Social enterprises and wellbeing for disadvantaged people in Australian regional towns

Sue Kilpatrick[1], Sherridan Emery[1], Viktoria Adler[2], Jane Farmer[2]
[1]Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, [2]Social Innovation Research Institute, Swinburne University of Technology

Background

Rural residents experience a range of place-based inequalities that are directly or indirectly related to health and wellbeing. There is less access to services, employment opportunities, educational experiences and social networks than in metropolitan locations. Socioeconomic disadvantage is one of the greatest underlying influences on health status in rural communities[1], and rurality may exacerbate the effects of socio-economic disadvantage.[2]

Social enterprise (SE) is promoted by governments around the world as a method for addressing place-based disadvantages through combining a commercial orientation with a social mission.[3] An aim of some SEs is to operate commercial activity which generates employment for participants while also producing wellbeing benefits. SEs have been shown to address the social determinants of health[4] and recent research has explored how wellbeing benefits are realised (for example through increased capability and interaction[5] for participants of SEs.[6] However, less is known about how SEs work with their community to build capacity of SE participants, including social capital[7] and other resources.

Contemporary research has begun to explore how place influences service planning and provision, particularly in rural communities.[8] Relational approaches provide a useful conceptual framework for studying connections between health and the social and physical infrastructure within rural communities. One such relational approach is to consider how social networks influence health in 'rural locales'[9], the settings in which social relations are constituted. Considering the community capacity of rural cities through a rural locale lens draws attention to the interactions and actions of people in specific rural places. SEs are places in which participants can build social networks in addition to developing work-related capabilities and skills. Social networks have been found to increase resilience levels amongst older adults[10], which suggests that SEs are sites where social networks can be developed for disadvantaged people, and may be productive for supporting the wellbeing of people in rural communities.

Social networks form the basis of relational resources of trust, shared norms and networks in rural communities which can enable disadvantaged individuals and communities to 'get ahead'.[11] Rural communities have some characteristics that are known to be important for SEs to succeed, for example, high levels of civic participation and dense social networks that can promote integration.[6]

This paper considers how social enterprises enable wellbeing for disadvantaged people in rural cities. We provide findings from an Australian Research Council Discovery project about how social enterprises realise wellbeing in two rural Australian cities of 80,000 to 100,000 people. We applied Fleuret and Atkinson's 'Spaces of Wellbeing Theory' (SoWT)[5], spatial data collection techniques and spatial analysis. We defined wellbeing following Fleuret and Atkinson as involving interconnected elements of: capability, social integration, security and therapy.

Spaces of Wellbeing Theory

The SoWT model conceptualises circular, multi-directional interaction of *integration* (into a network of associations), *therapy* (constructing healing through the space's nature and character), *security* (support to deal with risk) and *capability* (self-fulfilment and achievement) as being promoted within spaces of wellbeing. SoWT has been applied for example to explain how supported living and working spaces act as spaces of wellbeing to promote self-determination and improve health outcomes for people with learning disability.[12]

Method

A qualitative case study methodology[13], which enabled comparisons and provided a diversity of perspectives to understand how and why wellbeing develops in social enterprise was applied across four social enterprises cases, two located in disadvantages suburbs of each city.

'Farm', 'Catering' and 'AssistAll' provide work integration for people with a disability and/or disadvantaged people (called Participants) in a supported work environment. Farm and Catering share a parent organisation. Farm provides light manufacturing, cleaning, market gardening and maintenance work. 'Catering' focuses solely on food preparation. AssistAll participants have intellectual disabilities and their work involves the production of timber products, clothing recycling, catering, mailouts, print finishing, assembly and data entry. 'Community Centre', differs from the other three social enterprises as it is not primarily a work integrated social enterprise but a community centre with social enterprises intended to support participants within its larger mission to support the wellbeing of its disadvantaged community. It operates a cleaning service, recycled clothing shop and home vegetable box delivery service.

We conducted face-to-face or phone interviews with Staff (Farm n=5; Catering n=5; AssistAll n=5; Community Centre n=4) and Community informants (City 1 n=9; City 2 n=6) interviews and 'go along' interviews with social enterprise participants (Farm n=4; Catering n=5; AssistAll n=5; Community Centre n=3). Go along interviews combine participant observation and interviewing.[14] Objects and places stimulated discussion and triggered recollection for participants. Ethics approval was gained from the university ethics committees of the researchers' institutions. Data were entered into NVivo geocoded and themed to produce rich, place-based data about wellbeing realisation.

Findings

The findings revealed that the SEs provided everyday training and work tasks which offered multiple different opportunities for participants to engage with rural communities. We employ a lens of wellbeing impacts to consider the ways in which the SEs afforded experiences for participants, with an emphasis on opportunities outside the boundaries of the SEs.

