Social Innovation in Rural Areas in Scotland

Joshua Msika, Carla Barlagne, Richard Hewitt and Maria Nijnik, the James Hutton Institute
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Executive Summary

This workshop report summarises the discussions from an event held at the James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, on the 31st of May, 2018 (Fig. 1). The workshop was titled "Social Innovation in Rural Areas in Scotland" and provided an opportunity for practitioners, policy-makers and researchers to network and discuss the challenges facing social innovation (SI) in rural areas.

Figure 1: The workshop participants.

The **first focus group** activity: *Identifying enablers and barriers to the initiation and development of social innovation* identified several factors influencing success over the course of a project's lifetime:

- **Project viability**: Identifying a workable project is particularly important in the early stages.
- **Group dynamics:** Having a shared vision and aims is important throughout. In the longer term, groups need to deal with internal divergences and adapt to changing circumstances.
- **Finances:** Financial needs change significantly as projects develop.
- **Local buy-in:** Maintaining the project's reputation and keeping people informed.
- **People:** Having enough skilled and motivated people is important throughout
- **External actors:** Similar projects, local authorities and network organisations providing advice and mentoring.
- **Supportive policy:** e.g. asset transfer legislation in the community empowerment act.

The **second focus group** activity: *Facilitating community projects: actors, linkages and scales*, found that: The same types of actor could facilitate or block initiatives depending on the individual case.

- Projects usually need a motivated individual or champion to kickstart and drive actions.
- A good treasurer is an important aspect once the initial set up stages are completed.
- Wider community support is important and should be involved as much as possible in project set up.
- Projects need to find ways to manage local opponents or "naysayers".
- External agencies and consultants can be useful but should be independent.
- Local authorities play a wide variety of roles but may not be motivated to help find specific solutions.
- Despite the critical importance of funding, funding bodies can be difficult to deal with, e.g. imposing restrictive conditions.
- Sufficient "social capital" is regarded as an essential asset for overcoming difficulties that may arise.

The **third focus group** activity: *How can we help you? Research Priorities for social innovation in rural areas*, identified possible directions for future research:

- A survey of Scottish social innovations to reveal the current state of the sector.
- Identifying good ways to measure the success of social innovations.
- Examining examples of particularly interesting social innovations or models of support.
- Assessing how different factors help or hinder social innovations.

Collaborative action research with support organisations to identify the best ways to support social innovation in rural Scotland.

Workshop Description

The day began with introductions from Maria Nijnik, The James Hutton Institute, and Graeme Beale, Scottish Government (Fig. 2). Prof Nijnik outlined the importance of social innovation (SI) as an area of interest to both policy-makers and academics, providing a model that could bypass the disadvantages of both market-led and state-led development approaches.

Figure 2: Prof Maria Nijnik (left) and Dr Graeme Beale (right) addressing workshop participants.

Dr Beale provided some policy context for social innovation in Scotland, highlighting the concept's overlap with Scottish policy agendas such as community empowerment, community resilience and rural development. He emphasised Scottish Government's interest in the topic while also posing some critical questions: Should we value innovativeness in and of itself, over impact? How does the new concept of SI fit into a long history of Scottish community development? What do SIs need to thrive and are we comfortable with those conditions (if they include state or market failure, for example)? How do we ensure SI for all?

The morning continued with three presentations. These took the format of dialogues between a practitioner and an academic, in three different sectors of social innovation in Scotland. Roger Goodyear of Portsoy Community Enterprise was interviewed by Bill Slee of the Rural Development Company to discuss community-led rural regeneration (Fig. 3).

Then, Tom Cooper of the Community Woodlands Association was interviewed by Bianca Ambrose-Oji of Forest Research UK to discuss social innovation in the Scottish community forestry arena. Lastly, Garth Entwistle of the Udny Community Trust Co Ltd was interviewed by Richard Hewitt of the James Hutton Institute to talk about community-led renewable energy developments. These talks provided concrete examples of Scottish rural social innovations that would inform our discussions later in the day.

