus and lacking in infrastructure for knowledge creation. We chose the term *outreach hub* to underline the focus on its intermediary role between universities and the local community, such as businesses, city and municipal councils, and the broader civil society located in the area distant from the university’s campus.

The primary aim of this study is hence to explore how the outreach hub can practically engage local communities (including civil society, now recognized as a key target group in universities’ third mission) for economic development in a peripheral and rural region. The study focuses on the practical steps and strategies the outreach hub can implement analyzing four events (participatory formats) launched in the outreach hub Luckenwalde/Germany between 2021 and 2024.

The next section presents a short theoretical review to frame the study of a university-based outreach hub in a peripheral region acting as a collaborative workspace. Section 3 presents the methodological approach for the analysis of participation of local actors through the outreach hub. After describing the characteristics of the outreach hub and the town of Luckenwalde, Sect. 4 presents four different participatory formats initiated in the outreach hub and classifies them by using the participatory science cube (Schrögel & Kolleck, 2019). Section 5 closes the contribution by comparing the formats and identifying challenges, possibilities, and limitations of the outreach hub to engage local actors and to contribute to regional development in a peripheral region.

2 UNIVERSITIES: FROM KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION TO COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE

The following subsections examine the evolving roles of universities. It first explores their expanded “third mission,” emphasizing stakeholder engagement, responsible innovation, and a shift toward science communication. Next, it details universities’ crucial role in regional development, acting as knowledge creators and innovation drivers, while acknowledging potential limitations. Finally, it highlights the significance of collaborative workspaces, like coworking spaces, in fostering knowledge exchange and entrepreneurship, emphasizing the need for active facilitation to maximize their impact.

2.1 Role of Universities in Knowledge Production

Considering first the scholarly contributions exploring the purpose and role of universities as organizations for knowledge production through research and education in the process of technological change and innovation, we observe an increasing emphasis on the interaction of universities with different stakeholders. In their Mode 2 of knowledge production, Gibbons et al. (1994) already broadened up the locus of knowledge generation introducing different actors besides universities, such as companies and civil society. Interestingly, systemic approaches to technological change and innovation see universities as organizations embedded in networks of interactions between diverse stakeholders and institutions (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2006; Mowery & Sampat, 2011). Also, in the comprehensive social system described by Carayannis and Campbell (2009), universities are placed in a “quadruple helix” structure linking them with industry actors (companies), the government, and civil society. With this turn of science and universities toward interactions with their environment, and with civil society in particular, a so-called third mission explicitly adds a new purpose for universities beyond teaching and research in the process of knowledge production and innovation (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Miller et al., 2018). But taking these different missions expands the universities’ role and activities. Regional or local issues should get more attention in research while collaboration with regional or local actors is demanded (Thomas et al., 2023, p. 2068).

The social turn of universities’ third mission is in line with the claim in science, technology, and innovation (STI) policy for social engagement

and for awareness of the societal impact of science and technology. Drawing on the policy concepts of “responsible innovation” or “responsible research and innovation” (RRI; Owen et al., 2012), there exists an inherent expectation for universities to actively contribute to sustainable development and to tackle pressing societal challenges. The traditional concept of university technology transfer (UTT) capturing the process of valorization of university research by companies broadens up to integrate social engagement and social innovation and explicitly consider citizens and civil society as key stakeholders and drivers of academic research (Amry et al., 2021; McKelvey & Zaring, 2018).

The third mission of universities is directly related to universities’ activities for science communication as channels to reach and involve civil society. Interestingly, in the field of public communication of science and technology (PCST), we observe a paradigm shift in the models of communication. Traditional models for public understanding of science (PUS) aim at informing about and explaining scientific advances and their value and impact. However, new models of communication follow more interactive approaches aiming at achieving public engagement in science and technology (PEST) as well as at launching collaborative practices, including public participation in scientific research (Rowe & Frewer, 2005; Stilgoe et al., 2014). From this perspective, we can find a variety of participatory communication activities and initiatives at universities, including, for example, the following: (a) scientist-centered activities for science communication (with scientists themselves communicating and interacting with the public); (b) so-called popular formats such as children’s and civic universities, science festivals, science slams, and FamLabs; (c) exhibitions and museums that are affiliated with higher education organizations or cooperate with them; and (d) activities for public participation in scientific research (PPSR) and citizen science (Fähnrich & Schäfer, 2019, pp. 233–234). These examples of science communication include public participation in scientific research (PPSR) and citizen science as models with high levels of engagement of citizens and cocreation. These types of activities involve nonscientists for different purposes and with different roles in research practices. PPSR and citizen science are increasingly gaining the attention of scholars and policymakers as a complex model of science communication. Shirk et al. (2012), Skarlatidou and Haklay (2021), and Strasser et al. (2019) are examples of contributions explaining the development of these participatory research practices, the different levels of participation they can involve, and their impact. Considering the

diversity of participatory formats in science (ranging from dialogic and communication formats to coresearching formats) and recognizing different degrees of participation, Schrögel and Kolleck (2019) proposed the “participatory science cube” as a descriptive framework to visualize and compare “participatory formats according to their similarities and differences” from different dimensions (Schrögel & Kolleck, 2019, p. 71). The study put forward in this contribution draws largely on this approach to explore participation of local stakeholders in university initiatives (see Sect. 3.2).

2.2 *Universities’ Third Mission and Regional Development*

Next, to frame the potential and challenges of an outreach hub as we analyze it, we also need to account for the role of universities and their third mission from the perspective of regional development. Considering the contributions to economic geography and regional innovation studies focusing on the role of universities, we can observe a “local turn” in the universities’ mission (Kohoutek et al., 2017, p. 407). Accordingly, in universities’ third mission, their social engagement and participatory practices in science communication have a strong regional and local component. Moreover, universities and their interaction with local stakeholders are considered key actors in policy approaches for regional development such as in the smart specialization approach (Benneworth & Nieth, 2019). From a regional policy perspective, universities can have a strong influence on the development and innovation capacity of their regions and, to a large extent, there is an expectation for universities to fulfil the role of local knowledge creators and be vocational education providers for their regional labor market, as well as drivers of regional innovation and entrepreneurial activities in interaction with local actors. However, given the specific organization and orientation of universities, their incentive structures or the available resources may impose strong restrictions for fulfilling these local and regional missions, especially in regions facing strong challenges of economic development, such as peripheral or less-developed regions (Kohoutek et al., 2017, p. 421).

2.3 *The Role of Collaborative Workspace for Universities*

Finally, in this context of knowledge cocreation, application, and diffusion under the premise of interaction between universities and diverse local

stakeholders in rural areas, the concept of collaborative workspaces as discussed in spatial, urban, and regional studies gains a relevant significance. Collaborative workspaces find their expressions in “Coworking spaces, Makerspaces, Hackerspaces, Fab Labs, Business Incubators or Start-up Accelerators, Cultural & Creative Hubs, Co-living spaces, Youth and community centres, artist residencies, and many more” (Marmo & Avdikos, 2024, p. 4).

Coworking spaces, as a very prominent expression of collaborative workspaces, belong to the so-called new working spaces (Mariotti et al., 2023) or open creative labs (Schmidt, 2020). They are in particular working locations for temporary use for different purposes, especially to work in collaboration or for individual work (Mariotti et al., 2023, p. 2). In general, there is a broad approach to coworking that made its way to “organizational structures, influences knowledge creation and sharing, improves innovative behavior and is influenced by social factors as well as material equipment” (Kraus et al., 2022, p. 10).

The emergence of coworking spaces relates to the diffusion of digitalization and the trend of urbanization (Bouncken, 2018, p. 45) as well as to changes in working practices. The rise of coworking spaces as we know it today goes back to the early 2000s, where the first coworking spaces were established (e.g., Spiral Muse Coworking Group in San Francisco [2005], St. Oberholz in Berlin [2005], Betahaus Berlin [2009]). Even though these spaces are more common in cities, they are not exclusively an urban phenomenon (Mariotti et al., 2023; Vogl & Akhavan, 2022). In general terms, and in rural areas in particular, coworking spaces enable formal and informal interactions and enhance community building and new network connections (Vogl & Akhavan, 2022). In recent years, coworking spaces have also been set up at universities, with a range of different forms and with a link to entrepreneurship (Bouncken, 2018, p. 47).

In regard to the relationship between coworking spaces and university outreach activities for knowledge and technology transfer, as well as entrepreneurship, Clayton et al. (2018) highlighted the fact that colocation alone in coworking spaces does not guarantee collaboration and knowledge exchange. Collaboration needs to be fostered by the organization of the coworking space through activities and events (Clayton et al., 2018, p. 111). Bouncken (2018) emphasized the great potential of university-based coworking spaces for entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Here, the university-based coworking spaces are associated with

coaching, mentoring, trainings, or programs with regard to entrepreneurship (Bouncken, 2018, p. 47).

