Social enterprises in the Irish rural space: an analysis in the area of Ballyhoura

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Social enterprises are a pivotal tool for improving the living conditions in the Irish countryside and also to reduce the sense of remoteness in rural space by creating many job opportunities specifically towards disadvantaged people and unemployed workforce. The latter aspect is particularly topical during this time of Irish economic crisis as many dismissed people come back to their rural villages aimed to find new job chances.
The object of this quantitative analysis was to investigate the role and the impact of social enterprises in a small Irish rural area such as Ballyhoura able to stimulate endogenous job opportunities towards disadvantaged groups of people and young generations.
The Local Action Group is the most and foremost local factor to promote and to manage in collaboration with stakeholders, farmers and entrepreneurs the rural development in the countryside, using different sources of financial supports allocated by the European Union and by the Irish government as well.
The methodology of analysis was a qualitative description of the role of social enterprises in a rural Irish area after a description of features and issues of the rural context.
Over the time of analysis, the less favored people as elderly and young people, female workforce and dismissed people have improved their skill capabilities and they have formed new enterprises able to produce handmade products, to implement the tourism fruition of the countryside. They have also set up new enterprises aimed to take care of disadvantaged people creating a social and solidarity economy.
The social enterprises have had a pivotal role in increasing tourism flows and the socio-economic growth in the area of Ballyhoura. Other findings have pointed out as in the area of study there has been a strengthening of the sense of belonging to rural communities and also a new involvement in a modern path of rural planning. Rural communities are a fundamental pillar in the Irish process of endogenous development able to reduce the sense of remoteness in the countryside and stimulating new generations to move from urban areas to the rural space.
The local and European authorities should allocate new addition financial resources to stimulate the growth of social enterprises in order to reduce the out-migration from the Irish countryside by several job opportunities in this time of economic downturn. Others recommendations for the public authorities are also to assign to social enterprises a prime role in providing social services towards people at risk of marginalization, in preserving the environment and in upholding cultural traditions in rural territories.

Keywords: Social Enterprises, social economy, multifunctionality, Common Agricultural Policy, Rural Development, rural remoteness, Local Action Group.

1. THE IRISH RURAL CONTEXT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The Irish rural villages and the countryside in the last two decades have suffered out-emigration issues and rural marginalization due both to a deterioration of socio-economic conditions and also to a decline in the supply of public services and in job opportunities. Hence, positive actions promoting rural development have been able to stimulate farming

activities such as the growth of new enterprises tightly linked to the Irish rurality and by offering new public services to look after rural people. People living in rural areas require an adequate level of social infrastructures, efficiently means of transport, healthcare services and an economic environment able to improve general conditions in rural communities. A fair rural development process has to face up out-emigration, rural depopulation and socio-economic marginalization of Irish rural areas creating several favorable opportunities for a socio-economic development using National and European Community funds. In fact, the purpose of the Common Agricultural Policy and other financial sources allocated by the European Unions toward the rural areas is to reduce the sense of isolation and remoteness in the countryside and in rural territories.

Over the last 6 years, as a result of recession and global economic crisis, rural areas in the Republic of Ireland have brought out a rapid increase of emigration both towards Dublin or other Irish densely populated urban centers such as Cork, Tipperary, Galway and Limerick, and also towards non-European countries as Australia, Canada and the United States [1, 2, 3, 4, 5].

The main downside of rural emigration from the Irish countryside to urban centers has been to accentuate the marginalization and socio-economic exclusion in rural areas in particular in many small rural territories such as tiny islands with a decrease of rural identities and a dearth of folk traditions [6]. National institutions, regional government and local administrations have prompted to face with the rural marginalization addressing specific actions aimed in providing basic services in order to reduce the out-emigration towards urban centers. Irish social enterprises have been a strategic element to ensure a balanced development in the diversified patchwork of the Irish countryside, providing a wealth of adequate and irreplaceable public services such as transport, healthcare, specifically addressed to the elderly, childcare and recreational-cultural activities through a new model of social assistance and local animation able to stimulate, in one side, new job opportunities in the Irish countryside and in the other side enhancing the solidarity sense of belonging to rural communities [7].

The Irish rural areas are characterized by ageing with effects on the level of involvement and participation in rural contexts increasing social inclusion which is pivotal to maintain social cohesion and to solve social fragmentation [8]. In the same time it is important to offer social services towards rural people with the purpose to reduce the growth of disadvantaged people due to only the remoteness and the physical distance of rural families from urban spaces [9] offering health and social care provisions and amenities to stimulate an adequate social life and human interactions. Thus, it is pivotal to stimulate a vicious circle engaging elderly people in programming processes of rural growth in the Irish countryside [9] because the farmers and the rural citizens are the dwellers of the rural space able to understand weakness and strengthens in the rural development path.