Figure 3: Three dialogues between a practitioner and an academic, in three different sectors of SI

The rest of the day was structured around **discussion groups on three topics** (highlights of which are summarised in the following sections of this report):
- Identifying enablers and barriers over time
- Identifying the actors and linkages at different scales
- Identifying research priorities for social innovation in rural areas

The workshop concluded with a viewing of the project video from the European SIMRA (Social Innovation in Marginal Rural Areas) research project. This confirmed to all of us that while the issues,

challenges and questions we had identified during the day may have felt specific to the Scottish context, they were in fact common across Europe.

Focus Group 1: Identifying enablers and barriers to the initiation and development of social innovation

Focus groups facilitated by Carla Barlagne, James Hutton Institute, and Bianca Ambrose-Oji, Forest Research UK (Fig. 4). These discussions focused on understanding enablers and barriers to the uptake and development of social innovation initiatives. Factors were identified across a timeline running from the beginning of the project, through its development and into the long term.

Figure 4: Dr Carla Barlagne (standing in centre) is facilitating Focus Group 1 of workshop participants.

Highlights from the Discussion

Similar enablers and barriers were identified across the three groups and generally aligned with factors that have been identified in previous research.

Enablers at the beginning of a project

Participants discussed the primary importance of coming up with a **viable project**. The people involved were seen as key to the process. Participants identified the following **helpful personal characteristics**: willingness, ability, know-how, imagination, ideas, motivation, knowledge, time, confidence, enthusiasm, skills and patience. These people, usually volunteers, needed some form of **group identity**. This had several facets: firstly, a **shared strategic vision or common purpose**; secondly a **legally-grounded organisational structure**; thirdly, **respected and inclusive leaders**.

Finally, there were several external factors that could support to projects in the early stages: Firstly, **other projects**, either singly or as part of larger networks, could act either as local partners or as inspirational examples of success elsewhere. Secondly, **buy-in from local people** beyond the core team confirmed that the project's vision was widely supported. More formal support could come from **funding bodies**, especially if the funding was staged/supportive, from **local authorities**, e.g. through rural development partnerships, and from a **supportive legislative framework**, e.g. asset transfer legislation in the community empowerment act.

Enablers during the development of a project

As the project develops, the core team of people involved must demonstrate **good decision-making and planning skills**, particularly in terms of dealing with challenges, being flexible with timing and being able to recognise opportunities and threats. The funding picture also evolves, as projects can be supported by **access to finance**, or a **reliable source of income**.

Several factors enabling project initiation continue to be important during projects' development phase. Linked to the evolving financial picture, the project's viability must continue to be demonstrated through **interim successes and milestones.** The project must also continue to benefit from the local community's buy-in, and must carefully maintain **the local standing of the project itself and the people involved**. **External support** continues to play a big role, including from supporting organisations, from professional supporters and from a supportive policy and institutional setting.

Enablers for projects over the long term

In the long term, participants emphasised the growing importance of projects' **flexibility and adaptability** to changing circumstances. This is facilitated by taking the **time to reflect, adapt and evolve** the project' aspirations. It is also important to **keep local people informed and involved**, using social media for example, to keep up projects' profile and maintain a **clear link to local needs**. The need for **skills and hard work** from the project team does not diminish over time. At the same time, a certain stability can evolve as **resources and assets provide "ballast"** that enable the continued pursuit of grant funding or other opportunities. Relationships with **mentor or network organisations** also continue to be significant enablers, providing support through challenges.

Barriers at the beginning of a project

Conversely, participants cited **a lack of project viability**, often due to an unfavourable setting, was emphasised as a barrier to initiating a project. The necessity to obtain **permission** from the local council, landowner or other body can be an important hurdle.

Participants highlighted the risks associated with a **lack of collective working,** of one person "going it alone". A lack of people could then lead to other gaps, in **experience, skills, enthusiasm, talents, confidence, imagination or ambition**, compounded by "fear of the unknown". These gaps could be particularly acute for projects with **complex knowledge needs**.

Two other barriers were mentioned: Firstly, **financial constraints,** such as a lack of funds. Secondly, a **lack of trust** in the community, manifest as **individuals' or organisations'** low standing.