Tselepi et al. (2023) discussed different events and activities that can take place in coworking spaces to support interaction. This variety ranges from spontaneous meetups and face-to-face interactions, regular formal and informal meetings, larger formal events such as conferences or workshops (also called field-configuring events [FCEs]), and virtual events. In their policy-oriented paper, Avdikos and Papageorgiou (2021, p. 9) stressed the potential of collaborative workspaces to also contribute to regional development in rural areas if they focus on specific local needs and characteristics following a “place-based approach.”

In the context of our study, we assume that an outreach hub for regional actors can support the regional engagement of universities with a special focus on third-mission activities. With an affiliation to two universities, but with a different organizational structure and location than the universities, the outreach hub under investigation can offer place-based and context-dependent bottom-up outreach activities in collaboration with local stakeholders.

3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To explore how local communities can be addressed through a university-based outreach hub, we use a qualitative research approach in the context of a single case study. The outreach hub approach with its participative formats is still novel and not deeply investigated. This research aims to gain insights and deeper understanding, so that we consider the case study approach as highly suitable (Yin, 2009). Moreover, the case study approach is pertinent because the research addresses an explanatory question (Yin, 2012, p. 5) on how local actors (including civil society) can be addressed with activities routed in and initiated by the outreach hub. Finally, the case study approach allows us to evaluate different data material.

This case study draws on the findings collected in the outreach hub in Luckenwalde, Germany, which is called *Gewerbhof*. The findings are based on the annual reports (2019–2022) about the activities of the outreach hub in general, the discussion of ongoing work during the monthly meetings with the coordinator and person in charge of the outreach hub during the project status (2019–2023), ongoing observations of the outreach hub’s activities and public perception, meetups with the mayor of the town of Luckenwalde in 2023, and the external evaluation report

(2023). Based on the exploration of the activities associated, initiated, and hosted by the outreach hub *Gewerbehof* with regard to civil society, it was possible to select four different formats hosted and implemented by the outreach hub with an explicit focus on engagement with local communities for regional development.

3.1 *The Single Case Outreach Hub Gewerbehof*

The selected outreach hub is located in Luckenwalde in the federal state of Brandenburg, Germany. With a population of 21,512 residents (as of 12/31/2023), the town of Luckenwalde and its districts are located in a rural and peripheral region of the area of the former German Democratic Republic, presenting a relevant case for studying the challenges and possibilities of the outreach hub.

The outreach hub was established in the framework of a government initiative to support university knowledge and technology transfer in rural regions in 2019. Two universities' applied sciences departments and the city council of Luckenwalde collaborated to establish the outreach hub and to initiate and run activities. It was intended to develop new opportunities for university interactions with local actors. There was a particular focus on involving civil society in research projects, which was of interest for both university partners involved.

Today, with a quite unique profile, the outreach hub incorporates a coworking and makerspace (see illustrative [Picture 1](#) below) as well as space for exhibits, and with approximately 800 square meters, it is situated in the center of the town to engage with the local community and address regional needs and challenges.

Within the case study, four different participatory formats are analyzed. They share the following characteristics: (a) they were initiated or accompanied by the outreach hub, (b) they explicitly have a regional focus and address a regional issue, and (c) they involve the local community and civil



Picture 1 Outreach hub *Gewerbehof*—inside and outside perspectives

society. In addition, care was taken to examine different formats to demonstrate the wide range of possibilities for participatory formats with civil society as part of the third mission.

Table 1 presents basic characteristics of the four different participatory formats implemented in the outreach hub.

3.2 *The Participatory Science Cube*

This study describes and analyzes the formats using the participatory science cube as introduced by Schrögel and Kolleck (2019). As briefly introduced in Sect. 2.1, these authors proposed the participatory science cube as a descriptive framework and basic typology to visualize and compare participatory formats. Specifically, they proposed a cube with three axes, each representing a distinct focus to study participatory approaches (see figures in the next section). One axis captures the degree to which the public is included in decision-making on science and technology governance (e.g., in priority settings [normative focus]). Another axis (epistemic focus) indicates the degree to which the public is included into the process of knowledge generation. The third axis (reach focus) reflects the reach of a project beyond institutionalized scientists. Formats positioned at the origin of the diagram are characterized as “traditional science” without public participation. As formats are positioned further from the origin, public involvement increases (Schrögel & Kolleck, 2019, pp. 87–90).

Using the cube as a tool of analysis, the discussion in the next section explores the challenges, possibilities, and limitations of participatory formats in a university-based outreach hub to engage local actors for contributing to knowledge transfer and to regional development in a peripheral region.

4 DISCUSSION OF PARTICIPATORY FORMATS

In the following section we shortly present the formats and frame them within the participatory science cube.

4.1 *Open Lab Days in the Makerspace (Participatory Format 1)*

The first format covers the open lab days as part of the makerspace within the outreach hub. The makerspace offered numerous possibilities for using innovative fabrication technologies. In addition to various additive

Table 1 Overview of participatory formats within the outreach hub Gewerbehof Luckenwalde

	<i>Participatory formats</i>	<i>Local community</i>	<i>Primary goal</i>	<i>Time frame</i>
1	Open lab days in the makerspace (every Thursday, 12 p.m.–8 p.m.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in the geographical area of Luckenwalde regardless of their origin, gender, age, or educational background 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint or individual tinkering and developing of solutions with the help of digital manufacturing technologies, such as 3D printers, laser cutters, CNC milling machines, embroidery machines, and soldering and woodworking stations • Establishment of new contacts and collaborative networks 	2022 (ongoing activity)
2	Joint building and data collection for cycling traffic <i>“Too Close—With Distance More Safety” (project title)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in the geographical area of Luckenwalde regardless of their origin, gender, age, or educational background 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint building of the open bike sensor and the 3D printed housing of the sensor • Data collection by citizens • University–citizen interactions • Discussion of challenges in cycling traffic 	2022
3	Perspective of citizens <i>“Explain Your Town—Explain Luckenwalde” (project title)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in the geographical area of Luckenwalde regardless of their origin, gender, age, or educational background 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collection of insights with regard to the citizens’ perceptions about the town and regional area, the perception of the town, challenges, and future perspectives • Identification of areas of interest for further participative formats conducted by the outreach hub 	2021–2022

- 4 **Strategic development of the town**
“Participative Scenario Analysis—Lackemalde 2040” (project title)
- Representatives of the public administration of the town and region, members of the city council, and residents
 - Participatory approach for the joint development and discussion of future scenarios for the town with a special focus on its economic development
 - Support of strategic decision-making
-

manufacturing processes, these also included 3D scanners and CNC milling machines. As an open innovation laboratory, members of the local community (users) worked on their own projects as part of open lab days, with the help of expert advice, or contributed to joint projects on urban and regional development topics. Users were invited to interact with the lab infrastructure (e.g., 3D printers, tools, laser cutters, mills, digital embroidery machines, presses) during the open lab day once a week and to teach others and find solutions collaboratively. Approximately 90% of users were citizens of the city of Luckenwalde who worked on private projects. The users worked on 3D printing experiments for private use, including cosplay products, housing for Arduino, visualization of family crests, spare parts, milling of components from different materials, production of architectural models, and woodworking or furniture making in the wood workshop. The makerspace in *Gewerbehof* was supported by two experts during open lab days and offered space for approximately 20 users, depending on the complexity of their individual projects. In the period observed, 692 users used the infrastructure during the open lab days, so the open lab day reached its capacity level during the first year (see Fig. 1).

Users of the makerspace promote experimental research and learning outside traditional institutional structures (Schrögel & Kolleck, 2019, p. 91). Our analysis suggests that open lab days allowed for direct

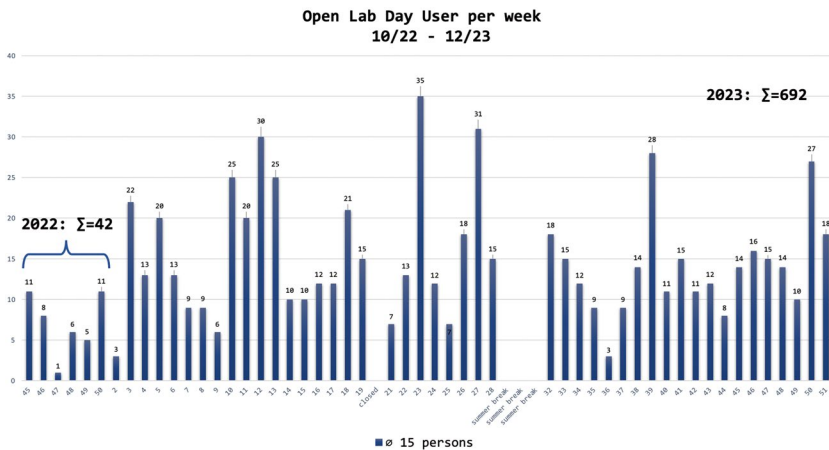


Fig. 1 Number of users during open lab days (10/2022–12/2023)

engagement with the local community; users brought their individual knowledge and competencies and trained other users or just shared experiences. As a side effect, locals got in touch with academic staff and university projects and got informed about further activities of the outreach hub or tied collaborations with the academic institution. The activities of the outreach hub gained visibility, and the users acted as promoters for the outreach hub when they shared their experiences.

