

Practices of rural social entrepreneurship: an ecosystem approach

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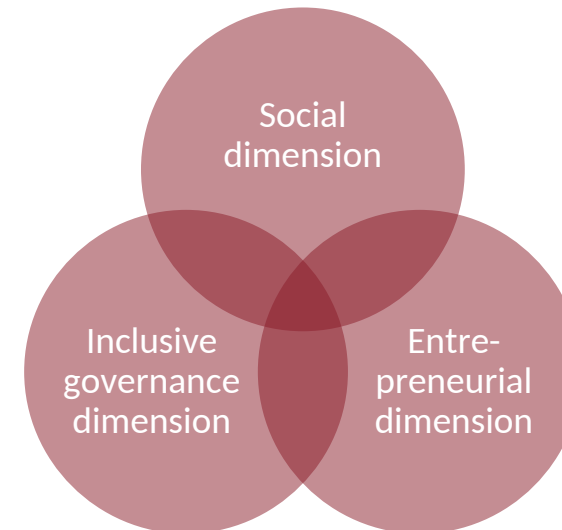
Social Entrepreneurship (SE)

...”[is] a process involving the innovative use and combination of resources to pursue **opportunities to catalyse social change** and/or **address social needs**”

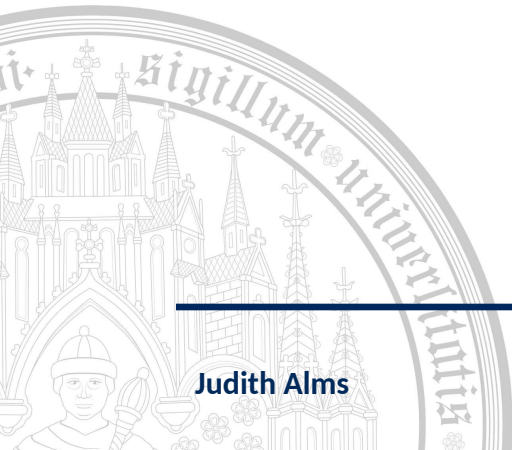
(Mair and Martí 2006, p. 37, emphasis added)

EU Operational Definition of Social Enterprise:

3 Dimensions



(European Commission 2020, p. 28-31, own visualisation)



Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystem (SEE)

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

“the entrepreneurial ecosystem as a set of interdependent actors and factors coordinated in such a way that they **enable productive entrepreneurship**”

(Stam 2015, p. 1765, emphasis added)



Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystem

“Ecosystems comprise a dynamic mix of interacting elements, actors, and environmental conditions, all with the intention of **sharing value** within and beyond a community.”

(de Bruin, Teasdale, & Roy 2023, p. 348, emphasis added)

Social Entrepreneurship in Rural Areas

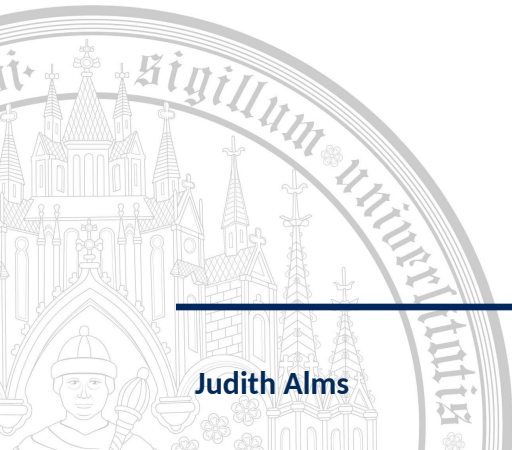
- Social innovation and social entrepreneurship are significant elements for neo-endogenous rural development.
(Bosworth et al. 2020; Olmedo et al. 2023)
- “The ‘rural’ appears to be not just a residual factor but a core issue that shapes the role and form of rural social enterprises.”
(van Twuijver et al. 2020, p.135)
- The ecosystem partners supporting social entrepreneurship are mainly located in cities and, thus, often first address urban entrepreneurs
(Alms & Tamásy 2026, Leendertse & van Rijnsoever 2025)
- **How can social entrepreneurship ecosystems be conceptualized to include rural places?**

