

Agri-food entrepreneurs' perceptions of the infrastructure to support their business: A West of Ireland analysis

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Abstract

Supporting the growth of rural agri-food entrepreneurs requires a clear understanding of the specific supports they need to succeed. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the infrastructure supporting agri-food entrepreneurs situated rurally in the West of Ireland, and their perception of this infrastructure. Twenty-nine participants ($n = 18$ women; $n = 11$ males) took part in five separate focus group discussions. The discussions were


guided by a semi-structured interview framework, and the resulting transcripts underwent thematic analysis. Three main themes were identified: (1) Financial Supports: (a) government funding and (b) insufficient and inaccessible funds; (2) Supportive Resources: (a) networking, mentoring, and training, and (b) isolating work environment; and (3) Social Supports: (a) online support groups and (b) perceptions from peers. The findings provide an understanding of the factors influencing entrepreneurial activity and will assist policymakers in the development and adaptation of the necessary supports.

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Keywords

entrepreneurship, agri-food, infrastructure, resources, rural living, perceptions, rural entrepreneurship

Introduction and Literature Review

Although research into entrepreneurship has increased in recent decades, the existing body of literature is heavily oriented towards urban entrepreneurship and often overlooks those situated in rural areas (Masoomi et al., 2024). Across European Union (EU) countries, rural regions, such as the West of Ireland, account for approximately 83% of total EU territory and 30% of the total EU population (Council of the European Union, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Entrepreneurial activity supports rural economic development and creates a more sustainable livelihood for communities, particularly in developing areas (Pan et al., 2024). The success of such endeavours is heavily reliant on factors such as surrounding infrastructure, institutional frameworks, and governance bodies (Gyimah & Lussier, 2021; Hou et al., 2023).

Rural agri-food entrepreneurship plays a central role in sustaining local food systems, strengthening rural economies, and supporting community resilience in the West of Ireland. The region is characterized by dispersed settlements, reliance on small-scale food producers, and a strong cultural identity tied to local food traditions. These enterprises often operate with limited access to physical infrastructure, digital connectivity, specialist training, and financial support. Understanding the specific infrastructural needs of agri-food entrepreneurs is therefore essential, as their success directly affects local employment, food availability, and the vibrancy of rural communities. In this study, the term “infrastructure” refers to the constellation of supports surrounding entrepreneurs, including financial instruments, digital and informational resources, mentoring and training opportunities, and broader institutional and social environments. While built and logistical infrastructure (e.g., transport, storage, processing facilities) is recognized as important for agri-food systems, the focus for this study is on the social, institutional, and digital supports most described by participants.

According to Hoogendoorn et al. (2019), a

perceived lack of financial support as well as a high degree of complexity in associated administrative procedures hamper entrepreneurial activity. In an investigation comparing the perceived barriers to entrepreneurship in Eastern versus Western European countries, Iakovleva et al. (2014) noted that the view of the lack of access to adequate finances was consistently one of the most influential barriers affecting entrepreneurial activity regardless of location. Further supporting this, previous research has shown that having a financially supportive economy is positively correlated to an active entrepreneurial ecosystem (Sharma et al., 2023).

Throughout Europe, a lack of relevant skills has also been cited as one of the most influential barriers hindering entrepreneurial activity (Iakovleva et al., 2014). Working toward overcoming this issue, mentorship programs provide entrepreneurs with the skills and information both to physically develop their business and psychologically improve their entrepreneurial resilience (St-Jean, 2021). Though evidence shows that entrepreneurial education and training have an overall positive effect on entrepreneurial activity, some research suggests that partaking in these programs may negatively influence such activity, possibly due to its highlighting of common setbacks experienced throughout the entrepreneurial processes (Bhatt 2021; Gómez-Araujo & Bayón, 2017). Integrating entrepreneurial role models, particularly women, into these programs has been recommended as a method to inspire and motivate individuals at the early stages of their endeavour while simultaneously combating the gender stereotype associated with entrepreneurship (GEM, 2023). Conversely, previous research suggests that the absence of entrepreneurial role models may act as an institutional barrier to rural entrepreneurship (Lafuente et al., 2012).