Depending on the kind of projects conducted at the open lab days in the makerspace, the complexity of the projects and the steps for the development of solutions strongly varied. Nevertheless, the analysis of the format with the participatory science cube confirms that the makerspace offered the opportunity for a strong public engagement in the different perspectives, which can range from “public discussion” to “public decision-making” with regard to topics and development of solutions by the public (normative focus). With regard to the epistemic focus, the open lab days involve “public problem definition and interpretation” at the outer end of the axis (see Fig. 2). In general, the open lab days can be classified as a suitable instrument to reach out for the “broad public” in the town of Luckenwalde (reach focus). Nevertheless, the local community still has to

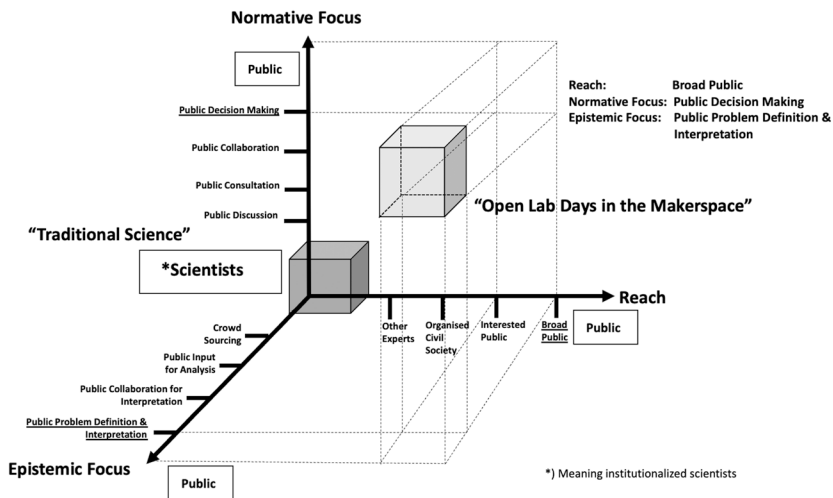


Fig. 2 Participatory science cube for Format 1 (Schrögel & Kolleck, 2019, p. 90)

have a certain interest in this infrastructure and the open lab experience to participate (“interested public”).

All in all, this format shows the potential of open labs in makerspaces in rural areas in terms of empowerment. The users bring in their individual competencies and build and share new skills and relationships with others. They develop solutions and raise questions.

4.2 *Data Collection for the Improvement of Cycling Traffic (Participatory Format 2)*

In this format, the outreach hub became part of a larger citizen science project (<https://innohub13.de/wir-forschen/zu-nah/>). The project aimed to collect measurements of overtaking distances from motor vehicles to cyclists. These data were used for the creation of a database of overtaking events. Furthermore, it was intended to link the collected data with data from the OpenStreetMap map service to analyze correlations between infrastructure characteristics and overtaking distances to initiate a scientific discourse on the needs of particularly vulnerable road users, like cyclists (Ingram et al., 2022, Slide 8).

First, the outreach hub’s role was the promotion of the project in order to engage the interested public, who are local cyclists. Second, the maker-space infrastructure was used to build the OpenBikeSensor with a 3D printed housing, ready to fix on a bicycle (see Picture 2 for illustration). In this format the local cycling community became directly involved in a university science project.

During the course of the project, it was possible to build the OpenBikeSensor with the housing with 42 citizens, of which 18 used the Gewerbehof Luckenwalde as a workshop place. In addition, 14 people borrowed an OpenBikeSensor to collect data, and another two citizens



Picture 2 Gewerbehof Luckenwalde, building of OpenBikeSensors with a housing and fitting to the bike

received a kit and built an OpenBikeSensor on their own without instructions and provided the collected data. Up to October 25, 2022, it was possible to capture 15,147 measurements during the overtaking process and a total of 13,181 km that were cycled. Data were transformed to an open-source platform for further exploration by bicycle traffic experts. The first results were presented and discussed with the public by the bicycle traffic expert of the university.

The analysis of this participatory format (Format 2) with the participatory science cube gives a differentiated picture. First, the cycling traffic project offers the opportunity for strong “public discussion”, which can vary from technical discussion with regard to the building of the sensor to challenges and experiences in cycling traffic to discussion on corresponding recommendations for the improvement of safety standards in cycling traffic (normative focus). Second, the epistemic focus can be considered as “public input for analysis” because the collection of data is one of the main goals (see Fig. 3). Third, the format can be indicated as a suitable instrument to reach out for the “interested public” (local cyclists) in the town of

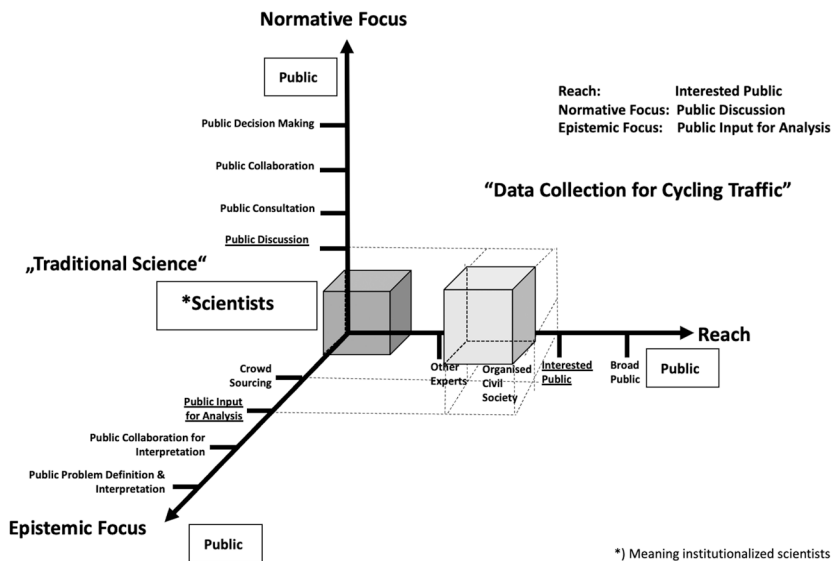


Fig. 3 Participatory science cube for Format 2 (see Schrögel and Kolleck (2019) for general science cube introduction)

Luckenwalde and nearby areas. In Format 2 the locals bring in their individual competencies—some of them develop new skills with regard to the sensor building and others share their knowledge. Furthermore, the local cycling community gets in touch with academia and the outreach hub in general. Nevertheless, the main motivation of participation is the common interest in cycling traffic. The further exploration of collected data remains in the hands of the researchers.

4.3 *Citizens' Perspectives: "Explain Your Town—Explain Luckenwalde" (Participatory Format 3)*

In this format the local community in Luckenwalde had the opportunity to answer important questions about living in a town by focusing exclusively on the issues and concerns of the residents in the town of Luckenwalde, where the outreach hub is located. This project aimed to start a dialog with locals as addressees of the outreach hub and took place in an establishing stage of the outreach hub. The survey included metaphoric questions asking what Luckenwalde would be if it were a culinary dish, an animal, a music genre, or, if the town were a person, what type of character it would have. Conversations between academic staff and local residents took place (e.g., at the flea market or the arts and culture festival). The project focused exclusively on the perspectives of the locals (people living in the area of the outreach hub) with regard to the current state of the town of Luckenwalde as well as future perspectives. In this format, questionnaires were used, both in direct interaction between citizens and researchers and also online. In this way, the survey offered an individual counterpoint to statistics or similarly impersonal publications on the development of the town. Through this format it was possible to collect insights from the locals about the infrastructure, local businesses, or rents and their development over the past decades. Finally, 24 questionnaires were collected; the one-by-one conversations were key for data collection. Even with that small sample, the survey delivered insights into the needs, regional challenges, and future perspectives as a starting point for the identification of relevant topics from a citizen perspective and ideas for participative formats.

