Social Incubation: Potentials for Rural Revitalization

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Abstract   Incubation has become a well-established approach to support entrepreneurship and the emergence of early-stage ventures. It is currently used to tackle a series of societal challenges such as marginalization, immigration, climate change, etc. But can incubation provide a new perspective into re-imagining the reservoir of rural resources (i.e., landscapes, different forms of heritage, values, and lifestyle) from an entrepreneurial lens and provide solutions to marginalized rural areas? I discuss hereafter several challenges and potential avenues for adapting (social) incubation to become more useful for revitalizing rural areas with important cultural heritage.

Keywords   Social innovation, social incubation, rural entrepreneurship.

Incubation and the rural context

During the past few decades, entrepreneurial incubation has become a multifaceted tool, used for diverse purposes. From a coveted approach to revitalizing post-industrial areas through enterprise creation, to a model for finding commercial outlets for technological innovations, to a spearhead of entrepreneurship, incubation remains a fashionable concept (Aernoudt 2004).

Nowadays, there is a certain glamour surrounding the image of incubation, due to the normative assumptions that it brings forth successful, fast-growing technology start-ups that operate in competitive niches and generally attract high-skilled employees located in urban areas. The incubation method and organizational model—that is, providing entrepreneurial support and services to early-stage ventures—has become commonly recognized as the norm in helping young start-ups to launch. Despite its debatable effects (e.g., in terms of enterprise creation, long-term survival, and local wealth generation) and difficulties in measuring its performance (Hackett and Dilts 2008), incubation appears to be here to stay: it continues to receive support from public and private actors despite changing trends and policies.

As a method, incubation has gradually permeated other milieus beyond the high-growth start-up world. Incubation is now seen as a potential approach to finding answers to diverse societal challenges, such as the marginalization and discrimination of certain population categories, including women, ethnic, or religious minorities;

the integration of immigrant populations; the fight against climate change; reduced financing in the arts and creative sectors, etc.

With this evolution, it has become an aggregator of creative forces and resources targeted at contemporary societal ills that proposes a unique solution—*entrepreneurialism*—and a unique method—*incubation.* Social incubation is an example of such efforts that exclusively support organizations that propose innovative and market-oriented solutions (Casasnovas and Bruno 2013) to regional welfare gaps in areas including health, education, social care, agriculture, and environmental preservation.

Rural areas are some of the regions facing increasing challenges because they suffer from state withdrawal (Richter and Christmann 2023) and marginalization from mainstream regional development policies and market initiatives (Vercher et al. 2021). These regions have been stigmatized (Bock 2016) and are not seen as environments conducive to entrepreneurship and innovation (Vercher et al. 2021).

It is in this rural context that I question what the relevance and contributions of social incubation can be. Precisely as the reservoir of rural resources—landscapes, different forms of heritage, values, and lifestyle—is apprehended under a new entrepreneurial perspective (examples include initiatives in the realms of culture, arts and crafts, sustainable agriculture, and tourism, etc.), the question arises of whether adequate support is given to these emerging initiatives. In the following paragraphs, I briefly discuss some of the topics that need reflection and provide potential avenues for adapting (social) incubation to become more useful for revitalizing rural areas with important cultural heritage.

Potential avenues for adaptation

Although the core approach and objectives of incubation have remained unchanged over the years, incubators have gradually become disconnected from the challenges of rural territories because they are now mostly concentrated in urban, developed, and fast-growing areas. This does not mean that incubators cannot bring any further value to rural territories, but that to do so they need to reengage with the specificities of these regions and, in so doing, envision new methods of support.

Firstly, it is useful to emphasize that a tacit relation of power underpins the incubation phenomenon, due to the asymmetry—in terms of access to resources, knowledge, networks, etc.—that exists between the support organization (the incubator) and the persons seeking entrepreneurial support (the entrepreneurs). This asymmetry of power can be exacerbated in cases where an urban-based incubator seeks to intervene in rural areas where it has not yet built legitimacy. To avoid a reaction of local resistance and a feeling of top-down instrumentalization, a bottom-up approach seems to be the most fruitful (Neumeier 2017) because it ensures that the entrepreneurial support empowers rural communities to develop the necessary collective force to build an authentic entrepreneurial path (Gaddefors and Anderson 2018). Nevertheless, this bottom-up approach is dependent upon the establishment

of a trusted relationship between the community and the incubator and genuine investment by the support organization in the long-term well-being and development of the community. The incubator's margin for maneuver is generally contingent on the institutional arrangements it is involved in (e.g., institutional supporters, sources of funding, local development, and political agendas) (Gaidos, Palpacuer, and Gurău 2023). It should be noted that, while the entrenchment of social innovations in power relations is discussed in rural studies, this aspect is rather absent in social incubation research, where the lens of analysis is geared toward performance and market value. Further, as a method (and as a process), social incubation is ruled by certain practices—in terms of selection processes, evaluation, entrepreneurial support tools, and trainings—which are developed in competitive urban contexts that appear unsuitable when applied to the challenges of rural revitalization. I will use several examples to illustrate this point.