Barriers during the development of a project

As projects develop, the **lack of the right funding** and the difficulty of **meeting funding deadlines** were mentioned over and above simple **lack of funds**. Constraining factors in **policies, governance and institutions** could also constitute a barrier.

Again, a **lack of capacity or volunteers** could lead to gaps in **confidence, skills, knowledge, capability and energy** which could lead in turn to **apathy and fatigue in the core group**. In addition, participants mentioned **community group dynamics** and the possibility of **fracture in the community group**, as a result of poor community cohesion. This could be exacerbated by **a lack of mediation or facilitation** and the **difficulty in finding the right advice / support / mentor at different points in time**. The other possibility participants raised was that the core group could develop **'elitist' attitudes,** feeling like the project team constituted their private social club, which could result in **local opposition**.

Another difficulty as projects develop could arise from a **lack of clarity in aims, direction and planning**. A common risk was seen to be **a focus on charismatic buildings / landscapes / environments** rather than what a community needs.

Barriers for projects over the long term

Over the long term, projects' survival can be threatened by **unexpected changes** due to unforeseen circumstances. The group may have **difficulties accepting change** or unable to innovate to the necessary degree. This can highlight **disparate agendas/aims** and precipitate **a clash of egos**.

Long-term sustainability is also impacted by **volunteer fatigue**, which could be due to **running out of ideas**, **running out of energy** or **apathy** – feeling like too much has been asked of communities already and that someone else should do the work, e.g. council, NHS, police, etc. This emphasises the risk of relying on **volunteers,** which can lead gaps in **expertise, knowledge, skills, capacity and capability** over time. A failure to take **succession** into account can also be a barrier in the long term.

Finances also continue to be relevant barriers over the long term, especially if **sustainable core funding is not available**, at the right time with the right conditions. This can be related to **low local support** as a result of **insufficient promotion** or a **lack of inclusivity of the facilities provided**. Finally, **legal constraints** such as planning, state aid rules, local authority red tape, health and safety legislation and risk aversion on the part of the authorities can all be long-term barriers.

Key Themes

We can thus identify several key factors that can act as enablers or barriers of community projects, and we outline here how they change over the course of a project's lifetime:

- **Project viability**: Identifying a workable project is the most obvious enabling factor and is particularly important in the early stages of a project's development. This can be made more difficult if the project is complex or if the setting is unfavourable.

- **People:** Two forms of human capital were discussed: motivation and skills. Because social innovations rely on volunteers, they need to find ways to maintain enthusiasm over the full course of the project. In addition, volunteers may not always project-relevant knowledge or experience. Involving more people at all stages and planning for succession over the long term helps to address these issues.

- **Group dynamics:** Having a shared vision and aims is important throughout a project's lifetime. The importance of respected and inclusive leadership was only mentioned for the project initiation stage. In the longer term, robust decision-making and planning helped groups to deal with internal divergences and adapt to changing circumstances.

- **Local buy-in:** Support from the wider community is fostered by designing projects to meet local needs, maintaining the project's reputation and keeping people informed. Local support is put at risk by focusing on charismatic projects rather than meeting people's needs, by insufficient promotion, by a lack of inclusive facilities or if the core group develops an exclusive feel.

- **Finances:** Initially, supportive, staged funding is very enabling for projects. As they develop, access to credit or regular income can become more important. Over the long term developing assets or reserves can provide stability. Lack of funds is not always the main problem: Lack of appropriate funding or funding with stringent deadlines or conditions could also be limiting.

- **External actors:** Other similar projects, local authorities and network organisations could provide advice and mentoring at crucial moments during project development. Conversely, a lack of permissions from the local authority or local landowner could be a major barrier early on in a project's lifetime.

- **Supportive policy:** Some policies support the emergence of social innovation, for example the asset transfer legislation in the community empowerment act. Conversely, legal constraints around planning, state aid rules, health and safety legislation, local regulations can be barriers in the longer term.

Focus Group 2: Facilitating community projects: actors, linkages and scales.

Focus Groups facilitated by Richard J. Hewitt, James Hutton Institute, and David Kerschbaum, University of Aberdeen (Fig. 5). For each group, this activity began with a blank sheet of paper placed on the table. The facilitator drew a small circle in the centre of sheet containing the words "community project" (CP).