The analysis of the "Explain Your Town—Explain Luckenwalde" project (Format 3) with the participatory science cube presents an interesting example of public involvement in a project for local economic development (see Fig. 4). First, such a format offers the opportunity for "public

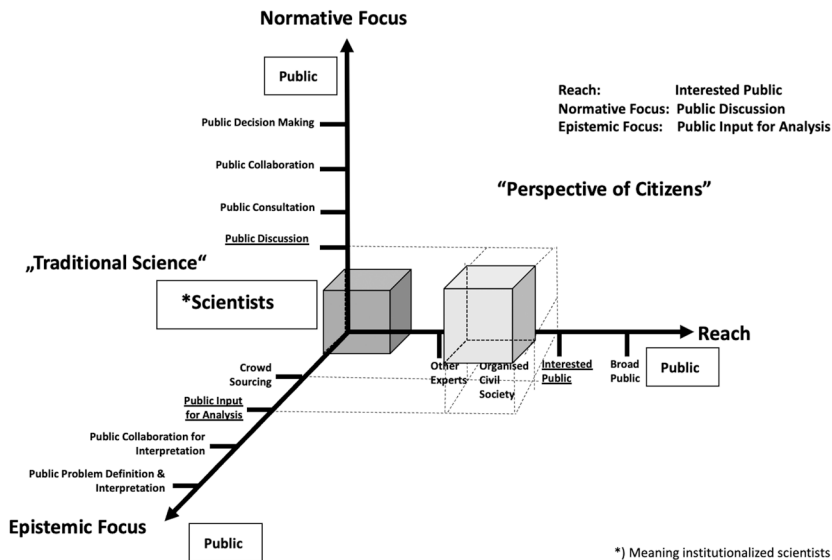


Fig. 4 Participatory science cube Format 3 (see Schrögel & Kolleck (2019) for general science cube introduction)

discussion” with regard to the town and region where the residents are living (normative focus). Moreover, the format incorporates the perspectives of the local community. The epistemic focus can hence be considered as “public input for analysis” because the collection of insights was one of the main goals of this participative project. Regarding the reach focus, in this project the researchers reached out to the public in general; however, only representatives of the “interested public” brought in their individual perceptions, experiences, and opinions (reach).

4.4 Participative Scenario Analysis—Luckenwalde 2040 (Participatory Format 4)

The overarching objective of the format Luckenwalde 2040 was to supplement the existing results of analytical and strongly prognostic planning instruments of the town of Luckenwalde with anticipatory, more qualitative, and strongly strategically oriented methods that are participatory in order to incorporate the interests, needs, and perspectives of a broad

spectrum of regional stakeholders (reach; see Fig. 5 for the analysis using the participatory science cube). This format was not so much about forecasting a future for the town, but about exploring different possible futures with a longer time horizon up to 2040. Here, the outreach hub acted as facilitator of the process due to the expertise of the academic staff in terms of scenario analysis and related methods. The outreach hub was used for several participative workshops and interactive sessions on status quo assessment as well as discussions of key factors, future projections, scenario discussions, and the development of a road map. The strong regional networks of the outreach hub supported the identification of participants from the local community, issues, critical development factors, and the general dialogue. The interested public was addressed for input on project ideas, assessment, priority setting, and decision-making, which was the role of the representatives of the city council (normative focus). The role of the scientist was the mastery of scenario analysis as a method. Here, the role of the local stakeholders went beyond input for analysis and also covered problem definition and interpretation (epistemic focus; see Fig. 5).

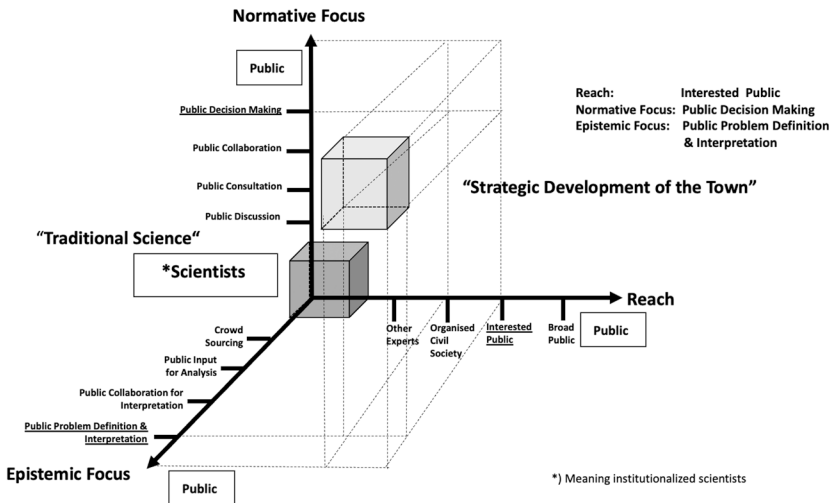


Fig. 5 Participatory science cube Format 4 (see Schrögel and Kolley (2019) for general science cube introduction)

5 CONCLUSIONS

There is a wide range of literature on the role of universities with regard to regional development, but there are still limited studies on the function of outreach hubs with regard to universities' third mission, especially in terms of citizen involvement and social society as a transfer partner. Here, participative formats are addressed as an instrument for interaction with civil society. But from a practical perspective, there is still an implementation gap for participative formats with regard to civil society and local communities as part of universities' third-mission strategies. Here, we shed some light on different formats conducted by a selected outreach hub.

The selected outreach hub in a peripheral region has proven its important role in universities' third-mission strategies and, in particular, triggers, promotes, and accelerates participatory projects with the local community, as we could show in the different formats.

The participative science cube is used as an instrument that helps to categorize different participative approaches, which are initiated, conducted, hosted, and supported by the outreach hub. The four formats show how participation in its various forms can be used to address local communities in peripheral regions. Participatory initiatives, as presented here, contribute to establish new networks and partnerships and provoke project ideas, which empower local communities through their maker-space infrastructure, coworking possibilities, and academic knowledge.

The four formats represent different possibilities for involving civil society in research and transfer, starting from the outreach hub. The formats presented here are very different from each other. While Format 1 (open lab days in the makerspace) enables continuous interaction with civil society, the other three formats are limited in time (temporary projects). Furthermore, the formats differ in terms of their degree of complexity. Whereas the implementation of a strategy process for the town requires a high level of methodological knowledge on the part of the universities and extensive analyses over a longer period of time, open lab days can be realized at a much lower threshold; the existence of a makerspace is assumed. In Format 1 (open lab days in the makerspace), a simple use of the devices is conceivable, as is the involvement of civil society as a problem solver by contributing individual skills from different areas. A similar observation can be made for the participatory scenario process (Format 4). Here, too, representatives of civil society have the opportunity to shape and contribute their own ideas and solutions. In contrast, the format with a focus on

data collection for cycling (Format 2) emphasizes data collection for scientific purposes, which is only made possible by the direct involvement of civil society.

With regard to the third mission of universities, the formats show that it is possible to reach civil society as a relatively new target group for universities in this way and to involve it both as a source of knowledge and as a problem solver, thus ultimately supporting research and transfer.

Despite these positive aspects, it must also be noted that mobilizing the local community is not always equally successful. A suitable form to address local communities also had to be found in all four formats to clearly highlight the objectives and possibilities for participation and the individual benefits. However, the coworking at the outreach hub means that there is continuous interaction with people from the region, so that people can also be approached through this. In addition, a relationship of trust and mutual respect is developing between the coworkers and the academic staff at the outreach hub. Additionally, in all four formats, strong local support and powerful promoters within the local communities could be identified as key. The outreach hub initially started as a joint initiative between universities and local authorities and representatives. In the implementation of different formats, the local partner offers networks and communication channels for the outreach hub and underlines its importance and credibility.

In all formats civil society is directly addressed, contributing to solutions or at least being somehow involved to a different extent as visualized in the science cube. The inclusion of civil society with help of the outreach hub is particularly promising for universities in the context of the third mission. With the outreach hub, the universities go directly to the people living in the region and address issues of the local communities or facilitate the development of solutions. In this sense, the outreach hub acts as a crystallization point—a space where new relationships, interactions, and collaborations between universities and civil society are established.

Ultimately, the architecture of the outreach hub also supports the low-threshold approach and uncomplicated form of encounter between science and society. A hall with open doors and an inviting but not excessive coworking and makerspace infrastructure helps break down barriers and counteract what is often perceived as an ivory tower of universities. The case studies also show that the outreach hub is not sufficient as a physical location on its own and can only develop its function through suitable dialogue formats that can then take place in or around the outreach hub.