In the 1990s, during the European Conference held in the Irish county of Cork, the European Union has acknowledged several functions to farmers in promoting rural development and in environment protection. The European Union accepted to assign to farmers the function in protecting rural space, readdressing the main goals of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) providing some environment priorities over the time 2000-2006 and in the seven year time 2007-2013. The priorities of the CAP have been focused on a multidisciplinary approach and plurisectorial proposals able to promote an integrated rural development shared among all stakeholders living in rural territories with the purpose to ensure an economically and sustainable growth towards rural communities. According to the principles of the Cork Conference, it was compulsory to involve in the rural development processes, political and economic institutions, enterprises and farmers aimed to encourage a greater

sense of belonging to the rural communities as well and to stimulate a direct participation in the patterns of rural economic planning and programming [10]. The countryside is considered an opportunity hence, it do not have a downside aspect linked to negative stereotypes of the rural life such as the sense of isolation and poor conditions.
Social enterprises specialized in rural craft, craftmade food, in green tourism, in healthcare and in elderly care have been the unique pillar of innovation and socio-economic development in rural areas ensuring to the Irish primary sector the multifunctionality and the protection in rural territories; the farmer is became a strategic human and social capital in protecting environment and rural space by the diversification of several agricultural activities offered throughout a new model of solidarity economy.

2. THE ROLE OF L.E.A.D.E.R. (LIAISON ENTRE ACTIONS DE DÉVELOPPEMENT DE L'ÉCONOMIE RURALE) PROJECT IN THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

New strategies aimed to promote the rural development and to protect rural space have been taken into place since the nineties through the Community Initiative L.e.a.d.e.r. acronym of French words Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale. Rightly the L.e.a.d.e.r. can be considered a normal continuation of the natural reform process about the Common Agricultural Policy proposed by the EU Commissioner Ray MacSharry aimed to strengthen a multisectorial approach in the European agriculture and furthermore to transform the European agriculture from a simple activity of production, productivist model, into a multifunctional sector or rather in an agricultural post productivist paradigm able to promote environmental protection and socio-economic development of rural territories [11,12,13,14,15]. The European Union with the Community Initiative L.e.a.d.e.r. I, over the time 1992-1994, put into action, by the principle of subsidiarity defined in the Maastricht Treaty, the protection of rural environment through the multifunctionality stimulating a local participation in political endogenous decision processes of rural communities.

In Ireland, the Community Initiative L.e.a.d.e.r. was pivotal in shrinking the economic and social divide between this country and the other States of the European Union by an integrated cohesive and coordinated model of rural planning in collaboration with local authorities and national government. The L.e.a.d.e.r. has formed the backbone for the local development and for the social and economic growth in rural areas by reducing the Irish out-emigration from the countryside, generating new job opportunities tightly linked to the rurality. The Community Initiative L.e.a.d.e.r. I, over the time 1992-1994, was carried out by several Local Action Groups (LAGs) which were micro structures able to stimulate rural promotion and local animation in small rural communities, giving value to social-economic rural features. The main purpose of Irish Local Action Groups was also to increase social inclusion by the development of new enterprises operating specially in the third sector and in other public services, through a sustainable making the most of natural resources and a protection of rural landscape, generating new job opportunities in tourism, crafts and agriculture.

Some studies published in 2002 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions have identified a number of actions and interventions to be implemented in order to better living conditions in many European rural areas and to improve the quality of life of farmers such as [16]:
1) implement the economic resources in the rural areas;
2) improve health care of rural population;
3) ensure an adequate employment and fair working conditions;

4) promote knowledge throughout an appropriate training process towards rural people, improving education and vocational training processes as well.

The Community Initiative L.e.a.d.e.r. is based on a plurisectorial local approach using endogenous resources and new technologies following the proposals of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Reducing social discrimination and shrinking economic critical weakness in rural areas have been two pillars of rural development. In fact, the main purpose of rural development has been to deal with social exclusion, stopping up the marginalization and lessening Irish rural emigration from the countryside, throughout an improvement in the accessibility to public services such as healthcare, rural transport, education and training. To solve partially the rural marginalization, European and Irish initiatives in rural development have financed actions able to implement above mentioned services, considered akin to public goods or rather something of not more economically efficiently in less favored rural areas. The spread of new technologies have been able to realize a more cohesive participation in processes of planning and management of rural territories reducing the remoteness and the dependence from urban spaces.