In most cases, entrance into incubation programs is highly competitive and, depending on the incubator's reputation, the selection rate can be very low. Selection criteria evaluate the potential growth of the venture, its speed to the market, and the innovative or tech-savvy character of the offer as well as the entrepreneurial acumen of the project leaders. This competitive nature is no less important in the case of social incubation, where the novel nature of the offer is scrutinized, as well as its potential social impact and its capacity to become scalable to other territories. The teams who succeed most often have an entrepreneurial background, master the business vocabulary, and are capable of convincing evaluators of their social mission, while reassuring on the economic feasibility of their ventures (Barton and Muñoz 2023; Kreutzer 2022). If incubators can afford to be selective in an urban context, this approach might not be productive in a rural context. Indeed, entrepreneurial culture and entrepreneurial role models are less prominent or lacking in rural settings (Fortunato 2014; Bock 2016; Summatavet and Raudsaar 2015) and the number of new entrepreneurial projects is less important.

This calls for an adapted selection process and criteria—for example, the socially innovative character of the initiative can be weighted as less important compared with the potential impact on local development—but equally for a reflection on the types of ventures to be supported. If, in general, incubators attract start-ups with a high-growth prospect in the short term, start-ups that target important markets, most often at a national or international level, and start-ups not attached to a particular territory, then there is a need for a change in the mindset, approach, and tools of incubation in a rural context. Entrepreneurial models that favor cooperation and are long-term oriented, thus promoting stability and embeddedness in the local socioeconomic but also historical context, seem more likely to spur on local development.

Moreover, the incubation offer is built around supporting individual entrepreneurs or small groups. The challenges faced in rural areas are interconnected, which means that the individual- or project-oriented incubation model is less effective. It has been shown that the social and relational aspect plays an essential role in rural development to fight against the remoteness and marginalization of these areas (Bock 2016).

A more systemic approach may be needed at the level of industries or sectors by considering the social, economic, and environmental entrenchments of social problems.

In this process of network and community building, questions of representativity emerge: whose voices are being heard and taken into account, which actors have or do not have the resources to participate in the entrepreneurial process, and which actors are included or excluded from the incubation journey? When engaging with rural contexts, the local history of collective action (Neumeier 2017) should be accounted for. Current incubation practices are therefore challenged to incorporate this collective dimension in an inclusive manner, and incubators are required to be mindful of the effects of their selection practices on local dynamics.

There is equally an issue of out-of-sync timelines. As social issues are locally entrenched and can be long-standing, social entrepreneurial projects need more time to get established and become effective. Their need for support can be longer than the current norm of incubation programs—very seldom do these programs go beyond one year of support (though some exceptions do exist: see for example the social incubator NESsT). Moreover, the pressure for quick results that is sometimes observable in urban incubators can be counterproductive. As social innovations suppose a change in social networks, mindsets, and power relations—and carry uncertainty—these processes take more time and demand long-term engagement by incubators.

It has been shown that for social innovation processes in rural areas to happen and become fruitful, there is a need to create connections beyond the local area with potential external partners (Vercher et al. 2021; Bock 2016). Moreover, this collective process requires constant animation (Vercher et al. 2021) to activate and maintain social relations, which carries an interesting window of opportunity for incubators who have, over time, developed important organizational skills in bridging and connecting different stakeholders. Effective incubators can capitalize on this need to engage with institutional and entrepreneurial networks to which they are already connected. For this collective emulation to take place, visible decentralized networks of support are important, as the incubator should have significant territorial coverage and be recognizable for local actors.

As (social) entrepreneurship engages with rural areas' local heritage through incubation support, new perspectives—as well as challenges—emerge. The capacity of incubation to instill entrepreneurial knowledge means it has the potential to revitalize rural areas, if done in a manner that allows local communities and actors to enact the rural (Gaddefors and Anderson 2018) and seize the entrepreneurial act in an authentic way. Indeed, rural areas are often pools of resources (Gaddefors and Anderson 2018), scenery, landscapes, social practices, cultural heritage, etc.—some obvious and others latent. Current societal trends, such as a return to craft making, a reshoring of certain industries, and a demand for local, more transparent products, put dormant cultural and industrial heritage in certain rural areas in a new light. These resources can rejuvenate a sense of pride and embody sources of inspiration for local ventures, in ways that align with the regions' history and heritage. However, activating these resources within new entrepreneurial journeys comes with a social responsibility

toward disenchanted local communities, who have already suffered from deindustrialization and a gradual retreat of public services.

There is, nevertheless, a risk of depoliticizing rural problems (Vercher et al. 2021) by assuming that civic self-responsibility (Richter and Christmann 2023) and social ventures are capable of revitalizing marginalized rural areas on their own, without larger institutional engagement. While social incubation can help to instill entrepreneurial knowledge, connecting stakeholders and orchestrating the collective entrepreneurial process is not a fool-proof panacea for the structural challenges faced by rural areas that are embedded in broader processes of social change (Bock 2016).

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