

# Rural innovation policies need to exploit differences within communities

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Policies aimed at encouraging rural innovation should take into account the differences between entrepreneurs and how they view where they live, according to a new study.

Researchers at the University of East Anglia (UEA) and De Montfort University have found that meanings attached to where someone lives are shaped by previous experiences, and this in turn influences their [innovation](#) strategies and [entrepreneurial activity](#).

Key to this are migratory experiences, which the study categorises into four types: 'locally-born', those who have stayed in the area all their lives; 'returnees', who left to study or for work and later returned; 'in-migrants', those born in other parts of the UK who moved into the area, often after years of employment elsewhere; and 'immigrants' born in another country.

The findings, published in the journal *Regional Studies*, suggest that rural-specific resources—for example, traditional heritage, natural beauty and assets—are not widely used in introducing innovation by rural entrepreneurs.

The most innovative rural entrepreneurs are migrants who not only use pre-existing contacts made outside the [rural area](#) to create jobs when they move into it, but also build on previous life experiences to gain 'continuous' access to distant knowledge resources through new contacts and transient supply chains.

The relative local detachment of in-migrant entrepreneurs makes them particularly suitable candidates for exploring and exploiting innovative alternatives in their business activity.

Study authors Dr. Zografia Bika from UEA and Prof Christos Kalantaridis from De Montfort say their findings have important implications for rural innovation policies both locally and nationally. They also argue that the UK Industrial Strategy fails to consider the complexities of the meaning of a place for different people, and disregards rurality as a distinct context for policy action.

Current policies focus on innovative activity being clustered in specific regions, sectors and rural resources. They also consider everyone living in a rural area as one, yet these areas have seen demographic changes, with urban to rural migration and most recently international arrivals, largely due to the desirable living environment rural areas offer but also the labour mobility rules of the EU.

Dr. Bika, of UEA's Norwich Business School, said: "The way people in the same rural area perceive and approach innovation is quite different and reflects their previous experiences and what the place means to them, for example in terms of being rich in resources or not, or being a good or bad place to live and do business.

"The importance attached in rural innovation policy to understanding innovative activity from the point of view of local people acquires particular relevance in the context of the changing demographic realities of rural areas, as these may underpin the emergence of different views among individuals.

"Instead of having a top down approach and focusing on particular sectors and clustering around rural knowledge infrastructures and resources, policies should support diversification. One size does not fit

all. It is critical to not only acknowledge but also use the differences within rural communities."

Prof Kalantaridis said the findings were particularly timely given the UK's decision to leave the EU. "Leaving the EU raises the question of whether this may lead to a reduction of immigration or its re-composition to include more arrivals, with very different experiences, from elsewhere in the world, and therefore new meanings of place and links, but also directs the focus of policy action on migration as central to rural innovation."

The researchers call for a move towards the development of connections between innovation networks combining rural specific and distant, at times transient and new knowledge resources: a way of 'open-sourcing' the diversity reported by individual entrepreneurs in light of ongoing personal experiences of moving across places, jobs and organisations.

For example, those of family entrepreneurs, owner-managers, migrant entrepreneurs or corporate entrepreneurs who have had diverse entrepreneurial journeys, but carry out their different economic activities in the rural area and can benefit from each other's knowledge portfolio. Dr. Bika and Prof Kalantaridis conclude that this "adds a new meaning to personal mobility, itself reshaped following withdrawal from the EU, beyond the provision of entrepreneurial talent and pre-existing networks to an enduring driver of rural innovation."

The study focused on rural Cumbria and involved a survey of 110 innovative enterprises, including manufacturing, business services, construction, trade, hotels and services, and agriculture. The findings also draw on four individual case studies, each representing one of the migration types.

**More information:** Christos Kalantaridis et al, Migration, meaning(s)

of place and implications for rural innovation policy, *Regional Studies* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2019.1597971](https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2019.1597971)

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