3. SOCIAL ENTERPRISES KEY DRIVERS FOR EMPLOYMENT GROWTH IN IRISH RURAL AREAS

The social enterprises have produced in the Irish countryside and in rural territories a new kind of economy based on solidarity and a democratic participation of citizens in the local process of development by creation of a newly cohesive environment with mutual links among inhabitants in terms of social and human capital [17, 18, 19].

In legislative literature a social enterprise is defined as a private enterprise, sometime in an associate form such as cooperative, aimed to produce and to exchange goods and services of social utility, which can be used and can be accessible by all people who request these services by paying in function of the obtained performance [20,21,22,23,24]. In general, social enterprises are groups of people aimed to protect some areas by implementation of an array of initiatives able to reduce the out-emigration from the countryside and from areas at risk of marginalization due to a shortage in public services, healthcare and job opportunities. The pivotal features of social enterprises are tightly linked to cooperative principles such as a decision-making power not based on capital ownership**,** a participatory and collaborative nature of members, a limited profit distribution and a key role in producing benefit to local community.

Comparing studies about the third sector and the literature on social enterprises in Italy and in Ireland, the Italian legislation seems to be a pioneer nation in the European Union (EU) in legalizing third sector and in recognizing and regulating social enterprises by the Legislative Decree n. 155 24 March 2006. Italy was the first nation in the EU to promulgate a specific and formal definition of social enterprises, defined as a group of people, formed mainly a cooperative, with the most and foremost purpose of doing business throughout the supply of socially useful services towards local communities and or in favour of disadvantaged people such as elderly and young people. In Ireland there is not a specific law to regulate social enterprises and the most important legal framework is the Credit Union Act published in 1997 and there is not a legal recognition of the social economy and social enterprise status [25].

The social economy in the European Union has growth during the early 2000s up to 2010 and the percentage of employed people has increased from 11 million to 14.5 million [25]. In Ireland the workforce in social enterprises was equal to 155,306 people in 2002 and it

declined in 98,735 employers in 2010 with a rate of incidence on the total workforce equal to 5.30%. The percentage of volunteers employed in them is equivalent to 32%, which is lower than the value detected in the Netherlands and in Denmark. According to the European Union, the L.e.a.d.e.r. has been less efficient than other financial funds such as European Social Fund (ESF) in the development of Irish social enterprises compared to other European countries such as Germany, Sweden, Finland and Greece [25].

Social enterprises play a positive role on the socio-economic development of rural areas, preventing social exclusion and economic marginalization, through the creation of employment opportunities, taking advantage of the potentialities characterizing rural territories such as green tourism, rural heritage and amenities and recreational activities. Moreover, social enterprises provide in the same time social services and healthcare to the communities that live in it replacing some public utility services for the collectivity. Social enterprises are predominantly scattered in Irish rural areas and they are grown in the last fifteen years due to a few endogenous factors such as a high incidence of social capital and a meaningful sense of involvement of private stakeholders and public institutions in the rural patterns of local development. Anyway, the role of the Irish public institutions in promoting the success and development of social enterprises was important in some stages of planning, coordination and allocation of national funds disbursed by the European Union through the European Social Fund, the National Development Plan (NDP) and the Rural Development Plan by the L.e.a.d.e.r. In order to support the local growth of social enterprises Irish government has provided national financial funds, co-financed by the European Union, that have had a positive impact both on socio-economic development and also on the employment opportunities in rural areas such as the Local Community Development Programme (LCDP), the Rural Social Scheme (RSS), the TUS Scheme, the Local Training Initiative's (LTI's), Equality for Women and Transport 21. The latter three funds have helped disadvantaged people, in particular female unemployed people, to create new enterprises and skill processes and to set up specific transport enterprises. The Local Community Development Programme has also supported and managed many co-financed actions in Irish rural areas improving new jobs opportunities and new enterprises able to promote professional skills and increasing socio-economic inclusion of disadvantaged people in rural areas as well. Social enterprises in rural areas of Ireland have had a stimulating effect in increasing levels of local socio-economic development, both in terms of social capital and also in terms of solidly relationships among all residents in rural communities that are geographically away from urban centers such as Dublin, Cork, Tipperary, Galway, Sligo and Limerick, strengthening the sense of belonging to the Irish rural community and reducing the spatial isolation or rather the rural remoteness.