Figure 5: Dr Richard Hewitt is facilitating Focus Group 2 of workshop participants

Activity 1: Identification of key actors and location of key actors on diagram

Participants were then invited to write down on post-it notes all relevant actors in relation to CPs. Going around the table, each participant in turn was invited to add their post-it notes to the diagram, locating those with closer relationship to the CP itself nearer to the central circle, and those with a more distant connection further away. This enabled an approximate idea to be formed of the key actors and their relationship to CPs, through three "snapshots" offered by the three groups in the form of an actor diagram (Fig. 6).

Once the first round had been completed, participants were invited to comment on the diagram and add more actors if necessary. Comments were recorded by facilitators on a flip chart, and as notes on the diagram. Both general concepts and concrete examples were used, for example 'champion' and 'Stonehaven Town Partnership', respectively.
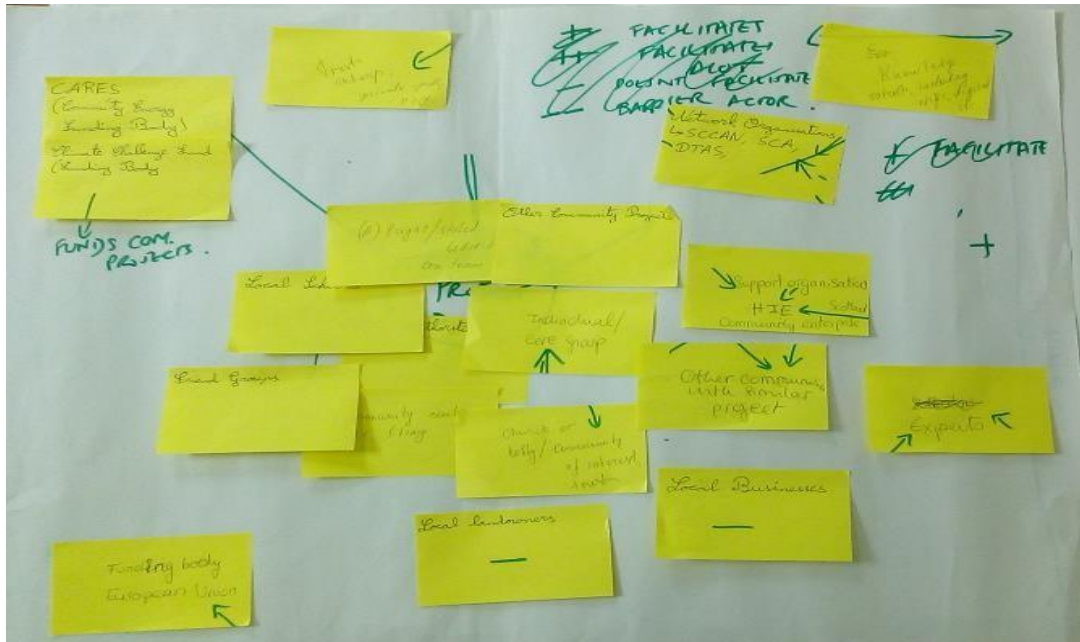
Figure 6: Actor diagram for group 1.