Location can have a significant impact on entrepreneurial activity due to the relative difference in availability of supportive resources and infrastructure between urban and rurally located entrepreneurs. For example, the average distance necessary to access essential services is 3.5km (2.2 miles) for urban individuals compared to 21.5km (13.4 miles) for those in rural areas (European Commission, 2024). Also hindering rural entrepre-

neurship is limited access to fast and reliable broadband connections (>30Mbps), with only 60% of rural areas having such access compared to 86% of the entire EU population (Augère-Graniar & McEldowney, 2021). Proposed by the European Commission in 2018, the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) “Next Generation EU” recovery plan commits to repairing a post-COVID economy and supporting the development of a more resilient EU. Included in this legislative proposal is increased rural development support with a shift from a one-size-fits-all to a tailor-made approach. This aims to promote and support the growth of rural employment, the development of rural areas, and to attract young people to farming. In 2021, the European Commission released a consultation factual summary that defined the most urgent issues in relation to the infrastructure of rural areas. These include public transport, access to public services, availability of quality education, access to vocational training opportunities, and addressing demographic challenges such as depopulation and gender inequality (European Commission, 2021). In Ireland, entrepreneurs can access support at both national and regional levels, with Irish regions split into counties. These counties have their own councils composed of elected individuals who are involved in policymaking procedures and developing services within their allocated boundaries (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2024). Three of the leading entrepreneurial support programs across Ireland are New Frontiers, Empower, and Accelerating the Creation of Rural Nascent Start-ups (ACORNS). New Frontiers is aimed at first-time founders and offers support such as mentoring, training, and funding across 18 locations in the Republic of Ireland (Enterprise Ireland, n.d.). Funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth alongside the European Social Fund Agency, Empower is a free entrepreneurial program for women aimed at supporting individuals in Irish-speaking regions and is funded by two Irish universities (Empowerprogramme.ie, n.d.). Similarly, the ACORNS program looks to support early-stage women entrepreneurs living in rural Ireland and gives participants the opportunity to partake in round table discussions facilitated by

successful women entrepreneurs in rural Ireland (ACORNS, n.d.).

The relationships surrounding entrepreneurs and the degree of support or discouragement perceived within these interactions can influence entrepreneurial activity both positively and negatively, particularly during the early developmental stages of a venture (Bohlayer & Gielnik, 2023). Such relationships can impact entrepreneurs’ self-efficacy, defined as the belief in one’s capacity to initiate and successfully execute entrepreneurial actions (Bandura, 1977). This self-efficacy, in turn, influences thought, affects motivation and action (Bandura, 1991). Understanding the dual role of supportive and unsupportive relationships is essential for interpreting how entrepreneurs navigate challenges within their wider ecosystem. Bohlayer and Gielnik (2023), in their investigation of how training programs shape self-efficacy, emphasised the need for a more granular approach to fully capture the potential negative consequences associated with participating in such training.

Despite increasing attention to entrepreneurship in rural regions, limited qualitative research has examined how agri-food entrepreneurs perceive the infrastructure surrounding their work. To address this gap, the aim of this study was to examine the ways in which agri-food entrepreneurs located in the West of Ireland perceive, interpret, and engage with the various supports available to them. Specifically, the study explored how agri-food entrepreneurs perceive financial, resource-related, and social infrastructure, and how these perceptions influence their entrepreneurial activity.

Applied Research Methods

A qualitative research methodology was adopted to examine how rural agri-food entrepreneurs perceive and experience the infrastructural supports available to them in the West of Ireland. The study utilized semi-structured focus group discussions to generate rich, experience-based data, which were subsequently analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Study Design

Five separate, semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with agri-food entrepreneurs

located in rural areas of the West of Ireland. The purpose of these discussions was to elicit participants' perceptions of the infrastructural supports shaping their entrepreneurial activity. The focus groups followed a discussion protocol designed to explore experiences with financial supports, access to training and mentoring, infrastructural and operational challenges, and social or community support. The focus groups were held in person, lasted for approximately one hour, were audio-recorded, and anonymised to protect participant identities.

Participants

A total of 29 entrepreneurs participated across the five focus groups ($n = 18$ women; $n = 11$ men). Recruitment was conducted through targeted invitations to entrepreneurs involved in the Empower and New Frontiers programs. A participant information sheet outlining the objectives of the study and eligibility criteria was circulated in advance. Participants were eligible to partake in the study if they were (1) currently operating an agri-food business; (2) were in the early stages of their venture (0–5 years); and (3) were located in a rural area in the West of Ireland. The sample represented a diverse range of agri-food activities, including small-scale food producers, artisanal food manufacturers, primary producers with value-added products, and food tourism enterprises. Following confirmation of eligibility, participants received additional information on the study, confidentiality, and data management strategies, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Sub-Committee of the Academic Council of the Atlantic Technological University (ATURSC_AC_23062020).