In Ireland, social enterprises have been and have become the first and foremost patch in the framework of rural development and local growth enhancing living conditions in less favoured areas, facing the gap between the needs of the community and economic-financial resources, carrying out different basic services such as rural protection, socio-economic assistance, local transport, healthcare, and other services of integration work, training of unemployed people and promoting rural tourism and cultural attractions [26] as well as partially occurred in some Italian rural areas through the social cooperatives [27] where there was a high level of social capital and meaningful spirit of integrative collaboration.

4. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ENTREPRISES IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, the development of social capital, which is the main pillar to create social enterprises and to hold up a social economy, is formed by strong and steady connections among local public administrations and private stakeholders able to generate an

endogenous pattern of local growth in rural areas [28] and in the same time providing some services for local communities. The endowment of social capital is directly correlated with the economic growth. Hence, the level of local development and involvement of local civicness potentiality in a specific place is able to produce a positive productive specialization and socio-economic externalities for the communities [29] and for the growth of social enterprises [30]. Purposes of social enterprises are to deliver public services and to increase the level of public trust in small areas, defining a new approach about the local governance [31] and local activities. The positive aspect of social enterprises is to solve the socio-economic marginalization even if the context is the first and foremost pillar to implement these kind of enterprises which have in different European countries a common conceptual and theoretical framework [32]; hence, the public institutions should promote an unique recognition of social enterprises in all European Countries reducing the dissimilarities [33].

Different qualitative studies have investigated in many states of the European Unions the role of social enterprises and their function in tackling the challenges to reduce the socio-economic marginalization in the next future, which require a pro-active role of policy makers [34], criticizing both in the United States of America and also in the European Union countries some functional, conceptual and legislative features able to obstruct the growth of social enterprises [35].

Many studies have analysed several stages about the establishment and development of European social enterprises, their role in reducing the socio-economic marginalization in rural and urbanised zones and their efficiency [36]; nevertheless, quantitative researches, able to examine social enterprises, are still quite scarce. In general the function of social enterprise is to promote social values and innovation in a multidimensional path of shared local development, which can be assessed in economic terms and as impact on local communities [37, 38]; in many cases purposes of social enterprises was to create job opportunities intrinsically tied to the goals of the social enterprises and their management team [39]. Few studies about the role of Irish social enterprises have underscored positive interactions of them with other stakeholders and specifically they have stimulated some new interactive relationships among manager and employers [40] with positive effects on the economic growth of local areas.

Social enterprises in different European states, such as Ireland and Italy, have been able to create job opportunities and a new small open economy able to offer public services towards young and old generations and less favoured people [41], supporting disabled people or in the case of Sweden encouraging high levels of work integration [42, 43]. Instead in Austria some findings have pointed out the role of social enterprises in creating job opportunities in few economic activities tightly linked to the rural areas, promoting the multifunctionality in the primary sector, such as arts and environment activities [44, 45].
To promote a fair development of social enterprises some scholars have confirmed the fundamental impact of public funds and subsides allocated by the European Union to their growth [46] but also the role of equity finance to stimulate social enterprises [47].

5. MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AREA OF STUDY AND AIM OF THE RESEARCH

5.1 Aim of the analysis and methodology

The purpose of this study has been to examine, using a qualitative approach, the diffusion of social enterprises in an Irish rural area and the role of social enterprises in improving the general living condition in the countryside by new changes of employment in different

activities tightly linked to the rurality such as tourism, crafts and certified quality food. In fact, the social enterprises have been one of the first and foremost pillar in reducing Irish rural marginalization providing public services towards old generations, young people, less favoured people and disabled citizens.

We chose to investigate the rural area of Ballyhoura because it was one of the first Irish territories with a meaningful diffusion of social enterprises, supporting different job initiatives linked to the rurality and the multifunctionality, throughout social enterprises since the early 1990s, using different source of funds and subsides allocated both by the European Union and also by national administrations. In addition, in the investigated area high is the incidence of farming activities and the risk of out-migration from the countryside to the urbanized centres of Limerick and Cork. Hence, the role of social enterprises in this area has been very demanding in avoiding the depopulation from the countryside, by the development of new enterprises, able to make the most of natural resources and agrarian productions, reducing the sense of remoteness of rural space by setting up in situ new job opportunities and new public services.

5.2 Geographical features of the investigated area

The area of Ballyhoura has an orography made by several and wide valleys crossed by rivers with a significant presence of lakes typical of unspoilt rural landscapes and a not urbanized countryside scattered by many farms, which are representative of rurality and rural remoteness; hence, in this area there are two variables in conflict. In one side tourists can practice hiking activities, green tourism and agro-tourism in farms located in few tidy rural villages; while on the other rural remoteness implies an objective issue in order to ensure a fair level in providing public services, such as public transport, healthcare, old care in an area where numerous houses are spread apart from each other several kilometers. Geographically Ballyhoura area is located in the Irish region of Munster and it consists of various portions of land belonging to the counties of Cork at north-east and Limerick at south-east. The population density is equal to 42 inhabitants per square kilometer, which is lower than the national average equal to 64 citizens per square kilometer [1, 2].

