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Land-Based Social Enterprise: Supporting New Models of Land Use for the Common Good

Rebecca Hudson, Tom Kenny and Mark Walton

This short article focuses on the results of interviews with 13 representatives from land-based social enterprises to explore how targeted support can help these organisations to develop new models of land use. The interviews were carried out by Shared Assets — a social enterprise dedicated to making land work for everyone — as part of wider activities supported by the Tudor Trust. The article provides an overview of the kinds of support these organisations are likely to have.

Background and Introduction

Shared Assets is a social enterprise dedicated to making land work for everyone. We believe that new models of managing land for the common good are needed and that land-based social enterprises are best placed to deliver them. In the 3 years since we started this journey we have provided support to more than 40 land-based social enterprises, offered consultancy and training to a range of landowners and public sector bodies, and conducted research on woodland social enterprises (Swade, Simmonds, Barker and Walton 2013), local authority woodland management (Swade, Walker and Walton, 2013), and community energy generation (Walton, 2013). In previous and ongoing projects, we have also explored models of social enterprise and community food growing, waterways management, and public green space management.

A range of innovative new models of socially focused land management is developing, with a focus on sustainability, the environment and social resilience. Their rise has been driven in part by reductions in public spending, which have required new thinking about business and management models for public land. Projects focus on things like community food growing, renewable energy generation, sustainable forestry, local economies, and health and wellbeing. This article is about these 'land-based social enterprises', and how support can help them to develop new models of land use. With both practitioners and support organisations often choosing to take on co-operative structures, it is an important movement for the co-operative sector to understand.

'Land-based' means the organisations use land, or 'environmental assets', to carry out their core activities. This could be anything from forestry in remote parts of the UK to projects using urban waterways. 'Social enterprise' means they are set up to generate income, but also have a primary social and/or environmental purpose into which any profit is reinvested. They take a range of different organisational forms, but co-operative (registered society) structures are commonly used since they provide a way of engaging communities, and enabling democratic accountability over the management of what are often significant public assets. Worker co-operatives are also popular with emerging community organisations such as food growing groups.

The findings reported here are drawn from interviews with 13 representatives from land-based social enterprises who received direct technical, business and training support from Shared Assets. Interviews focused on the practitioners' experiences running land-based social enterprises and the support received from Shared Assets, other organisations, and peers. The research also aimed to identify key barriers, and support they felt the sector lacked. This was not a systematic evaluation of support for land-based social enterprises, but should give readers an understanding of the kinds of support needs these organisations are likely to have. Although

these findings are most relevant to organisations working with land-based social enterprises, there are several points raised that also have relevance for support work more generally and the following sections focus on: barriers to developing a land-based social enterprise; support needs required; what constitutes 'good' support' and concludes with some thoughts on implications for policy and the role of co-operative structures.

Barriers to Developing a Land-Based Social Enterprise

A key difficulty identified by participants was in identifying and accessing land. Some of the organisations interviewed were still struggling to access the sites on which they wanted to work. The high cost of land, and a lack of information about it, made access difficult. Another major reason given for this was difficulty engaging with landowners, with social enterprises sometimes struggling to be taken seriously by landowners. The relatively casual and ad hoc origins of many land-based social enterprises could mean they struggle to develop the requisite language, credibility and knowledge in order to be taken seriously and some participants also mentioned issues working with (predominantly public) landowners. Examples included 'broken promises', where land, buildings, leases or opportunities had been suggested, but never delivered. Others mentioned frequent staff changes in local authorities as a problem for some organisations, as contacts could be lost, leading things to 'fall apart'.

Lack of resources and difficulty maintaining financial sustainability was also a barrier to developing a land-based social enterprise. Participants described a feeling of regularly 'treading water'. Some had other 'day jobs', and many projects were underfunded and understaffed. Moreover, focusing on the immediate activities needed to sustain their organisations could militate against their development. Finally, participants were often motivated by tackling local poverty, yet struggled to develop revenue streams in poor areas.

Support Needs of Land-Based Social Enterprises

Organisations wanted help in developing robust legal and democratic governance structures. This was seen as essential to moving projects forward. In particular, they desired support in setting boundaries with volunteers, trustees and colleagues and developing clear agreements with landowners.

This also linked to a broader desire to develop relationships with key stakeholders and the community. Participants were concerned with developing the relationships they needed to be taken seriously by key stakeholders such as local authorities and other landowners. This is a particularly important issue for newer organisations. Organisations were also interested in support on building local relationships, in particular with vulnerable groups.

For some participants, their lack of knowledge about one aspect of their project (eg land legislation, community involvement, land management, or business management) was the key reason they came to an organisation like Shared Assets for support and to develop their skills and knowledge. Practitioners were also interested in receiving information on issues that could affect them, and felt support organisations should monitor this information and communicate it in an accessible way.

Participants also described how networking with similar, or local, organisations could be useful. Some felt that place-based networking was especially important, as a network of diverse projects within a local authority could be a powerful tool, potentially swaying local politics, making connections with nearby expertise and transforming a place by pursuing a common agenda. Building social networks was also seen to be a means of providing peer support. While support agencies could help to facilitate useful networking, and helping organisations network was seen as a valuable role for support organisations, participants also raised a number of issues. In particular: taking up too much time and failing to meet practical needs.