Data Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured discussions from each of the five focus groups. The data was transcribed and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022; also Clarke et al., 2015). A pre-specified framework of analysis was used in this research, with semantic coding prioritized over latent coding. First, transcripts were produced, and the research

team familiarized themselves with the data. Second, recurring ideas, experiences, and patterns were identified. Third, segments of text capturing core meanings were coded, and these codes informed preliminary sub-themes, which were discussed and agreed upon within the research team. In the fourth phase, related codes were organized into coherent themes that reflected meaningful patterns in relation to the research questions. Fifth, the themes were reviewed and refined to strengthen conceptual clarity and interpretive depth. Finally, in the sixth phase, the research team developed a conceptual model capturing the relationships between themes and sub-themes, providing an integrative representation of participants' perceptions of the infrastructural supports available to them (Table 1).

Results

Twenty-nine participants ($n = 11$ male; $n = 18$ women) took part in the focus group discussions. All participants were in the early stages of their business venture (within 0–5 years). Participants represented a diverse range of agri-food activities, including bakeries, farm-based value-added production, locally focused food services, and food tourism initiatives. This diversity reflects the multifaceted nature of rural agri-food enterprise in the region. The central themes identified (financial supports, supportive resources, and social supports) included both positive and negative opinions regarding the current infrastructure and supports available to the agri-food entrepreneurs in the West of Ireland. These main themes were further subdivided into sub-themes (Table 1).

Theme 1: Financial Support

The first identified theme, financial supports, provides an insight into the financial aid agri-food entrepreneurs situated in the West of Ireland are aware of and their perception of such support.

Government Funding

Participants spoke positively about some of the financial supports available, including a tax-free allowance of up to €15,000 offered by New Frontiers, Ireland's national entrepreneur development program. They considered the allowance as an incentive, enabling individuals to take advantage of

the host of benefits it offers, such as training modules and networking opportunities.

Participants also spoke positively about accessing funding specifically for their rural location. This may be available through Enterprise Ireland (a government agency) or, in some cases, from the local (County) Council. Participants were pleased to see the Irish government supporting their rural economies through funding to create and support a diverse employment opportunities in small communities. However, they felt a need for “more government funding available for those areas to create jobs and so on” (P14). Issues in their areas, such as poor broadband quality, were considered costly for entrepreneurs. Participants felt that the new funding available was an active response to the government’s recognition of these location-specific challenges.

Insufficient and Inaccessible Funds

It was clear that, although entrepreneurs appreciated the financial support they received, they felt that overall, the degree of this support was insufficient and oftentimes difficult to access. Multiple

entrepreneurs described their struggles in finding information on the financial support available to them and expressed their desire for a central repository that collates such information in an easily accessible and time-efficient manner. With regards to the funding that the entrepreneurs are aware of, they expressed that the amount of time spent completing such applications greatly outweighs the resulting financial assistance they may potentially receive if their application is successful: “the rate you’d want to be paying yourself at to do the application negates the value of the funding you get at the end of it” (P22).

Many agreed that they would be “better off” working for their business and generating the profit from something that is “more sustainable” than trawling through the application processes for the majority of financial supports available. In addition, entrepreneurs felt that the eligibility criteria were frequently overly specific, leaving applicants continuously required to adapt their business plans to ensure eligibility.

Financial supports were also viewed as disproportionately directed toward businesses with high

Table 1. Developed Themes, Sub-Themes, Orientation, Description, and Representation