Practice Theoretical Approach

- Practice theory understands the world as compilation of routines performed within time and space.
- Practices comprise three elements:
(Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012)
 1. Materials
 2. Competences
 3. Meanings
- Practice theory is deployed in **social innovation ecosystems**, where social innovation is defined as
“a new combination and/or new configuration of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts prompted by certain actors or constellations of actors in an intentional targeted manner with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices.”
(Domanski, Howaldt, Kaletka 2020)

SEEs as “Systems of Shared and Linked Practices”

- SEEs as open complex systems which cover urban and rural areas
(in contrast to the focus of EEs on “regions” often conceptualized as metropolitan areas, e.g., Bennett et al. 2025; Mack & Mayer 2016, Spigel 2017, Thompson et al. 2018)
- Digital cooperation allows for expanding practices over space and time
(Kuebart & Ibert 2019)
- Networks of social enterprises as an open community of practice
(in accordance with Kuebart & Ibert 2019; Bacq et al. 2022)



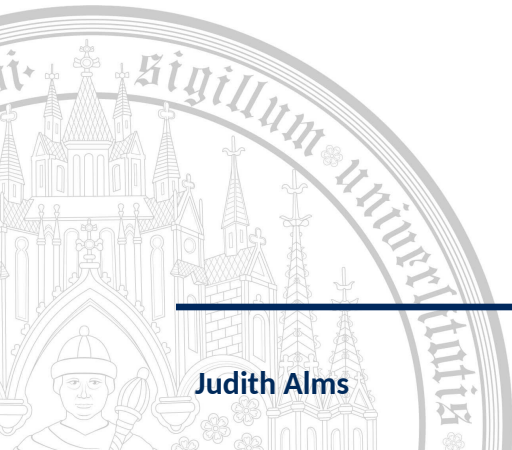
Analytical Framework for Qualitative Case Studies