5.3 Socio-economic characteristics in the analyzed area

Over the last few decades, the rural area of Ballyhoura has suffered a process of amalgamation and downsizing in food industries, with the consequence to boost the out-emigration and rural depopulation in the countryside. In the 1990s many farmers have moved away towards big cities or abroad, relocating agrarian workforce in the building sector and industry and accentuating the socio-economic marginalization of rural territories. This has compromised in Ballyhoura area the overall level of social-economic development and the provision of social services, welfare activities and transport, fostering rural emigration, rural poverty and shortage in public services, emphasizing in the same time critical issues in the urban centers of Limerick and Cork.

Nowadays, the Irish economic downturn has led to a backflow from the urban space to the Irish countryside making even more tragic in the Irish rural space the past problems about the lack of public services and job opportunities. In the main rural villages included in Ballyhoura area over the time 1996-2001 there has been an increase in the resident population equal to 2.8% whilst, in the period 2006-2011 the percentage of the rural population leveled off at 19%.Comparing the dataset about rural population over the years 1996-2011 the data has pointed out a general decline in resident population of almost 4,000 units due to the out emigration at the beginning of the new millennium towards urbanized areas (Table 4.1). In the study area people seeking an employment is doubled from a value

of 7% in 2001 to 14% in 2011 and in some rural villages the percentage of unemployment in 2011 reached the peak of 35% and the percentage of the national participation rate to the total workforce dropped at 54% in 2011 compared to the value of 62% in 2006 [1, 2]. To lessen the unemployment the Local Community Development Program has been the first and foremost financial support to promote an economic development in the area of Ballyhoura by many social enterprises and new business activities.

Table. 4.1 Resident population in the main rural villages in the area of study over the time 1996-2011

Villages	1996	2001	2006	2011	variation in % 2011-1996
Liscarroll	568	560	256	230	-59.51 %
Bruree	824	905	321	541	-34.34 %
Mitchelstown	4,400	4,618	3,365	3,677	-16.43 %
Kildorrery	475	473	207	283	-40.42 %
Kilbeheny	230	242	418	402	74.78 %
Kilmallock	2,058	2,085	1,443	1,635	-20.55 %
Hospital	1,186	1,148	628	630	-46.88 %
Ballylanders	591	606	319	331	-43.99 %
Croom	1,600	1,563	1,045	1,157	-27.69 %
Bruff	1,192	1,276	724	783	-34.31 %
Caherconlish	453	459	700	1,279	182.34 %
Castleconnell	2,651	2,665	1,330	1,917	-27.69 %
Cappamore	1,280	1,410	669	675	-47.27 %
Total amount	**17,508**	**18,010**	**11,425**	**13,540**	**-22.66%**

Source [1, 2]

Table 4.2- Percentage of people at risk of poverty in the area of study over the time 2005-2010

Population	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Urban	16.0	14.3	15.1	11.9	11.8	13.1
Rural	22.5	21.5	18.9	18.7	17.8	20.0
Female	16.2	14.4	15.7	14.9	15.7	15.9

Source [1, 2]

Chiefly the function of social enterprises is to support less favored people by new job opportunities avoiding the out migration from the rural areas. In fact, in these zones, according the Eurostat data and Irish statistical office (CSO), higher is the risk of poverty compared to urban areas; this is particularly true for women who live there (Table 4.2), towards which are addressed many actions by social enterprises, focused to support new business chances and job opportunities.

The purposes of these entrepreneurial initiatives have been to incentivize the development of small businesses, agro-food productions, rural tourism, which are representative of rural territories, reducing the marginalization of rural population at risk of poverty. In the same time, the growth of social enterprises able to provide health and social services and assistance towards rural communities has implemented actions to get better training and education skills towards unemployed people and in creating job opportunities. According to Forfas, an agency of the Irish Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the social

enterprises have employed directly and indirectly more than 14,500 people, reducing the marginalization in rural areas, and in 2020 they will be able to employ more than 25,000 people.