This single case study shows that research and transfer at universities provides direct benefits because knowledge from local communities enriches research processes, valuable skills from civil society actors enrich universities, and knowledge exchange is possible in both directions. However, it should be ensured that the outreach hub does not lose its connection to the universities, because initiatives and projects relate strongly to the surrounding region and the problems that exist there. It is therefore important to integrate the outreach hub as an equal component of the universities—considering the physical distance and its function—and to continuously implement a variety of formats with academics from the universities and local communities.

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Disclosure One of the authors, Dana Mietzner, was partly involved in the planning of the participatory formats.

Ethics Approval This study was conducted in accordance with the applicable ethical guidelines (Brandenburgisches Hochschulgesetz [BbgHG], April 9, 2024, § 70 (3)). Potential dual-use concerns or the possible application of research findings for non-peaceful purposes were not addressed. Moreover, no experimental procedures involving humans or animals were conducted. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. All sources and data were processed in compliance with scientific standards.

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Collaborative Workspaces Beyond Big Cities: Common Features and Open Questions

Danai Liodaki and Thilo Lang

I INTRODUCTION: TYPICAL FEATURES OF RURAL AND PERIPHERAL CWS

This volume addressed the emerging phenomenon of collaborative workspaces (CWS) beyond the bigger cities. Although CWS are still seen as a phenomenon mostly related to central urban locations and metropolitan areas, their spread in rural and peripheral areas can give us insights in the characteristics, transformations, and challenges of those areas. Moreover, the increase of new work spaces in such locations raises questions about

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their prospects for the future, from an economic, social, and regional development perspective and about common features of these work spaces.

The phenomenon of CWS with their more recent spatial diffusion has been raising scientific interest by many different disciplines for quite some time (see introduction to this volume). Previous literature looks at them from a geographical approach (e.g., Avdikos & Kalogerisis, 2017; Brown, 2017) or from economic geography (e.g. Parrino, 2015) and analyzes the role of CWS for a region and its economy, or even from design approaches (e.g. Salovaara, 2015; Kojo & Nenonen, 2016). Other authors have approached the issue from a management or economics perspective (e.g., Salinger, 2013; Capdevila, 2013, 2015; Garrett et al., 2017; Blagoev et al., 2019) and many have explored the phenomenon from sociology and related social sciences (e.g., Merkel, 2019; Schmidt & Brinks, 2017), seeing CWS as possible vehicles to change social relations or foster social innovation (Liodaki, 2023; Liodaki & Stockdale, 2025). Nevertheless, from an empirical point of view, most research until recently has focused on big cities, while the significant rise of CWS in rural and peripheral areas remains under-researched and unmonitored (Gandini & Cossu, 2021).

This volume keeps the interdisciplinary approach of the research on CWS, while focusing empirically on new CWS in ‘rural and peripheral’ locations. The contributions in this volume outline some main characteristics of rural and peripheral CWS, as well as some main differences to their urban counterparts. The chapters, empirically grounded, show multiple potentials and limitations for CWS, to shape the places they inhabit in a diverse set of practices.

Attempting to draw some common conclusions from this volume, we acknowledge that there is a wide set of properties specific to the cases illuminated in this book. Nevertheless, we can identify three main tendencies that hint toward common characteristics of rural and peripheral CWS, that distinct them from their urban and metropolitan counterparts. Those characteristic features have already been outlined in previous literature (e.g. Fuzi, 2015; Merrell et al., 2021; Mariotti et al., 2023), but are also reassured and analyzed through the empirical observations presented in the chapters of this volume. Hence, as a common conclusion, we can state that rural and peripheral CWS typically are:

- a. Locally embedded: Rural and peripheral CWS are considered to be more interrelated to the local context, and more embedded to the local environment, depending on the barriers and the potentials of

the place they are in. This tendency is also reflected in the relation of rural and peripheral CWS to local and regional governments and policy-makers that tend to be more supportive to them in comparison to their urban counterparts.

- b. Community-led: In a distinction between community-led and entrepreneurial-led spaces, rural and peripheral CWS are considered closer to the community-led axis. Some of the authors in this volume stress the rural CWS' grassroots spirit and argue the spread of the phenomenon in rural and peripheral areas takes coworking to a direction closer to social and political activism.
- c. Hybrid and multifunctional: Rural and peripheral CWS are considered to be more multifunctional and hybrid. In order to address specific local needs, the CWS in rural and peripheral areas may offer more services apart from coworking, like educational services, socializing activities, community events, activities to enhance access to technology and more.

Based on the above observations, we have analyzed the contributions of this volume along those three strains of thought, exploring what those characteristics mean for rural and peripheral areas and their futures.

2 LOCAL EMBEDDEDNESS

In this volume, the authors have provided multiple insights of what it means for a CWS to be rural, and in this way, they have provoked thoughts and aspirations on rurality and peripherality and potential local futures. We can detect many perspectives on what rurality or peripheralization mean and how we can approach it. As Willett and Lang argue, more orthodox approaches claim that peripheries are produced due to economic and material factors, while others focus “on critical theories and philosophies emphasizing how spaces are discursively produced” (Willett & Lang, 2018, p. 258). Moreover, the practices in the rural and urban environments have drastically shifted and some argue that the distinction is not that clear anymore, as perspectives of urbanity can also be found in rural areas, while urban actors are gradually striving for rural values and virtues (Clope, 2006). Regardless previous perceptions of rural and peripheral areas as inactive, we have to stress Massey's view of space as inherently open to uncertainty, which is not “unique to the postmodern city” (Massey, 2005, p. 116). As she argues “space is the sphere of the

possibility of the existence of multiplicity” (Massey, 1999, p. 2) and in that sense rural and peripheral areas can be open to new pathways, energized by their residents’ desires, collective action, and motivation, like the one that is usually manifested in CWS in rural and peripheral areas. In this volume, the construction of rural places as weak and failed deficit spaces, in comparison to a strong center, is challenged, as Gatsinos and Stockdale (this volume) argue following previous research (see, for example, Willett & Lang, 2018). Sánchez-Vergara (this volume) stresses the role of collective identity in rural places that is based on tradition and cultivates a sense of belonging to the people in a rural place, stressing how CWS in rural and peripheral areas are closely related to place identity and to the natural environment, to the local culture, history, and shared values.

Some of this volume’s authors begin their chapters with presenting the challenges of rural areas that CWS aim to tackle. Tan (this volume), for example, refers to the limitations in technological access, social and professional networks, learning opportunities as barriers for CWS in rural areas. Likewise, Wagner and Gruber (this volume) see CWS as a way to motivate people to return to rural areas and revitalize them. Kaputska (this volume) perceives makerspaces as spaces that can address the inequalities of rural communities in engaging with digital innovation. CWS are seen as a potential vehicle to attract young talents and stop brain drain from the rural places to the centers (Manoukas and Mariotti, this volume), while giving young qualified people new professional options and bringing economic and social revitalization (Almeida and Bastos, this volume). One aspect that many authors stress is the digitalization of the rural and peripheral areas and the role CWS can play in that process. In that sense, some authors refer to the potential of CWS to contribute to a “smart countryside” development (Tan, this volume) and increase accessibility to digital knowledge in remote areas, reducing disparities in digital skills and access to technological infrastructure (Manoukas and Mariotti, this volume). The important role of CWS in technology and knowledge transfer is evident also in university-based coworking spaces that except from collocation offer also activities and events especially organized to coach, mentor, and train the participants (Lacasa and Mietzner, this volume).

Nevertheless, one tendency presented in this book has to do with overcoming the traditional binaries between ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’. Some of the case studies explored in this volume show a more fluid approach and connection between different geographical contexts (for example, Tan, this volume). This interconnection is on the one hand achieved by

strengthening of core-periphery networks and brain circulation between rural and urban areas (Manoukas and Mariotti, this volume). On the other hand, the emergence of CWS can potentially illuminate new career opportunities for people in rural areas (Bosworth, this volume), while providing services that are typically found in urban settings (Tan, this volume). In that sense, CWS not only practically revitalize rural and peripheral areas, but also can contribute to deeper social and cultural transformations that equip rural areas with urban lifestyle choices, or even cosmopolitan views of the world, fostering rural urbanization (see, for example, Flipo et al., 2022 as cited in Cinere, this volume). Following these observations, the perception of rural CWS in this volume lays between cultural and spatial embeddedness and a tendency to reform or open up rural identities.