Activity 2: Identification of key facilitating or blocking actors on a matrix

The second part of this activity involved the identification of the most important facilitating or blocking actors. Participants were asked to select them from the actor diagram (activity 1), the facilitator then located them on a 2-column matrix drawn on a flip chart. Where facilitating actors could also be blocking actors, an arrow was drawn across both columns (Fig. 7).
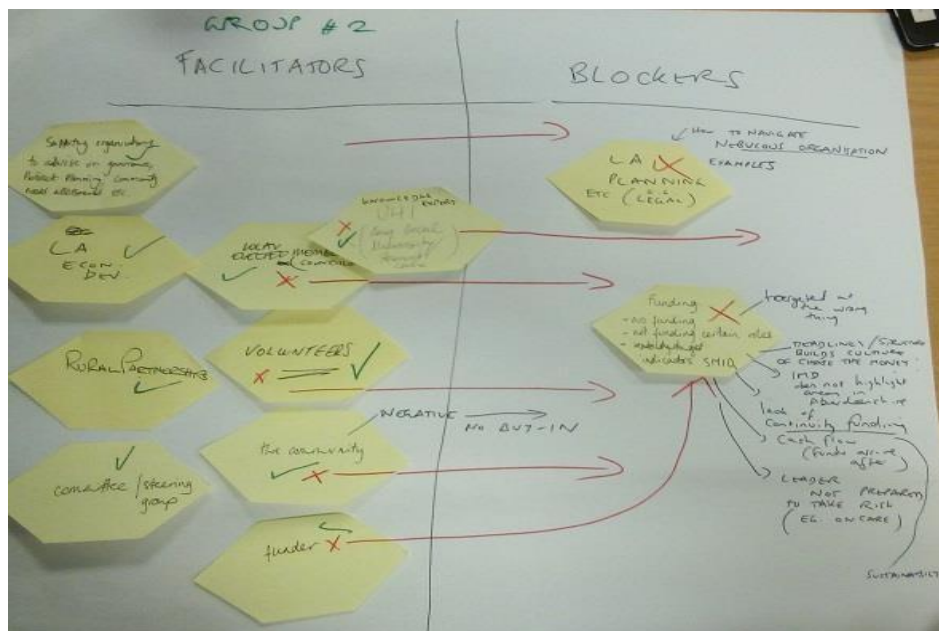

Figure 7: Facilitating/blocking actor matrices for group 2.

The resulting information was later combined into a single diagram by researchers (Fig 8) and interpreted as follows.
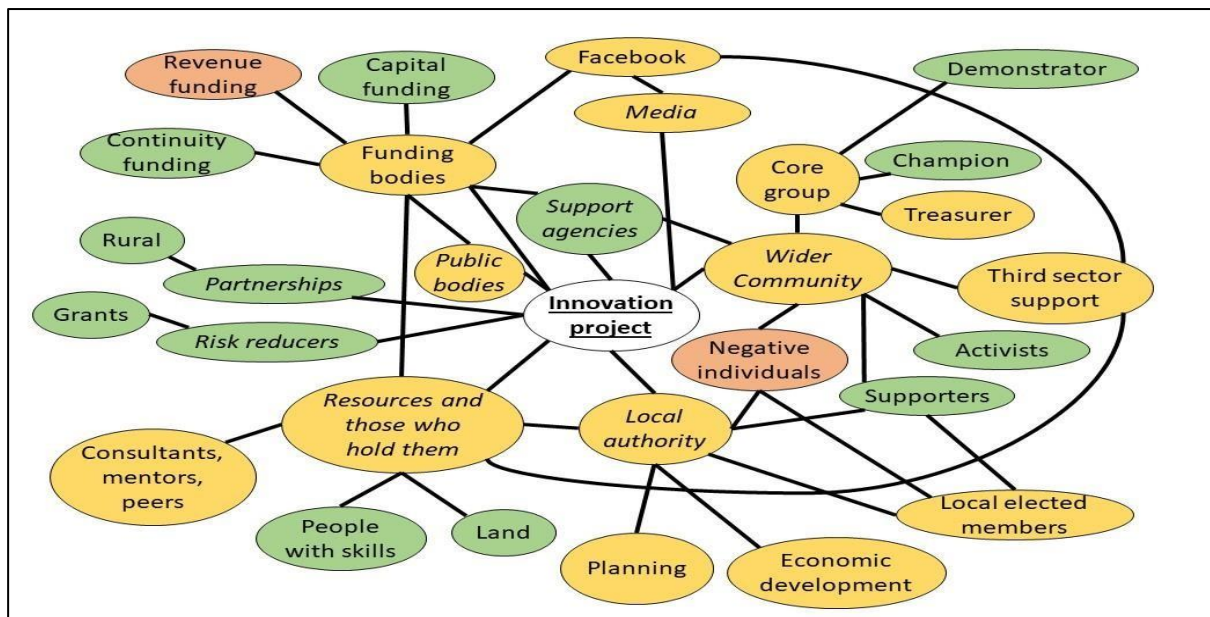
Figure 8: Summary sociogram drawn up by researchers after the workshop showing key actors potentially involved in community-scale social innovations. Actors in green were generally considered facilitators, those in orange were considered blockers and actors in yellow could be both depending on the situation.