6. SOCIAL ENTERPRISES IN THE BALLYHOURA AREA AND THE COMMUNITY INITIATIVE L.E.A.D.E.R.

Since 1989 in Ballyhoura area is active the Local Action Group (LAG) Ballyhoura Development Limited which is a non-profit limited company with the main function of stimulating local animation, programming and planning the development in rural areas, by using national funds and other source of funding allocated by the European Union. The most and foremost goal of LAG is to promote a fair socio-economic development in disadvantaged rural territories, improving the cooperation among all public institutions, private partners and other voluntary organizations active in the rural area.

In Ballyhoura area of investigation the Local Action Group, mainly through the National Rural Development Plan, the Local Community Development Programme (LCDP) and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013, sought to reduce the issues of social marginalization by specific interventions of social inclusion needed to deal with marginalization in Irish countryside and rural villages. Moreover it is important to point out the role played by national fund disbursed by the Rural Social Scheme (RSS), the TUS Scheme, the Local Training Initiative's (LTI's) and the Equality For Women. These financial supports, equal to 37 million of euro in terms of direct and indirect investments, were useful to promote the development of specific entrepreneurial initiatives holding up new job opportunities in rural areas, of which more than 4,000 only as self employment opportunities in the primary sector. More than 8 million of euro has been invested towards women and disadvantaged groups of people; these funds have been fundamental to set up more than 50 enterprises aimed to promote community services for rural population.

The intervention area of the LAG Ballyhoura Development Limited is made up and operationally divided into 5 districts: South East, Galty, St. Ailbe's White Sage, Golden Vale and District Mulcair characterized by a plenty of rural villages and scattered houses. The experience gained in previous Community Initiatives since 1990s such as L.e.a.d.e.r. I, L.e.a.d.e.r. II, L.e.a.d.e.r.+ and L.e.a.d.e.r. programming time 2007-2013 have enabled the LAG Ballyhoura Development Limited to develop a meaningful level of human capital and social capital background set up by a high quality partnership based on voluntary activities able to enhance the sense of belonging to the rural community of Ballyhoura. All this has stimulated in the rural communities of Ballyhoura area many actions connected to an endogenous sustainable development, reinforcing both in local communities and also in the private enterprises the sense of being an unique point of contact with the public administrations in the strategic stage of territorial planning, mobilizing, with a multiplier effect, many economic resources (34 million of euro during the time 2000-2008) allocated by the European Union and by the national and regional government, equal, over the time 2000-2008, to 13,5 million of euro, in order to stimulate the development of local businesses, rural enterprises and new direct and indirect employment opportunities estimated at more 25,000 units.

In general the aim of Local Action Groups, according to the targets of L.e.a.d.e.r. Community Initiative, is to coordinate an endogenous rural development, throughout the growth of social enterprises or new private enterprises and by encouraging social inclusion, maintaining on-site rural population. Furthermore, the main goals of the Local Action Groups has been to improve the quality of life of residents by providing social and health services and other welfare programs such as public transport, encouraging the growth and the success of

tourist enterprises and valorizing natural-cultural resources and local amenities. Some actions taken by social enterprises in the area of study have been the development of infrastructures and amenities for different purposes such as sport, cultural and recreational activities with the goal of supporting the socio-economic sustainability in rural areas.

The actions put into place in the area of study aimed solve the rural exclusion and the marginalization in rural territories have been the organization of cultural centers, which are became places of aggregation and dissemination of the local culture to contrast the loss of traditions and Irish rural culture. However, it is pivotal to pinpoint the role of complementary and replacement of public services that social enterprises have played in favour of residents of rural areas against social exclusion supporting health care services dedicated towards people with mental diseases or with other health illnesses, replacing some institutions no longer able to ensure these public services due to limited budgets and spending review constraints.

The funds allocated by the Community Initiative L.e.a.d.e.r. have implemented projects and entrepreneurial initiatives useful to take into account the different needs of women in rural areas, at risk of work exclusion. In fact, the percentage of female employment in Ballyhoura is equal to 48%, lower than the national average that is 53%; hence, it was pivotal to encourage female employment in new business activities in the tourist sector, in crafts and in social assistance and health care by carrying out specific training interventions and self entrepreneurship courses involving more than 1,300 people. Rural women are deemed a disadvantaged category, such as long-term unemployed people and people over fifty years old, who have difficulty to find job opportunities as well. For these latter groups of people social enterprises have been an engine in the rural areas in giving them innovative job opportunities. This last aspect is important to analyze what happened in rural areas in the last few decades. In the Irish countryside since the nineties there has been a meaningful rural depopulation due to an out-emigration towards urban centers with the consequence of many farmers have left their farming activities to work in the building sector. In the late 2000s, after the economic downturn, many of workers in the building sector have been dismissed coming back to their native hometowns; hence, by specific initiatives the social enterprises have provided training opportunities towards them with the purpose to reinstate quitted workforce and to increase their level of skills giving them new job opportunities through some new activities in tourism, craft-making and cultural activities in rural areas. This has also generated, although there are main formal differences from the theoretical and practical structures of Italian rural districts and agro-industrial districts, a network of human, social and economic relationships among enterprises, private partners and public administrations able to tackle the social exclusion in rural areas, enhancing the level of social capital by developing a mesh of social and human relationships and skills [48].