Based on an extensive non-representative survey that included 273 CWS from 34 European countries, unpacking the demography and impacts of CWS in and outside cities, there is some evidence that supports that rural and peripheral CWS are more locally embedded than their urban counterparts (Marmo & Avdikos, 2024). More specifically, quantitative data supports that CWS based in cities are more likely to rely financially on market streams, while CWS outside cities usually rely on personal funds and external subsidies and public support. Also, outside cities it is more likely to find CWS that own the space or are given the space free of charge for use from public institutions, while in cities it is more likely for CWS to rent their space, from a public or private institution. This shows a tendency of CWS outside cities to be in closer relation to local authorities and public institutions, while owning the building in which they operate shows a potential for a long-term rooting in the place.

Nevertheless, the level of spatial embeddedness of rural CWS, although a factor of success, is not a given, rather an open question, as Bosworth (this volume) argues. In his view CWS users may perform work in the rural but not necessarily ‘rural work’, since their occupation may not be connected to the social environment of the place. Although cultural embeddedness is cherished as a needed aspect to cultivate trust and foster collaboration (Diaz and Psenner, this volume), it is not a given in many cases of rural CWS. For example, digital nomads, may not interact with the local communities, but with distant others with whom they share their work and lifestyle (Cinere, this volume), while a free-lancer may engage more with local networks (Bosworth, this volume). Also in an economic sense, the productivity generated in a rural CWS from a remote-worker generates value elsewhere (Bosworth, this volume). From a policy

perspective, the question of local embeddedness must be thoroughly explored, as the needs of remote workers may differ from the ones of rural workers and each of them may contribute in a different way to the local economy.

This process of shifting the perception of rural places has been analyzed by Sánchez-Vergara (this volume) as a potential place brand strategy CWS can contribute to. As they argue, local stakeholders together with local development actors may use coworking to raise the local profile and change the image of rural areas, boosting regional visibility. Nevertheless, other authors (for example, Bosworth, this volume) also stress the fact that a growing demand for living in rural areas impacts housing market and raises concerns regarding rural gentrification (see Halfacree, 2012; Smith et al., 2021). In that sense, there is a danger that rural areas become sites of consumption, and if the counterurbanizers do not find ways to integrate in local settings, they might weaken the social cohesion of rural communities (Bosworth, this volume). This is why rural CWS should not only aim to attract creative and mobile professionals but also support diverse local populations and offer services that can benefit the most vulnerable local communities and bridge the divide between rural and urban disparities, while respecting local specificities, networks, and lifestyles (Tan, this volume).

3 WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY FOR RURAL AND PERIPHERAL CWS?

The word ‘community’, often charged as being able to appear “everywhere and nowhere at once” (Bauman, 2001), has been used so broadly that it could include “business community, or the therapeutic community, in the same way we speak of neighborhoods or socially homogenous spaces” (Brenner, 2000, p. 192). ‘Community’ has also been used as a radical concept, describing relations of cooperation and mutual responsibility (for example, Mouffe, 1992; Federici, 2018). Regarding economic relations and development, Gibson-Graham have contributed to the debate with their work on community economies. As Gritzas and Kavoulakos explain, Gibson-Graham use the term community in an anti-essentialist way, implying the need to socialize economic relations, and perform them in a collective way, without eliminating individuality (Gritzas & Kavoulakos, 2016). Previous literature has stressed the importance of community in collaborative practices (e.g. Avdikos & Iliopoulou, 2019;

Liodaki, 2023; Liodaki, 2024a, 2024b); however, this volume sheds new light on what kind of community and communal relations emerge specifically in rural and peripheral CWS.

A lot of the authors in this book write about the community and the community building processes in CWS and particularly claim that rural and peripheral CWS have a stronger communal aspect and are usually community-led. Evidence from a recent survey shows that CWS outside cities tend to be smaller, hence closer to a human scale that can foster personal communal relations (Marmo & Avdikos, 2024). Also, we observe that CWS outside cities rely more on volunteer labor, in comparison to CWS in cities that show a bigger percentage in paid labor, while CWS in cities are more likely to offer professional activities and networking events, than the rural and peripheral ones (Marmo & Avdikos, 2024). This shows a tendency of rural and peripheral CWS to be less career-driven and financial capital-oriented than their urban counterparts, showing stronger potential for communal bonds. In parallel, this volume includes a number of perspectives on what kind of communal bonds emerge in CWS and their effects. Kapustka (this volume), for example, stresses the maker-spaces' ability to act like a place for socializing, offering space for meetings that may be lacking in peripheral areas. Bosworth (this volume) refers to CWS as a community that can inform users on different types of work and integrate diverse groups in rural economies. Other authors see the emergence of a community in CWS as a way to empower local entrepreneurs and freelancers (Rexa and Hans Westlundb, this volume) bring them together in a space that can foster the exchange of ideas as well as the formation of new collaborations, partnerships, and businesses (for example, Bosworth et al., 2023; Clifton et al., 2019 as cited in Rexa and Hans Westlundb, this volume). Almeida and Bastos (this volume) speak more specifically, about social capital and networks. As they argue, the new relationships, networks, and trust that emerge in CWS can act as an added social capital for rural and peripheral areas to foster social and economic development.

Similarly, Diaz and Psenner (this volume) refer to the concept of middleground to describe the in-between spaces where connections and relations of common trust are built and can lead to innovative practices. Nevertheless, they stress that the middleground is not a neutral space but has to be carefully orchestrated to foster collaboration. This point is common to a lot of chapters in this volume that stress the importance of a facilitator, an office manager, or an operator for the CWS. More

specifically, Rexa and Hans Westlund (this volume) point out the importance of an office manager, to take care of everyday operation in a CWS, and Sánchez-Vergara (this volume) explains that a facilitator is indispensable for sustaining the spaces analyzed, as they are responsible for logistics, and the relation between coworkers and the local communities. Wagner and Gruber (this volume) argue that in most of the cases they looked into, the initial idea for the creation of the coworking space was the operator's. They explain that the idea for the creation of the space arose usually from personal interest of those individuals, either for coworking or for rural development, or for contributing to the creation of a better life in the countryside for themselves and others. Rexa and Hans Westlund (this volume) stress the importance of those common observations, in rethinking how such individual life choices and motivations can actually have an impact in the developmental pathway of a place, something that has not been yet analyzed. Nevertheless, there are some reflections also on the difficulties of the role of the community manager in CWS that usually takes the role of the caregiver, a role that is usually taken by women, contributing to the gendered understanding of care labor (for example, Crovara, 2023; Papageorgiou & Michailidou, 2023; Merkel, 2023 as cited in Ciccarelli and Wrbka, this volume). The community managers, especially in small places, could end up working many extra hours for the CWS, as they may engage on conversations about it in their everyday encounters, as Gatsinos and Stockdale (this volume) observe.

The caring element on the community development aspect of CWS is an important factor, either as part of the community manager's work or as a bond that emerges among the CWS users. In previous literature (e.g. Akhavan & Mariotti, 2023; Ciccarelli, 2023), a lot has been written on how CWS and coworking can have positive effects on the users' wellbeing, creating positive feelings, socialization, and professional empowerment. In this volume, Ciccarelli and Wrbka contribute to this strain of thought, by shedding light to the ways rural and peripheral CWS can empower women professionals, who are usually facing even more obstacles than women in the big cities. As they explain, CWS can play a significant role to women's wellbeing in rural areas and beyond, as they constitute a necessary retreat away from the domestic space, that can help them focus on their work and boost their self-confidence. Cinere (this volume) refers to CWS as generative spaces that not only provide with a facility for remote work but also offer services that respond to the needs of local population, especially the people that are most in need of care and support.

Another perspective highlighted in this volume is the emergence of an inclusive CWS community that can foster social activism. For this purpose, one of the aspects that is important is the openness of the spaces and their orientation, that is not for-profit but is welcoming and open to everyone either free of charge or with a small charge that does not target the maximization of personal economic profit, like the cases illustrated by Kapustka (this volume). The peripheral CWS Gatsinos and Stockdale (this volume) analyze, for example, are characterized by a collective identity and a social activism ethos, as they argue, and the motivations of the founders and the users are to pursue social and developmental change, by engaging to socially useful activities. Tan (this volume) describes also how the cases analyzed provide support to marginalized groups, like LGBTQ+ individuals, who could not find safe spaces in the rural place they were living, before the CWS took action to provide one for them. Similarly, other CWS provide support to refugees, young women, women who have experienced domestic violence and more oppressed groups (for example, Garrett et al., 2017; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016 as cited in Tan, this volume). In that sense, the factor of community in rural and peripheral CWS goes beyond the colocation of people to foster creativity and entrepreneurship—values more embedded in urban CWS—and becomes a way to cultivate civil engagement and social inclusivity. On the other hand, it is important also to look closer to the labor conditions of the workers and the users in CWS, and rethink voluntary labor, which is more usual in rural and peripheral CWS, as “collectively performed reciprocal labour” (Gibson, 2020 as cited in Gatsinos and Stockdale, this volume).

