1. Background/context

Socio-economic research studies the interaction of social and economic factors within a particular context. This study focuses on socio-economic interplay among rural businesses, in pursuit of community development.

Successful rural businesses are characterised as having strong local connections or ties highly embedded within their community. Well cited micro-level internal resource challenges (Gherthes et al., 2021; Kallith and Reîni, 2009) may be alleviated by engaging with social networks wherein opportunities can be evolved, creating a catalyst for socio-economic development (Kallith et al., 2014; Hayden et al., 2014; Mayes et al., 2015; Merrell et al., 2021).

Ubiquitous with knowledge transfer through increased contact with others as outlets for problem solving (Huggins, 2000; Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004), optimised social networks need diversity in composition, comprising of both close contacts and external ties (Uzzi, 1997; Jack, 2005).

Rural business networks are often critiqued for being narrowly embedded in their localities (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Steiner and Atterton, 2014; McKeever et al., 2015; Kallith et al., 2018), ultimately restricting socio-economic development.

Broker role/influence is poorly understood in a rural micro firm context. Taking a social network perspective, this research draws on strong and weak tie concepts, and network broker theory. The research aim is to explore broker influence on the socio-economic development of rural business communities.

Research objectives:
- Who are the brokers in rural business communities?
- How does the broker use and activate social ties in rural business communities?
- How does the broker influence socio-economic development?

Who are brokers?

Central network actors who drive rural development. Individuals within communities (for example local business leaders/entrepreneurs), social enterprises, formal/semi-formal governmental actors (for example, Local Enterprise Office) or an entire network of actors.

2. Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key theme</th>
<th>Finding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diverse rural business base</td>
<td>The rural business landscape ranges from craft industries, services/hospitality and artisan-food production and many more. The vast majority are micro-firms (no more than 10 employees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural networks network</td>
<td>Networks and networking activities are seen as significant for the rural business landscape. Networks act as means for attaining resources and information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network engagement</td>
<td>Despite the importance of networks within the rural context, rural business networks are often critiqued for being narrowly embedded in their localities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embeddedness</td>
<td>Embeddedness is the degree to which social and economic activity are intertwined. Over embeddedness can however stifle entrepreneurial output and promote an over reliance of strong internal connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key broker activities</td>
<td>Bonding internal strong ties, Bridging external weak ties, Linking formal external ties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key broker criteria</td>
<td>Speak the language of rural business, Be empathetic and be aware of the opportunities/challenges, Possess key knowledge to leverage the potential of rural business communities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Preliminary conceptual framework

Broker’s need to balance social ties both strong and weak. The broker’s influence occurs through embeddedness and through the activities of bonding, (strong ties) bridging and linking (weak ties) of social capital (Woolcock, 2001). The broker (centre) is able to bridge weak ties (broken arrows) from external network actors and bring expertise back into the rural business community, the same occurs through linking external formal support.

For bonding to occur brokers must have the required knowledge and connections to embed within the social structures of rural communities (McKeever et al., 2015; Richter et al., 2019; Leick and Gretzinger, 2020).

Information that is brought back into network is reinforced by internal knowledge already present.

4. Research Impact

- Findings will inform a framework to better understand the influence/role of brokers with a rural micro firm led business community.
- Inform policy and support brokers and community led rural development.

5. Planned methodology

- Interpretive multi-case study of rural network brokers in interaction with their rural business community and outside others over an 18 month duration.
- Three to five rural business networks in the Southeast of Ireland.
- Using semi-structured interview technique - brokers and other key network actors.