TPSN Framework to identify structuring principles of socio-spatial relations

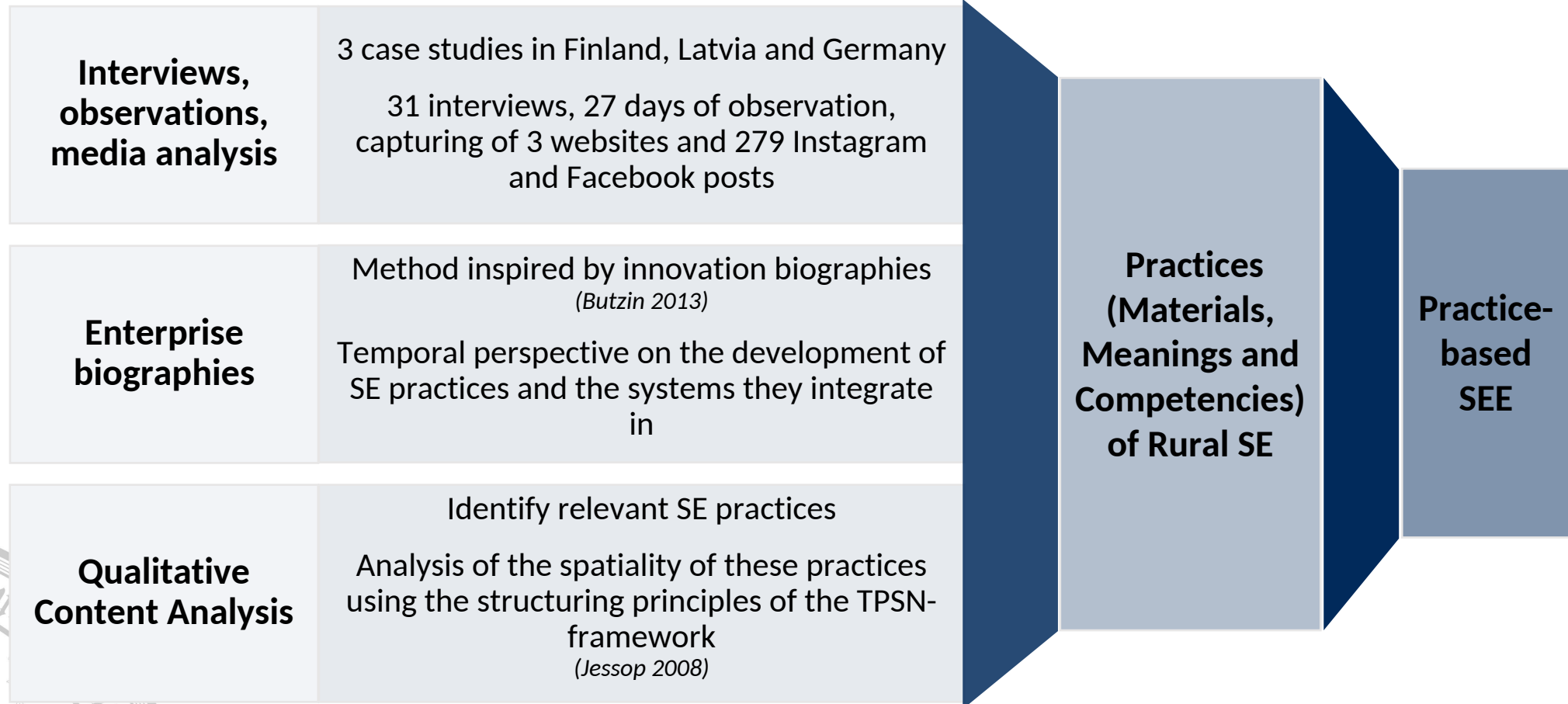
- (1) territory, the bordering that constructs an inside/outside divide
- (2) place, as spatial embeddedness and expressed in a sense of place
- (3) scale, as hierarchisation of social relations and vertical differentiation
- (4) networks, as decentred social relations with flows and interdependence

(Jessop et al. 2008)

How are social entrepreneurship ecosystems constituted through practice and socio-spatial relations?



Methods




Case Selection

- Cases in different SEEs in the Baltic Sea Region:
 - Previous study on the different national SEEs
 - Different structures of the SEEs allow to discern related practices
 - Cases in Finland, Latvia and Germany
- Selection of the social enterprises:
 - Located in a rural area (according to the national definition of rural areas)
 - Represent themselves as rural
 - Fulfil the criteria of the EU definition of a Social Enterprise
 - Self-identify as Social Enterprise
 - Exist for 3-10 years

The cases

The Nature Enterprise (FI)




Materials:
free nature products

Meanings:
allow local people to live from their work collecting nature products

Competences:
founders with experience in food processing, networking and ancient knowledge

The Horse Enterprise (LV)




Materials:
a rural area, close to Riga

Meanings:
create a free space for horses with disabilities; educate the riders

Competences:
a founder with boundless energy, passion and knowledge about horses

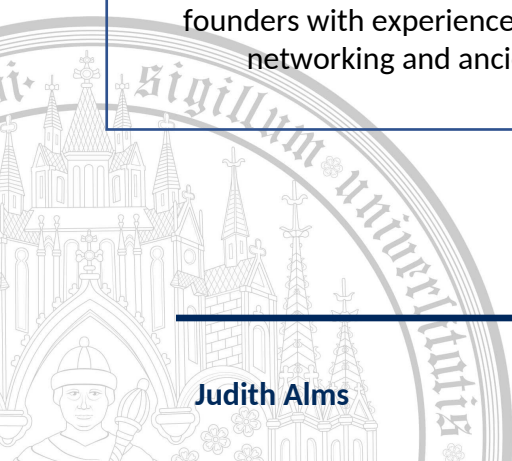
The Future Enterprise (DE)



Materials:
an ancient botanical garden with free space

Meanings:
create a “future place” for sustainable living and working

Competences:
a group with experiences of founding start-ups, social entrepreneurship, design thinking etc.