Exposure to health-promoting experiences

There were many reports of healthier food choices at home and in the community based on participant experiences at Catering and AssistAll. Following a chat with Staff member Corinna, Farm

participant Michael who was diagnosed with diabetes not only acquired a pushbike and started riding, he encouraged another participant to join him:

> We talked about you've got diabetes, you can reverse that you know … now he's got a pushbike and he said to me today, you know Eric … he's got a pushbike and I'm trying to encourage him to come out with me to get fitter. (Farm Staff member Corinna)

Talking things through in a supportive way assisted mental wellbeing, for example in the Community Centre cleaning enterprise where Staff member Trudy and Participant Nancy travelled together between cleaning jobs:

> I always ask her how she's going. She's always willing to talk to me which is lovely. Because I think you need someone to talk to. By the end of the day, I find that she's different … She's a lot happier and a lot more relaxed … like in the morning I go gosh, are you alright. She's just really, really tight and really stressed about maybe something that went on in the morning to get her son to school or previous days … I find that the job helps Nancy tremendously in regards to her mental health. (Community Centre Staff member Trudy)

Education and experience-based learning that can lead to employment

Some staff members we interviewed at Community Centre and Farm had started at the SEs as participants before progressing to become staff members. For example, at Community Centre Gilbert, a shy volunteer on a work for the dole scheme was given the role of manager of the veggie box enterprise. At Farm, former participant Sally explained that not only was she now a staff member at Farm, she had some work for an external employer:

> I was still volunteering here … they said, you're no longer a volunteer, we're going to pay you for what you do now. Then they added the cleaning jobs [with another non-SE employer] on top of that. (Farm Staff member Sally)

A Farm participant Alan explained how his work had progressed from ad hoc office work to taking over the role of car washing for a corporate client:

> Before I was at Farm, I was with other employment agency at [Town] which is about half an hour from here … then we moved up here, and yeah, they gave me the info to join up here. I started off in [Farm Parent Organisation] office, doing a bit of booking for jobs and … through the office, got connected through in to Farm. So yeah, started off under my own crew down there, which I'm still on on Wednesdays, which is fantastic, I like using the mowers and all that sort of stuff … and then … position came up here washing the cars, with a couple of other fellows … and one got crook and other fella moved on to another job. Yeah been here pretty much ever since, nine years later. (Farm Participant Alan)

Access to networks that connect with new people, places and knowledge

A Farm staff member played in an All Abilities Cricket Club. He suggested that some participants join the club. Andy, Julie and Ethan now play cricket at the stadium across the tracks. A Catering participant, Ben was happy that he was now also a valued volunteer at an aged care home where he has made new friends:

> Interviewer: How did you get started doing that?
> Ben: Through Georgina.
> Interviewer: Georgina at [Farm parent organisation]?
> Ben: Yes … She says Friday, they want me there on Friday from nine till 12. She says that's good. It's just a lot of fun … we mainly do—for morning tea, with them, just get them all

ready and that, yeah.
Interviewer: Have you met any new people over there?
Ben: Yes I have. (Catering Participant Ben)

Gilbert from Community Centre describes how he can now confidently converse with politicians and professionals. Here he describes experiences related to the new Community Centre premises:

> Having to talk to politicians who are very professional people, growing up I never seen myself talking with politicians … or even dealing with architects … I'm a lot younger than what these politicians are so having a conversation where we can both be on a similar page of what we're talking about trying to get across, it's different … the last politician was[Name], and that was just recently about the building. (Community Centre Staff member Gilbert)

Opportunities for social integration

All four SEs provide opportunities for some participants to go out into the community. There they extend their social interactions with a diversity of people in the community. AssistAll's recycled clothing enterprise has donation bins all over the city. They also receive donations at the enterprise. Staff member Daisy explains the rich interaction that the shop affords:

> [Participants] go out in the truck with one of the staff members and they will go and gather it up from the bins … If people are making donations most of the time they will go into the shop and say, we've got a donation. The [participants] will go out and help collect it out of their boot of the car and carry them in … Most of the customers come into the shop anyway so they get to talk to them. A couple of the [participants] are well known by all the customers. (AssistAll Staff member Daisy)

Farm provides car washing services at corporate clients' business locations. Staff member Darren explains that Farm Participant Alan has become part of the client's work social network:

> One of our Participants, Alan has been working out there [car washing corporate client's location] for about six years … They treat him like he belongs in the organisation. When they have Christmas party he's invited … (Farm Staff member Darren)

Opportunities to contribute value to community (economic and social).