Many participants felt it was crucial simply to have 'possibility models', to provide an understanding of what was possible for an organisation like theirs. One of the main reasons that they wanted support from networks and their peers was to see what other organisations had achieved, in order to develop their own plans and ambitions.

What Constitutes Good Support?

What became apparent was that regular, structured support may often be inappropriate for these organisations. Especially at early stages, the social entrepreneurs running these projects are often unable to dedicate consistent hours. Moreover, the progress of the organisations is often quite stop-start. Participants described long waiting periods for planning permission, or agreement of asset transfers, for example — and then moments of intense, fast moving organisational development. They explained that this would mean that they would have a wide variety of different needs at various points in their project's development. Rigidly structured training and support could easily result in that support being ineffective and therefore, participants favoured ad-hoc support, and practically focused networking opportunities.

A common theme was the idea that support cannot be an out-of-the-box, one-size-fits-all, package. Rather, support needs to be tailored and it needs to be flexible to be able to provide different support at different stages and for different organisations and people. In addition, it was felt that support should be practical in its focus. This means both being practitioner led, and focusing on developing clear strategies. Some participants described attending seminars, webinars and workshops that were useful as 'thought' exercises, but very impractical. They commented that these sessions did not 'do the work' or help them make practical decisions. For some of the social entrepreneurs, capturing the passion of those who had done similar work was more valuable than hearing from 'experts' removed from practice. Even so, while being practice-led was considered very important, participants also valued support that bridged gaps with other groups and actors. Being able to understand, and negotiate with professionals and landowners was seen as crucial to achieving goals and being perceived as credible.

Participants considered that support should provide key knowledge in an accessible format. Specific areas where participants had found information provision useful included: the implications of new policy, digital archiving of events, and toolkits for decision-making. They suggested that helpful support might include research, guides, or case study series to help clarify and illustrate these issues.

Participants were clear that support must be delivered with the acknowledgement of the serious resource challenges facing many of these organisations. Travel time and cost were barriers for all the organisations we spoke to, and could stop them attending useful events. Some also said they would only pay for resources if they considered them to be truly invaluable. One solution presented was recording events to broaden access to them.

Implications for Policy

While the findings focus on practice and the need for tailored support relevant to particular development needs in building capacity and credibility, there are also implications for how government can help meet the needs of land-based social enterprises.

Make public land more accessible to communities: One way of doing this is through asset transfer, where government gives community groups access to land or buildings for less than market rates. Another option Shared Assets has proposed, is a 'Community Right to Manage', which would enable communities to propose new management arrangements for environmental assets (or functions) currently held or delivered by government. Shared Assets is also currently involved in the Community Ownership and Management of Assets (COMA) programme, which supports partnerships between local public bodies and community groups that want to access land.

Establish clear and consistent policies on working with land-based social enterprises: This goes for the commissioning of land-based services from central and local government, but also for planning authorities and any other public institutions or large landowners. The first step is to develop an understanding of the needs and potential of land-based social enterprises and adjust practice accordingly. This means realising they may need some support early on so as to deliver longer term benefits. A focus on consistency in processes and communications with the social enterprises is key, so clear guidelines should be issued.

Ownership and Management in Land-Based Social Enterprise: the Roles of Co-operative Structures

Shared Assets' is agnostic about the best type of legal structure. We believe form should follow function, and not all the organisations we support are co-operatives. However, co-operative structures are widespread amongst land-based social enterprises, and there are a number of ways in which adopting such a structure can help address some of the issues discussed above.

Registered societies — in particular community benefit societies — can help develop a wide local membership and ensure democratic accountability for decisions made about the management of shared public assets. These assets often have multiple stakeholders with different and sometimes conflicting interests in their use, so it is crucial to engage widely. While processes will still need to be in place to recognise and balance conflicts, the community benefit society form means that democratic decision-making is built into the group from the start.

Another advantage of using this structure, is that it enables the groups to issue community shares, which allow organisations to raise funds for capital expenditure. This is great for groups who want to use land in a way that has high upfront capital costs, such as buying the land, developing the asset, or installing infrastructure for renewable energy production.

Increasingly we are finding that organisations adopt registered society legal structures for the organisations that *own* the asset, but establish a separate legal structure to undertake day to day management. This captures the benefits discussed above, whilst also enabling a greater degree of entrepreneurial freedom. The members of the registered society retain control over long term and strategic decisions with regard to the use and development of the land, but the management have control over day to day activities.

Finally, a worker co-operative structure is often used for day to day work, reflecting a focus on creating livelihoods rather than relying on voluntary action. Interestingly, we also know some organisations that operate as co-operatives while working within a legal structure such as a company limited by guarantee.

The Authors

Shared Assets supports the development of new models of managing land that are sustainable and productive, create livelihoods, enhance the environment, and involve local people in making decisions about the place they care about. It is run by a small, dedicated team of which Rebecca Hudson, Tom Kenny, and Mark Walton are part. Shared Assets provides support to land-based social enterprises through several other programmes: *Making Local Woods Work* is an attempt to transform undermanaged woodland; *Better Land-Based Economies* is a project supported by Friends Provident to work with social enterprises on innovative means of cost reduction. For more information on land-based social enterprises, visit <https://makinglandwork.wordpress.com/about-2/>. More detailed findings linked to this research can be found in: Rebecca Hudson (2015), *Supporting Land-Based Social Enterprise*, Shared Assets, available at: <http://www.sharedassets.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Supporting-land-based-social-enterprises.pdf>

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