The analysis of data on the tourism movement in the Ballyhoura area, as reported in the Ballyhoura Development Rural Development Plan 2007-2013, has pointed out an estimated growth in arrivals of tourists, which produced an average annual turnover in 2006 of more than 6 million of euro and almost 20 million a year in 2013 [49]. Anyway, in the area of study it has been possible to find out many issues for implementing and getting better social interactions and the sense of belonging to a rural community due to the remoteness of rural villages from main urban centers such as Limerick, Cork, Tipperary and Galway, anyway the conflict between rurality and urban spaces is persistent. These latter urban centers over the past thirty years have accentuated the phenomenon of urbanization and emigration from the Irish countryside debunking the paths of endogenous development in rural areas [50].

The development of social enterprises has reduced the remoteness and socio-economic exclusion in the area of study; social enterprises have been an innovative methodology to

improve rural development and the level of interactions in rural areas in terms of social capital through the creation of a socio-cultural network based on economic and civic links among all entrepreneurs, farmers, and policy makers. In this case private and public institutions aimed to promote rural space as an unbearable place and to face with local community issues and features have created strong relational links between town and country [51]. The consequence of this new approach has been to strengthen the level of involvement in rural areas, to enhance social capital making rural areas more involved in their endogenous path of development. The experience of social enterprises in the Ballyhoura area of investigation has pointed out as the rural area is not identified such as a physical space, disconnected with other urban spaces or peripheral areas but it is a model characterized by an huge set of local needs, that have created an overlapping network among active stakeholders in the Irish countryside [52]. In this rural area, in comparison to other Irish agrarian communities, social exclusion is very low equivalent to 25% compared to the risk of poverty in small villages which is more than 30% [53, 54]; higher is instead the sense of belonging to the community.

The Community Initiative L.e.a.d.e.r., over the time 2007-2013, has allocated to the Republic of Ireland a total amount of funds equal for 428 millions of euros, 60 millions of which have already been spent in 2010 for initiatives able to ameliorate the quality of life in rural areas and to stimulate diversification in economic activities connected to the rural areas through the development of social enterprises. Analysis of the statistical dataset in the area of Ballyhoura has pointed out as actions linked to skills acquisition, training and local animation have benefited from 22% of the total allocated budget. Measures addressed to better living conditions in the countryside and to stimulate the diversification in the agro-food sector and traditional productions, have spent and invested only 13% of the total budget.

7. NEW CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISES IN THE INVESTIGATED AREA

The Republic of Ireland has to face in the next future many challenges and different commitments to resolve the economic downturn and employment crisis threatening the country, undermining the great progress achieved in the social environment, in the economic field and in welfare context. These improvements in general living conditions have led this nation to become a model of development for the European Union, well-known as the Celtic Tiger, with double-digit growth rates and frictional rate of unemployment.

In general, in the rural inland areas of Ireland, since 2007 there has been a significant decrease of job opportunities, all this did slip back into the rural area of Ballyhoura into the abyss of rural depopulation, draining labor force from the countryside to urban centers weakening general living conditions in the countryside [55]. The role of social enterprises in the area of study was pivotal in avoiding the marginalization of rural areas improving through the use of new information technologies and telecommunications, the exchange of knowledge and technological know-how, enabling the growth of employment in rural areas with an increase in the level of involvement and participation of women and disadvantaged groups of people in many economic activities [55]. The Irish group of people, which have been addressed the most attention in terms of social welfare activities, carried out by social enterprises, have been the population aged less than 15 years and those aged over 65 years. These two demographic classes, in fact, have benefited of social welfare activities, health care, training, education and transport, that are the most and foremost backbone in revitalizing rural areas and in preventing social exclusion and isolation of these groups of less favoured people in school processes, in working paths and in economic growth.
Considering both the statistical data published in 2011 by the Central Statistical Office (CSO) throughout the Census of the Irish population and also in the dataset of Agrarian Census