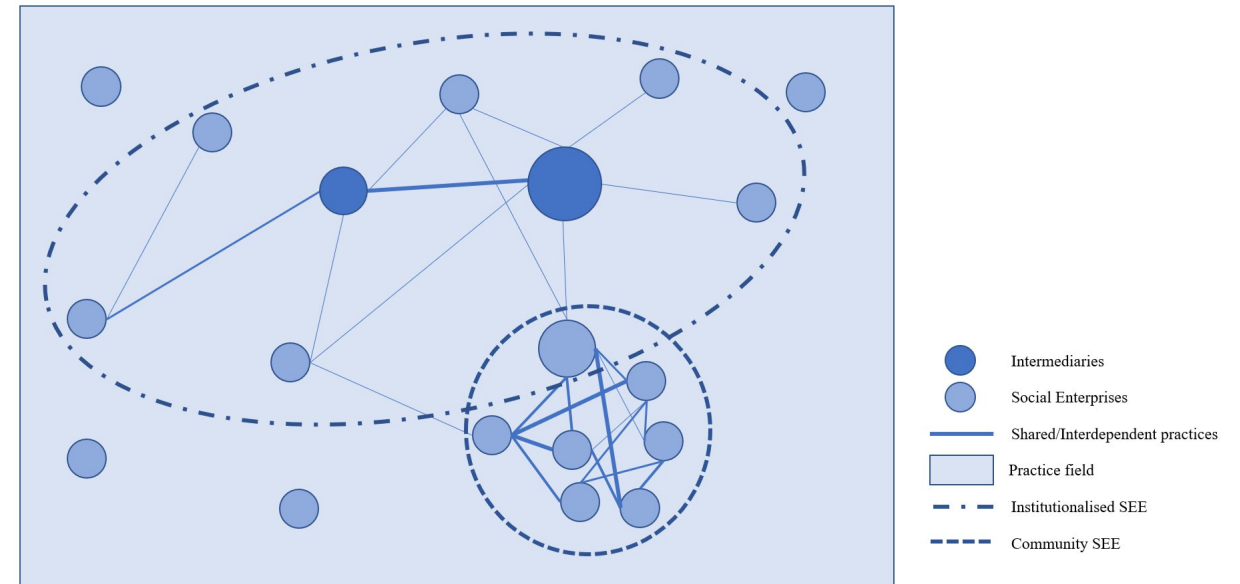


Sociospatiality of Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystems

	Nature Enterprise	Horse Enterprise	Future Enterprise
Territory	National influence through the trademark and national intermediaries	National influence through the Social Enterprise Law; municipal influence through funding opportunities	National influence through funding schemes; regional influence through the construction laws
Place	Territory-based place-making in Lapland, distance to Southern Finland	Homestead and the area of family history as central places, proximity to Riga	Site as agentic place with the community and entrepreneurial practices
Scale	Operations mainly regional; social entrepreneurship connections international	Operations and social entrepreneurship connections mainly national and nationally mediated (through Social Entrepreneurship Association of Latvia)	Operations and social entrepreneurship connections mainly national; hyper-local and regional ecosystem development
Network	Regional network of nature entrepreneurs; international social entrepreneurship network less important	Social entrepreneurship network as central network	Community network (hyper-local up to international); social entrepreneurship network additional

Sociospatiality of Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystems

- The study proposes a practice-based conceptualization of social entrepreneurship ecosystems overcoming the urban-rural divide
- 2 types of ecosystems were found: a mainly place-independent institutionalised ecosystem and a place-based community ecosystem
- SE practices are central in both types, but the institutionalised ecosystem is characterized by the presence of intermediaries who connect and align practices
- The rural social enterprises are found to be deeply embedded in place, co-constructing these places through practice



Schematic illustration of the relation between an institutionalised and a community social entrepreneurship ecosystem



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Feedback is warmly welcome

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