Ben from Catering whose volunteering at the Aged Care facility is described above is happy to be contributing to the community through volunteering. Similarly Farm participants contributed to the local church community through their gardening efforts, pruning, mulching and replanting overgrown garden beds that had become unkempt. The Staff member overseeing the work explained how the project worked:

> We were using the units as the base for the training so I was able to use that as evidence that the guys were participating and doing the work. We took lots of photographs and then the guys and the girls [Participants] put it together in a PowerPoint presentation and we presented it to the church.
>
> So the church then played it to the congregation and it was gold. Because it was such a great outcome for them and for the guys [Participants]. They had so much pride in doing this work outside the church. People would come past while we were working there and say, oh, wow, you're doing a great job. (City 1 Community informant)

Participants further contribute to creating sustainable economies through enterprises that recycling clothes and other materials. This Community informant describes the gap filled by Farm in its rural city's economy, and how it adds value to commercial food businesses:

> The [Participants] they're at work and they feel incredibly empowered by that. Social enterprises also help deliver to the overall community and feel and I guess the visibility. [Farm] is a wonderful space … The social enterprises involved in collecting recyclables— again, taking what would otherwise end up in landfill and recycling it. Delivering that social worth, however the downside is that sometimes it's a false economy because it does need to be subsidised …

> [Farm] is reaching out to a broader demographic who like farmers' markets to support that local food produce environment … it's recruiting people to eat local produce to understand it so they're able to charge a higher, more premium price for it. (City 1 Community informant 3)

Despite Catering and Farm's work integration objective, there were relatively few examples of participants gaining employment outside SEs. As noted earlier some participants went on to staff jobs within their SE and Sally had cleaning work with a non-SE employer. Some interviewees at Farm and Community Centre spoke of people who had moved on to mainstream employment. As well, some participants had picked up casual work mowing lawns based on gardening capabilities developed at Farm.

Engaged social, business and civic infrastructure

Engaged social, business and civic city infrastructure enhanced social enterprises' ability to provide the experiences and opportunities discussed above. This infrastructure includes local government, business, and community and business organisations which were proactively engaged with SEs in both cities. A senior local government representative in City 1 spoke of the city's aspiration to be recognised as a liveable community. She explains her local government favours partnerships with social enterprises:

> We're wanting to be proactive with our partners … Often the social enterprises are the ones that align the nicest with where we should be going. Because they've got the community at the core, and I think they understand some of the determinants to health and wellbeing better than others … Overall, I'd say social enterprises have a greater appreciation for what you might call the common good, or the bigger picture. (City 1 Community informant 1)

Social enterprises need customers for their services and products. All four SEs sold goods or services to private sector businesses. Community informants spoke about their experiences as customers of SEs. Here an organiser of a major community event describes the event's relationship with AssistAll:

> We've had a relationship with those guys now for probably about five years. Initially it started off with us utilising their catering facilities and it grew from that. We've actually utilised them twice in recent times … to design some … custom-made tables and then build them for us … They did an initial lot of 50 and they were very, very successful and they've worked out ideal. (City 2 Community informant 1)

SEs also reached out strategically to business and civic city infrastructure. The manager of AssistAll was on the Board of City 2's business organisation. The parent organisation of the two City 1 SEs had joined the chamber of commerce to build closer relationships with the business community to increase pathways to employment and customers for their services:

[Parent organisation] … they've been involved in the chamber of commerce for many years … They decided to become a partner … their role was around shifting the mindset of employers, particularly the large employers, around the contribution of people with a disability in employment … [They] identified new host employers … there was a huge amount of growth for [SE] in being exposed to new catering clients. I know a lot of the very large organisations here use them very frequently. We do. (City 1 Community informant 2)

Discussion

The SEs all provided products and or services to their communities and are part of the economic, civic and social infrastructure of their rural city. The data show that the interaction opportunities and experiences provided to SE participants extend beyond the boundaries of SE premises. These opportunities and experiences are enhanced by relationships that the SEs have established with customers, clients, and suppliers. Social inclusion in rural cities is facilitated as community members encounter Participants as they go about their day to day lives.

From findings we suggest how social enterprises could boost rural city wellbeing even further by paying attention to 'good practice' actions and procedures observed in the findings. These good practice actions and procedures relate to participant support, multiplicity of participation opportunities both within and beyond the boundaries of the SE, individualised pathways that facilitate progression and two-way SE engagement with city social, civic and economic infrastructure.