A number of key points emerged from this activity.

Firstly, **almost any facilitating actor could be a blocking actor in different circumstances and vice versa**. A simple analysis of potential facilitating and blocking actors in the early development phases of SI might be a great time-saver, later on.

Secondly, an SI project usually **starts with a core group or person with a vision (a "champion")** who can kickstart and drive actions. It can be important whether this group or individual is local, as a community may be less receptive to outsiders, though not necessarily, as recent incomers may bring new ideas. The role of the champion is also considerable no matter whether an idea derives from a group of people or an individual, since leaders are required for the success of the project. If an idea is conceived by a person who does not possess the skills to find an audience, a demonstrator may become key.

As a project leaves the initial stages, a **good treasurer can become a key asset** to deal with financial aspects of the initiative. The **support of the wider community** is also important as a pool from which to recruit new activists, and should be directly involved in defining the project's aims.

There are always likely to be people with different views who might try to hinder or block SI initiatives. While accounting for differing views is a natural part of all social interaction, **some community members might be "naysayers"**: individuals that are unhappy with the initiative in general and seek to prevent it. Strategies need to be found to **manage these people** to limit the damage they can do to projects.

Social media was identified as potentially beneficial, as a tool to promote the SI and attract new investors or activists. It can also be useful for progress monitoring and financial reporting. On the

other hand, social media can give a platform for individuals to negatively influence the reputation of projects.

Support agencies and other **external actors**, such as consultants, may be useful to provide advice and networking. Ideally, however, external actors should be independent, since they can influence the delivery of a project, but their type and structure is less important.

Local authorities (LAs) have several roles, e.g. planning and managing local assets, and can offer support or critical feedback. Workshop participants felt that LAs could sometimes be too passive in terms of finding solutions, whereas communities would always "find a way".

Funding is of central importance to the success of SI initiatives , but it can be difficult to deal with funding bodies. They may give no funding at all, or give funding but to certain roles only, thus targeting wrong things, they may not respect the cultural importance of places and spaces with their conditions, the focus on deadlines can build a culture of chasing the money, the lack of continuity funding can also be an issue, and revenue funding can be much harder to cover than capital funding.

Overall, the roles of actors who are usually involved in the innovation process rely heavily upon the circumstances. Therefore, building up sufficient **social capital** may be the most beneficial thing for the success of social innovation projects, as it may create the right context easier for potential triggers that can get the project past stalling points.

Focus Group 3: How can we help you? Research priorities for social innovation in rural areas

Focus groups facilitated by Prof. Bill Slee, Rural Development Company (Fig. 9), and Joshua Msika, James Hutton Institute. Bill Slee and Joshua Msika facilitated a discussion with three separate groups of participants in turn (Fig. 10). We started each discussion by introducing the Social, Economic and Geographical Sciences (SEGS) group at the James Hutton Institute, highlighting the opportunity for collaboration with 35+ social scientists working on rural and environmental issues. We then asked each group to think of ways in which research and practice could be more closely linked.

Highlights from the Discussion

Many of our participants provided support to community groups developing social innovations, so a key question was **how does one best support social innovation?** Several participants from Aberdeenshire wondered if the community development partnerships set up by the local authority in 2008, several of which are still running, could be assessed as a model. Participants also stressed the importance of finding appropriate ways to **assess how successful the support has been**. There was some speculation on factors that may help or hinder social innovation.

Figure 9: Prof Bill Slee is addressing Focus group 3 of workshop participants.

Firstly, we discussed the impact that **the type, scale, demographic make-up and geographical constellation of the community** might have. Secondly, we discussed supporting factors in the built environment, such as **the role of meeting spaces**.

Thirdly, we discussed the importance of **human and social capital**, particularly for accessing state support schemes, but also for managing what can be very complex projects. It was obvious to all participants that certain communities found it easier to get projects off the ground.