4 HYBRIDITY AND OPENNESS IN RURAL AND PERIPHERAL CWS

Another element that is outlined as one of the characteristics of CWS is hybridity. Indeed, previous literature shows that hybridity is an important element of CWS in urban and rural settings, while there is important openness to their definition, potential meaning, and ideological direction. Scholars have already proposed categorizations between CWS, like “neo-corporate” and “resilient spaces” (Gandini & Cossu, 2021), or “entrepreneurial-led” and “community-led” ones (Avdikos & Iliopoulou, 2019) that differ in their way of organization, and social and political objectives. These tensions and differentiations have led scholars to wonder if we can even speak about a coherent phenomenon (Spinuzzi, 2012,

Brinks, 2022). The multitude of users, practices, and events that coexist in CWS can be described as assemblages that “bring together people, materials, goods, finance, physical and virtual spaces, ideas and innovations” (Avdikos & Pettas, 2021, p. 45). In that sense, CWS may not be easy to define, but can be understood through a relational approach, as “spaces of possibility”, where a multitude of social relations coexist and maybe come in tension (Merkel, 2019). In this sub-section, we aim to explore how the authors in this volume understand the hybrid and open character of CWS in rural and peripheral areas.

Many authors in this volume argue that CWS in rural and peripheral areas are hybrid and multifunctional. Tan (this volume), for example, builds on Orel and Dvouletý (2020) to argue that it is vital for rural CWS to offer hybrid models that combines coworking with other functions, such as education, culture, and more, while such a need may not be present in urban CWS that address a broader market. Also, Wagner and Gruber (this volume) explain the importance of responding to local needs, to create valuable services for the rural CWS, to revitalize vacant spaces and satisfy local population also regarding social needs and meeting spaces that may be less in rural and peripheral settings. Cinere (this volume) also argues that the rural CWS must be multifunctional in order to be able to strongly connect to the local context—that may differ a lot from an urban one—and respond to various place-specific needs. Previous quantitative measurements support that the urban CWS are more likely to be open only to their members, while CWS outside big agglomerations are often also fully accessible to non-members, showing the potential tendency of rural and peripheral CWS to cater broader social needs of the local population in the places they operate in (Marmo & Avdikos, 2024).

Tabrizi and Psenner (this volume) delve into the issue of hybridity, building on previous literature, to argue that hybridity happens when we cannot answer, “where could we draw the boundary between the different types of communities and spaces?” (Koch, 2004, p. 176 as cited in Tabrizi and Psenner, this volume). They explain that being hybrid is an important factor of success for CWS in urban and non-urban settings, and it entails a series of relative connections, between diverse spatialities, communities and places, including the physical and the digital distinctions. CWS is anyway an umbrella term that does not describe a solid phenomenon but on the contrary is used to describe different categories of spaces, a lot of which are analyzed in this volume, like coworking spaces, but also maker-spaces, FabLabs, creative hubs, business incubators and the like. All those

different categories of spaces differ in function and level of hybridity. Apart from diverse organizational models, the different spaces target to cover the needs of diverse users offer diverse activities and interchangeable functions, leading to the need of a strong level of hybridity (Tabrizi and Psenner, this volume).

Indicative of the hybridity and the openness of the term CWS and its manifestations is the many concepts it connects to that show this ‘in-between’ character. Apart from previous literature that describes CWS as third-places or spaces between the home and the office, in this volume we also encounter concepts as the middleground, as explored by Cohendet et al. (2010, 2021 as cited in Diaz and Psenner, this volume), used to emphasize the role of shared spaces in bridging the grassroots creativity and the structured innovation. We also see the ‘meanwhile’ model that Tan (this volume) describes as an innovative approach that bypasses the traditional capitalist logic of return on investment. Also, Gatsinos and Stockdale (this volume) build on Avdikos and Pettas (2021) to argue that CWS are operating in-between the commons and the market. Tabrizi and Psenner (this volume) argue that the blurry separation between private and public in CWS (Di Marino et al., 2023) is a key-characteristic of their hybridity. In addition, Cinere (this volume) uses the term “in-between imaginaries” (Membretti, 2011, p. 197 as cited in Cinere, this volume) to describe how rural CWS mobilize imaginaries that go beyond strict binaries of the rural and the urban.

Another aspect of openness for CWS is also the fact that they contribute to development in rather heterodox terms, as it is argued the introduction of this volume. Through the observations of the chapters in this volume, we can identify a multitude of different perspectives on what kind of development CWS foster or should foster and on which futures they should lead rural areas. Apart from claims that CWS can bring economic growth to rural areas, tackle outmigration, and attract young creative professionals, we also come across perspectives that problematize the equalization of development to economic growth and modernization and see in CWS a potential for place-based development, for sustainable development, for more just local and regional development and more. This tendency is stronger in rural and peripheral areas, where CWS are not linearly related to market revenues and may be less profit-oriented. Cinere (this volume) acknowledges that sometimes there are conflicting interests, visions, and aspirations for the developmental pathways of rural areas, between different groups of residents and visitors; hence, she

operationalizes a Cultural Political Economy approach (Sum & Jessop, 2013) for local and regional development. Tan (this volume) outlines the transformative potential of CWS to serve as catalysts for inclusive and sustainable socio-economic impacts, showing the normative perspective of CWS that may aim to transcend market logic and address socio-economic challenge. Overall, CWS can be used and operationalized from a multitude of perspectives and in relation to a diverse set of logics around development. Economic growth is one of them—and may be the most dominant in relation to urban CWS—but there are many voices in this volume and beyond that use more heterodox lenses for the developmental pathways of rural and peripheral areas, showing a lot of potential trajectories in which CWS may contribute to.

5 LIMITATIONS OF THIS VOLUME AND QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This volume has addressed many important features of CWS in rural and peripheral areas and has allowed us to identify the basic characteristics of this emerging phenomenon and some elements that differentiate them from urban CWS. First, rural and peripheral CWS are considered more locally embedded, more dependent on the specific local environment, and more bounded to the circumstances of the place they inhabit. They address more issues related to the rural and peripheral challenges, and they are more rooted in the place, and more supported by local authorities and public institutions, in contrast to the urban ones that are more relying on market revenues. Nevertheless, as they may come as a transformative actor for rural and peripheral areas, it is important to take this local embeddedness as an open question and a target, rather than a given element, to continue caring about the social cohesion of rural and peripheral areas and support vulnerable populations. Secondly, the rural and peripheral CWS are considered to be more community-led. They are smaller, closer to the human scale, and more dependent on volunteer labor, in relation to their urban counterparts. In this volume we see a lot of approaches to the issue of community, that is not only the rise of collaboration and creativity that comes from the colocation of professionals. Other aspects that have been addressed are the caring characteristics that emerge in rural and peripheral CWS, either from the community manager or between the users, as well as the importance of supporting marginalized groups. Last, the hybridity and openness that characterize CWS in urban settings is even stronger and

more needed in rural and peripheral areas, where CWS cover many local needs. The rural and peripheral CWS tend to be more accessible to non-members, hence open to the local community of the place where they operate. Multiplicity and openness in CWS does not only concern function but also definition and ideological direction, as well as the types of development CWS could contribute to. Connection of CWS to more heterodox takes of local and regional development is more promising in the rural and peripheral cases, as the urban ones tend to be more embedded into the market logic and the economic profit imperatives.

Although these observations address many of the open questions regarding rural and peripheral CWS, there are also some limitations in this volume that could lead to questions for future research. Firstly, this volume is strongly empirically grounded and interdisciplinary. This can be a strength and a weakness in the same time, as it is difficult to contribute to theory building regarding an emerging phenomenon that is studied from so many different approaches. Future research could delve deeper into the broader concepts and ideas that are associated to CWS and contribute more to the theory of the different disciplines that are concerned with the issue. Moreover, the cases in this volume are exclusively placed in the Global North, raising questions about the potential of the phenomenon in the Global South. Future research could shed light to the collaborative practices in the Global South and explore if and how the phenomenon of CWS is spread in different geographical settings. What is more, the ideological openness of the approaches to the phenomenon and the multitude of developmental pathways it can potentially contribute to make it difficult to outline specific policy implications and recommendations for CWS support. Overall, this volume sees rural and peripheral CWS with a positive perspective, with limited critical voices. As mentioned above, some authors in this volume shed light to potential threats related to the emergence and spread of CWS in non-urban areas, such as the gentrification of the countryside, or the romanticization of voluntary labor despite the exploitation and precarity it entails. The fact that the non-urban CWS usually rely on some specific people's desires for their place may seem inspiring but hides the fact that often those people cannot stand the burden of the high expectations to fulfill the initiatives' needs. What is more, although this chapter draws some insights from quantitative research as well, we have to mention that there is limited research that looks into the long-term sustainability and impact of non-urban CWS—a relatively recent phenomenon. More research should be done to explore the success or failure of

rural and peripheral CWS in the long run, their organizational and financial limitations and their long-term social, economic, and environmental impact for non-urban areas.

