

Discovering the secrets of business success in modern rural areas

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Credit: Thomas Norrby

A new European initiative is working to identify the vital ingredients for developing rural entrepreneurship and successful business models in high potential sectors such as food and agriculture, bio-based value chains and services. We spoke with Thomas Norrby, senior extensionist at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) to get a flavour.

What are the key assets and challenges for entrepreneurship in rural areas today?

As stated in the Cork Declaration 2016 on "A better life in Rural Areas," we need to recognise the economic, environmental and social diversity that characterises rural Europe. We need to better distinguish and respond to the different needs of peripheral areas with very low population density and 'commuter accessible' peri-urban areas. Different ruralities face different challenges. Having said this, the major challenges facing rural Europe are not considerably different to the global challenges facing society at large. We need to find a sustainable future and wiser use of resources of all kinds: natural, social, cultural, economic, or other.

Finding a new sustainable way of life will require innovation at all levels of society at large, in businesses, associations and in public administration. Those innovations will come about as a result of entrepreneurial actions, regardless of sector, perceiving and tying resources together in new ways to increase the value of the resources generating a positive income stream to the [rural areas](#). Bridging sectors to open up and making use of existing assets is a key.

How can new business models and entrepreneurship bring about the necessary change to a sustainable, circular economy?

Entrepreneurship is per definition how change comes about. Someone identifying a need or opportunity, trusting their own ability to act and, not least, acting to make a difference. A "Business Model" is a way to describe the value a company brings to its consumers and how it is realised. Thus it has a market side and a production side, it describes on one hand how this value reaches the customer and on the other, how the value is produced and which resources that it draws upon.

RUBIZMO is identifying viable [business models](#) that include

sustainability at every step of the way: sustainability in the market approach, as well as the sustainability in the use of natural, social or economic resources. An entrepreneur would in many cases have a gut feeling or intuition for this model, but the only constant in life is change, thus there is a need to continuously review, rethink and revise the business. Applying the concept of a business model to a business, the entrepreneur may explore in a much better way the sustainability in every step of the way, improving also the management capacity as we go along. In the Swedish context, we see new business models evolving, some of them originating from entrepreneurial consumers, like new "Food circles," tying producers and consumers together via social media.

In your opinion, is there a recipe for business success in rural areas... and if so, what is your favourite ingredient?

A recipe by definition includes both several ingredients (resources) and a description of how to do things (processes). Success in business requires many different skills, but if there is one key component in a recipe for business success, I would say the balancing and interplay between imaging and acting. The ability to visualise where one wants to go, and an ability to formulate a story about this that involve others, requires an ability to perceive the world around you with curiosity and creativity. That ability does not "take you there," but without it you never get there... To get there, you need a great deal of GRIT, the constant and energetic engagement with your everyday tasks that makes you get up and greet every morning with a smile.

But, that said, developing and running a sustainable rural [business](#) requires a supportive context. Today, this requires high-speed connectivity, a supportive regional strategy and with knowledgeable and entrepreneurial bureaucrats as well as a local culture allowing and

embracing both failures and successes.

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