Figure 10: Joshua Msika (left) is facilitating discussions of Focus group 3 participants.

This raised a host of questions about **social justice and representation**. Some projects were seen to be less representative of their communities than others, sometimes over-representing the concerns of more affluent residents. Participants pointed out that while private service provision is market-driven and the public sector is state-driven, while the third sector is "empowerment-driven", delivering services to those communities most able to initiate social innovations and does not necessarily address social inequalities.

Finally, several participants pointed out the **specific opportunities provided by the rural context**. Social innovations could make use of rural resources and create links to farming, renewable energy and tourism, amongst others. Participants wondered about the possibility to link these aspects of the rural economy with education or health and social care, particularly on the preventative side. Some participants commented on the lack of social innovations in the housing sector.

Avenues for Future Research

The purpose of this discussion was to inform the direction of research on social innovation within the Scottish Government's strategic research programme in rural and environmental affairs. Participants in the workshop raised questions about Social Innovation (SI) that can be broadly broken down into four different types of research (Fig. 11).

Descriptive	Exploratory
• In which sectors of the rural economy are SIs involved? • What types of services do SIs provide? • What types of communities do SIs serve?	• What are good ways to measure the success of an SI? • Are there any SIs that are particularly well linked to the rural economy?

• How many people are involved in SIs and how representative are these groups? • How do SIs interact with local authorities, the Scottish Government and other state organisations? Are there organisations that mediate these links?	• How do SIs manage complex assets such as land or buildings? • Are the Aberdeenshire Partnerships a useful model for supporting SI processes?
Explanatory • How do various factors help or hinder social innovations? • Does lower expectation of state services in rural areas affect propensity to start SIs? • How does the type and scale of the community affect the success of an SI? • How does the availability of meeting spaces affect social innovation processes?	**Emancipatory / Action Research** • How can community capacities be built up over time? • How can projects be supported through critical points in their trajectories? • What are the most effective techniques for supporting social innovation processes?

Figure 7: Different types of research questions on Social Innovation in Scotland. The 4 categories are drawn from Box 3.6 in Robson, C. 2002. Real World Research 2nd ed. Blackwell Publishing.

Thus, we can envisage **several possible avenues for further research**:

1. A survey of social innovations across (rural) Scotland to reveal the current state of the sector. This could build on similar work already done in SIMRA (see below).
2. A mixed methods investigation (literature, interviews with key stakeholders) to identify good ways to measure the success of social innovations.
3. Case study work to examine examples of particularly interesting social innovations, or models of support such as the Aberdeenshire partnerships.
4. A mixed methods investigation (census data, SI survey, interviews) to assess how different factors help or hinder social innovations.
5. A collaborative action research project with support organisations to identify the best ways to support social innovation in rural Scotland.

Further Information

For further details on the EU-funded SIMRA research project, which provided impetus for the workshop, please see: http://www.simra-h2020.eu/

A full list of workshop participants is provided as an appendix.

To contact the authors of this report, please write to Maria.Nijnik@hutton.ac.uk.

Workshop Participants List

Name	Organisation
Maria Nijnik	The James Hutton Institute
Carla Barlagne	The James Hutton Institute
Richard Hewitt	The James Hutton Institute
Joshua Msika	The James Hutton Institute
David Kerschbaum	The James Hutton Institute
Mags Currie	The James Hutton Institute
Graeme Beale	Scottish Government
Roger Goodyear	Portsoy Community Enterprise
Bill Slee	Rural Development Company
Tom Cooper	Glengarry Community Woodlands
Bianca Ambrose-Oji	Forest Research
Garth Entwhistle	Udny Community Development Trust
Natasha Pawlukiewicz	Marr Area Partnership
David Nelson	Kincardineshire Development Partnership
Roisin Daly	Marr Area Partnership
Jacky Niven	Kincardine Development Partnership
Heather MacRae	Aberdeenshire Council
Lucy Styles	Aberdeenshire Council
Zoe Laird	Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Diana Valero	University of Highlands and Islands
Reid Hutchison	Aberdeenshire Council