published in 2010, it has emerged as in the rural area of Ballyhoura there were some critical negative aspects able to amplify the process of marginalization and social exclusion. The out emigration was the result of weakening in public transport services and health support. The shortage of the latter services, in fact, has made the two demographic groups of people more dependent on their families with the consequence to set them at risk of social isolation. Without the initiatives of social enterprises in ensuring an adequate provision of specific services dedicated to elderly and young people the consequence would have been an increase of marginalization and rural emigration. This is particularly true in two rural districts of the Ballyhoura area, located in the county of Limerick such as the South East Limerick and Saint Ailbe's Maigues, where high is the incidence of the citizens aged under 15 years and those aged over 65 years; hence, social enterprises have provided services in the less favored areas, characterized by rural villages with population of one thousand inhabitants disseminated in many small centers or in scattered houses.

Another critical issues that emerged in the Ballyhoura area have been the need of entrepreneurs and employees in becoming also a proactive and proponent tool of social development of women, which have benefited of specific patterns of self-employment financed by L.e.a.d.e.r.; furthermore, other job opportunities have been developed in the craft sector, tourism, and health and social care enabling some disadvantaged people and improving per capita female profitability, which is lesser than 60% compared to the amount of average disposable income in the area of study. To sum up, the social enterprises are a good tool to solve the marginalization in rural areas if they are supported by animation local groups and by the public institutions, able to co-finance entrepreneurial initiatives, aimed to reduce the sense of remoteness in rural territories and to stimulate young generations to stay in the countryside, diversifying business activities.

8. CONCLUSION

In order to limit the marginalization of rural areas and to solve their problems of social exclusion and economic isolation in the Ballyhoura area an array of actions financed by L.e.a.d.e.r. Community Initiative have been implemented through social enterprises aimed to create many stable employment opportunities and self-employment possibilities in social and health care towards rural population.

Social enterprises have met needs of local communities aimed to face with and to solve problems of social and labor exclusion creating enterprises able to offer health and social services. During the Irish economic crisis the social enterprises have placed at work a meaningful percentage of workforce expelled from the service sector and the building sector, who has been pushed back in its native rural areas previously abandoned. These laid-off people has been helped both by the Local Action Group and also by the development of social enterprises to seek a new position in the primary sector or in other business activities in the rural space by continuing the operation of the family farms mostly diversifying agrarian activities throughout the agro-tourism, green rural tourism, handmade products and crafts [56, 57] or by creating public services such as transport service or healthcare for the benefit of the entire rural villages.

In the Ballyhoura area of study it has been possible to identify a network of social relationships pivotal to create a good level of social capital and an high level of bond of trust; in fact, the network of social relations is the pillar for the growth of social enterprises, ensuring the development of additional opportunities for self-employment with a significant improvement of living conditions in rural areas. The purpose of social enterprises and Local Action Groups has been to implement the local animation, taking account of the specific and

critical issues in the rural area, which are the prick of an endogenous and integrated model of development based on land, tourism, culture, heritage, traditions and food.

For the near future, in order to enhance, the rural development in a marketing perspective of transversal and integrated rural growth, it is important to create a no longer deferrable umbrella brand that involves social activities, cultural tourism and natural resources with the purpose of renewing the rural villages in the area of study and to promote and to preserve towards future generations the historical traditions and other cultural initiatives tightly linked to the Irish countryside and agrarian rituals.

Social enterprises represent in Ireland, as well as in other European rural areas, the fundamental patch in order to stimulate a cohesive and shared growth in the countryside, improving levels of social inclusion and increasing a positive and mutual exchange of information and knowledge pivotal to innovate rural areas. Irish social enterprises have strengthened the training and education processes reducing women exclusion and for the benefit of other disadvantaged people, in order to ensure an efficient transfer of know-how through pilot initiatives, able to develop both a social economy and also an economy of solidarity based on a new model of endogenous growth.

The economy of rural areas has undergone a process of composite transition which required the support of social enterprises to switch from the production of agricultural commodities towards the production of services and positive externalities in environmental and social terms, to which the European legislator, throughout the Common Agricultural Policy in the last two decades, has showed special attention with the L.e.a.d.e.r. initiative and the European Social Fund. In the area of Ballyhoura the development of social enterprises in tourism has generated a solid base to institutionalize a diversified rural economy blended by economy of solidarity, human capital, social economy and an high level of social capital, which are key factors to create a climate of confidence and knowledge necessary to stimulate a fair rural development. In fact, the direct economic effects in the Ballyhoura area have been a growth of touristic attractions with positive effects on farmers' income and on agrarian infrastructures, reducing social issues and the sense of rural isolation and remoteness, stimulating new generations to move to the countryside.

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