Support that was 'wrapped around' everyday training and work tasks helped Participants such as Michael and Nancy with their physical and mental health challenges by combining commercial activity with a social mission in a space of wellbeing.[3–5]

Multiplicity of participation opportunities that drew on the outside community allowed Participants to find a niche, making the most of the rural city locale and its social networks.[6,9,10] Alan's car washing activities lead to him being part of a client's staff social network, Ben expanded his horizons and was happy volunteering at the age care home, some Participants joined a cricket club. Others benefited from social relationships established when out collecting clothing and interacting with customers while secure in the knowledge that staff members were close at hand if needed, drawing on the space of wellbeing created by the SE.[5]

Individualised pathways that allow for progression and 'getting ahead'[11] are facilitated by multiplicity of opportunities. Gilbert's journey from shy work for the dole volunteer to managing a social enterprise program is perhaps the greatest journey reported here, but others such as Alan, Sally and Ben also progressed.

Engagement with the wider community is key to SEs being able to access the opportunities they need for their participants. Such engagement should be proactive, and ideally initiated by both SEs and social, economic and civic infrastructure.[8] Community informants have pointed out that their cities benefit from such engagement, through customised goods and services, and through contribution to city identity (for example the famers' market) and city goals, such as a liveable community. SEs also facilitate inclusive communities where community members expect to see SE participants as part of everyday community life.

Conclusion

We conclude that SEs are a valuable tool for wellbeing realisation for disadvantaged people in regional cities. They can mitigate for aspects that are relatively inaccessible in non-metropolitan

places. They provide exposure to health-promoting experiences, education and experience-based learning that can lead to jobs, access to bridging networks that expose them to new people, places and knowledge, opportunities for social integration and an enhanced sense of self-worth through contributing to their community. Cities benefit from SEs through their contribution to city identity. They facilitate liveable, inclusive communities where SE participants are part of community life. Rural cities and their SEs do better when working together. Social, economic and civic infrastructure are encouraged to engage with SEs for the benefit of all.

References

1. Beard J, Tomaska N, Earnest A, Summerhayes R, Morgan G. Influence of socioeconomic and cultural factors on rural health. Australian Journal of Rural Health. 2009;17(1):10-5.

2. Smith K, Humphreys J, Wilson M. Addressing the health disadvantage of rural populations: how does epidemiological evidence inform rural health policies and research? Australian Journal of Rural Health. 2008;16(2):56-66.

3. Australian Government. A new system for better employment and social outcomes. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia; 2015.

4. Roy M, Lysaght R, Krupa T. Action on the social determinants of health through social enterprise. Canadian Medical Association Journal. 2017;189(March 20):E440-1.

5. Fleuret S, Atkinson S. Wellbeing, health and geography. New Zealand Geographer. 2007;63:106-18.

6. Munoz S, Steiner A, Farmer J. Processes of community-led social enterprise development: learning from the rural context. Community Development Journal. 2014;50(3):478-93.

7. Falk I, Kilpatrick S. What is Social Capital? A Study of Interaction in a Rural Community. Sociologia Ruralis. 2000;40(1):87-110.

8. Kilpatrick S, Auckland S, Woodroffe J. Community health planning: Rural responses to change. In: Scott M, Gallent N, Gkartzios M, editors. Companion to Rural Planning. London: Routledge; in press.

9. Bourke L, Humphreys J, Wakerman J, Taylor J. Understanding rural and remote health: a framework for analysis in Australia. Health & Place. 2012;18(3):496-503.

10. Wells M. Resilience in rural community-dwelling older adults. Journal of Rural Health. 2009;25(4):415-9.

11. Boisot M. Information Space: A Framework for Learning in Organizations, Institutions, and Culture. Emea: Thomson Learning; 1995.

12. Hall E. Spaces of wellbeing for people with learning disabilities,. Scottish Geographical Journal. 2010;126(4):275-84.

13. Yin R. Case study research and applications: Design and methods: Sage publications; 2017.

14. Kusenbach M. Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool. Ethnography. 2003;4(3):455-85.

Presenter

Professor Sue Kilpatrick is Professor of Education in the Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Australia. Until December 2015 she was Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students), University of Tasmania where her responsibilities included access and outreach programs, pathways to the University from schools and vocational education and training (VET), relationships with the VET

sector, the Aboriginal support unit, Riawunna Centre, English Language Centre. She was formerly Pro Vice-Chancellor (Rural and Regional) at Deakin University, Australia, and Director of the University Department of Rural Health, Tasmania. Her previous positions at UTAS include seven years as Associate Director and Director of the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia in the Faculty of Education. Sue holds a PhD in the Economics of Education and a Master of Economics in Labour Economics. She is a Graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and Member of the Australian College of Education. Membership of community boards and committees in areas related to her research has complemented Sue's career, including school education, the early years, farmer education and training, economic development, rural health and community care. Sue is currently a Member of the Regional Development Australia (Tasmania) Committee.