As stated above, many CWS in rural and peripheral areas depend on external resources due to the lower numbers of users as compared to CWS in urban locations. This means that they are more likely to depend on local and regional funding opportunities. Often support from local and regional public administration, municipalities, and governments is instrumental for the sustainability of CWS and is often based on a particular set of expectations toward local development. In this volume, we have seen how CWS can contribute to socioeconomic transformations and open up new developmental pathways for rural and peripheral areas. Since, CWS can open up new possibilities in rural and peripheral areas, it is important to explore in depth the concrete ways in which they can be supported and describe the futures they can lead to.

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INDEX¹

A

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), 37, 49

Alpine areas, 74, 84

Assemblage, 7, 53–69, 318

B

Built environment, 49, 74

C

Care, 8, 18, 103, 175, 177–179, 181, 182, 184–188, 227–229, 231, 291, 316

Civil society, 9, 61n6, 64, 284–286, 289–291, 301–303

Collaborative workspace (CWS), 1–10, 22, 23, 26, 53–69, 73–87, 126, 133–140, 142–148, 158, 160–163, 165, 166, 168, 170,

171, 176–188, 180n1, 181n2, 201, 226, 237–256, 283–289, 309–322

Communities, 2, 18, 36, 53, 64–66, 74, 94, 112, 134, 158, 161–162, 176, 198, 205–206, 218, 239, 263, 283–303, 311, 314–317

Community-led, 20, 54, 133, 311, 315, 317, 320

Community-led collaborative workspaces, 55–56, 67, 136, 145, 146

Core-periphery, 9, 239, 251, 255, 313

Coworking, 8, 9, 17n1, 22, 23, 26, 28–30, 37, 39, 41, 42, 55, 56, 59–64, 76, 93–105, 134–136, 143, 145, 147, 157–171, 180, 181, 184, 197–201, 204–211, 217–232, 250, 288, 290, 301, 302, 311, 314, 316, 318

¹Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

Coworking spaces, 1, 7, 9, 19, 21, 23, 25–29, 35–50, 58, 75, 76, 93–99, 101–105, 133, 135, 144, 160, 161, 164, 171, 187, 197–211, 218, 220, 226, 227, 229–230, 239, 240, 242, 243, 247, 249, 250, 285, 288, 289, 312, 316, 318

Creative and cultural industries (CCIs), 112, 115, 119

D

Digitalisation, 74, 76, 79, 80, 221, 239, 240, 248, 251, 254, 255, 288, 312

E

Embeddedness, 7, 19, 20, 22–25, 27, 117, 119–121, 123–125, 220, 221, 230, 313

Employment, 2, 9, 19, 24, 36, 57, 59, 84, 85, 100, 102, 143, 159, 175, 176, 237–256

Entrepreneurship, 2, 18, 21, 104, 158, 224, 232, 241, 246n9, 247–249, 251, 264, 267, 269, 275, 276, 285, 288, 289, 317

F

Female professionals, 8, 184

Flexible work, 8, 93–105, 199

G

Gender, 6, 7, 50, 175–178, 186, 188

Germany, 5, 112, 284, 289, 290

H

Human and non-human actors, 37

Hybridity, 5, 7, 9, 73–87, 240, 255, 317–320

Hybridity and openness, 317–320

Hybridization, 73, 75, 79, 80, 228, 239, 251, 255

Hybrid space, 8, 73, 74, 79, 80, 87, 158, 224, 248

I

Imaginariness, 6, 8–10, 199, 217–232, 319

Inclusivity, 30, 104, 134, 140, 144, 146, 239, 241, 242, 249, 251, 255, 317

Innovation, 2, 4, 5, 21, 26, 41, 65, 69, 79, 84, 87, 94, 95, 111–126, 133–136, 146, 147, 158, 163, 170, 189, 198, 219, 220, 238, 239, 241, 242, 248, 254, 255, 264–266, 285–287, 294, 310, 312, 318, 319

L

Left-behind places, 69

Local embeddedness, 7, 20–22, 117, 133, 134, 140–143, 145, 311–314, 320

M

Makerspaces, 1, 9, 75, 134, 181, 249, 263–277, 288, 290–296, 301, 302, 312, 315, 318

Municipal involvement, 47

N

New work, 42, 159, 309

O

Operator motivation, 49
 Orange Foundation, 268, 270–274,
 276, 277
 Outreach hub, 9, 283–303

P

Participatory formats, 9, 283–303
 Peripheral, 2, 8, 38, 42, 44, 74, 140,
 145, 228, 251, 263–277, 283,
 284, 287, 290, 291, 301,
 309–311, 313–322
 Peripheral areas, 2, 4, 6, 8–10, 36, 68,
 87, 118, 126, 135, 146, 147,
 162, 163, 176, 189, 221,
 263–277, 309–313,
 315, 318–322
 Place-based policy, 9, 223, 224, 232
 Place identity, 8, 9, 197–211, 312
 Poland, 9, 263–277

R

Regional development, 5, 8, 9, 36, 40,
 47, 49, 53, 54, 58, 69, 74, 95,
 104, 121, 133–140, 143,
 145–148, 165, 166, 171, 200,
 221, 239
 Remote workers, 4, 5, 8, 9, 19,
 22–26, 28, 29, 93, 94, 105, 158,
 162–170, 199, 205, 208, 210,
 237, 239, 242, 249, 251, 255,
 313, 314
 Resilience, 4, 8, 95, 137, 142,
 144–148, 157, 158, 240, 255
 Rhizome, 54–56, 65–68

Rural, 2, 17–30, 35–50, 53–69, 76,
 93, 118, 133, 157, 175,
 197–211, 217, 237–256,
 264–268, 277,
 283–303, 309–322

Rural areas, 5–9, 17–19, 21–29,
 35–47, 49, 53, 54, 79, 80, 84,
 95, 104, 118, 134, 136, 140,
 143, 144, 157–163, 165, 167,
 170, 171, 176, 183, 184, 187,
 188, 199, 201, 207, 208, 210,
 211, 218, 220, 221, 224, 226,
 227, 229, 230, 232, 237–256,
 264, 283–303,
 309–316, 318–322

Rural coworking, 17n1, 94, 135, 136,
 143, 158, 165, 167, 198, 200,
 201, 204–211, 219, 250

Rurality, 9, 24, 30, 67, 159, 231,
 232, 311

S

Science cube, 284, 291, 295, 297–302
 Short-term coworking, 8, 157–171
 Social capital, 2, 158, 161–162,
 166–169, 171, 176, 229, 231,
 267, 315
 Socio-economic impact, 133, 134,
 137–139, 265, 267,
 272–275, 320
 STEM, 265, 267, 270, 272, 275, 276
 Strategy, 43, 46, 48, 63, 69, 76, 80,
 99, 101, 103, 105, 117, 120,
 121, 136, 138, 139, 146, 147,
 158, 160, 162, 163, 165, 166,
 168–171, 200, 201, 206, 207,
 211, 218, 219, 222–224, 232,
 237, 241, 243, 245, 248,
 254–256, 284, 301, 314
 Sweden, 8, 93–105, 220, 242n4

T

Territorial assets, 198, 210
 Third mission, 284–287, 289, 291, 301, 302
 Transformative potential, 8, 10, 125, 134, 138, 139, 145–148, 320

U

Urban and rural divide, 145, 148, 149, 314

W

Wellbeing, 5, 7, 8, 28, 35, 170, 175–189, 205, 240, 247, 316
 Work, 2, 7, 17–30, 36, 41–44, 49, 55–57, 55n1, 60, 61, 63, 63n7,

64, 67, 69, 75, 76, 95, 99–101, 103–105, 113, 115, 116, 120, 122, 125, 143, 158, 159, 161, 163, 167, 171, 176, 178, 181, 183–185, 187, 188, 198, 199, 204–207, 210, 211, 217–223, 225–231, 238, 246n7, 247, 249, 250, 254, 265, 273, 284, 288, 289, 313–316

Worker cooperative, 54, 56, 58, 59
 Workspace, 8, 23, 28, 59n4, 104, 134, 140, 144, 163, 185, 187, 198, 206, 221, 238, 240, 263, 274, 309, 310

Y

Youth employment, 9, 237–256