Theme	Sub-theme	Orientation	Description	Representativeness*
Financial Supports	Government Funding	Positive	Government and regional supports (e.g., rural grants, enterprise programmes) were viewed as helpful in enabling early-stage development.	Prevalent theme; raised across most focus groups.
	Insufficient and Inaccessible Funds	Negative	Funding processes were perceived as burdensome, difficult to navigate, and often oriented toward export-focused businesses rather than local agri-food producers.	Prevalent theme; widely discussed across the dataset.
Supportive Resources	Networking Opportunities	Positive	Training, enterprise programmes, and mentoring initiatives offered valuable opportunities for learning, confidence-building, and connections with peers.	Recurrent theme; raised across several focus groups.
	Isolating Work Environment	Negative	Entrepreneurs described isolation, limited rural supports, and emotional strain, including gender-specific challenges for women balancing multiple roles.	Prevalent theme; raised across most focus groups.
Social Supports	Online Support Groups	Positive	Online communities and social media networks provided encouragement, practical advice, and opportunities to expand customer reach.	Recurrent theme; raised across several focus groups.
	Perceptions from Peers	Mixed	Peer interactions varied: some participants experienced encouragement, while others received discouraging or conflicting advice that undermined confidence.	Peripheral theme; raised occasionally but meaningfully.

* Representativeness reflects breadth across the five focus groups, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis.

export potential, which participants felt disadvantaged locally oriented food producers, whose products are inherently tied to place-based markets, short supply chains, or perishability. Several entrepreneurs emphasised that this bias undermines the development of community-focused agri-food enterprises that contribute to local food systems and rural resilience. Participants felt a sense of hopelessness, stating that they would not “get much support” unless they are “export ready.” Also looking on an international scale, rural entrepreneurs explained that they would like to see Ireland seek more funding at a European level, which could be used to support businesses situated in rural areas; according to one participant, “I don’t think Ireland punches its weight in terms of drawing down enough EU funding to support infrastructure projects and everything else in rural areas” (P11).

Entrepreneurs expressed that additional funding could be used to create some sort of salary for those who are self-employed, offering some financial security. On multiple occasions, women described the pressure they felt to return to work immediately after their pregnancy or, unfortunately, their miscarriages, as they were financially unable to take any personal time off and could not locate financial support for these situations.

I suffered lots of miscarriages through the years, and there are no supports if you are self-employed, you have to get right back into it. There is nothing for any women suffering any emotional loss, or anything like that—they just have to get back up on the horse, and it’s not dealt with. (P20)

Theme 2: Supportive Resources

Beyond financial support, participants discussed the various resources that they had previously availed themselves of.

Networking, Mentoring, and Training

Networking and networking opportunities were highlighted as positive, supportive drivers of business development. Two examples of programs available in the West of Ireland that were referred to include the EMPOWER (EU funded mentoring

program for women) and the Accelerating the Creation Of Rural Nascent Start-ups (ACORNS) programs, as well as various courses that offer training and advice to improve entrepreneurial skills, with one participant stating that without such programs they “would not be doing what I am today.” Some participants felt there had been vast improvements in the support of entrepreneurs.

It’s never been a better time to be an entrepreneur in rural Ireland, actually. I think it’s been amazing, Empower, I’ve done the Empower program and the ACORNS program, and I think there are so many supports out there if you want to go and embrace them and make use of them, that barrier is completely gone. (P27)

Multiple participants had experience partaking in mentorship programs offered by different organizations; as one noted, they “did a series of mentoring with ‘The Design and Arts Council of Ireland,’ and we had an excellent mentor, and he had exactly the right experience” (P22), whereby they were assigned an individual with ample entrepreneurial experience in a similar field. The role of the mentor is to provide guidance and feedback to mentees as their business develops and to help them overcome any obstacles that may arise.

While skills workshops and training for entrepreneurs are useful, participants noted a lack of resources and courses that could improve entrepreneurs’ confidence and self-belief. Though many participants recognized that supportive online groups were available, there was a shared belief that these are “severely under-advertised” and require more publicizing. Similarly, participants voiced their confusion regarding course eligibility, expressing their uncertainty regarding whether a course’s content is building on other programs or had prerequisites, or if all courses “are targeting complete beginners.”

Isolating Work Environment

While the participants in this study did express their appreciation for the variety of programs and courses available to them, they described considerable frustration with the application processes.

Entrepreneurs explained that the “demand is so high you can’t get on to them” and felt that the number of programs and courses specifically for entrepreneurs required improvement, either by increasing their quantity or increasing the number of places available to participants. Additionally, the quality of these events was heavily dependent on the skills of the facilitators organizing them, with some participants regarding their experience in these events as “quite poor.” Similarly, the feedback on mentoring was extremely varied, sometimes considered too broad and not tailored enough to the specific business involved. The participants also felt that entrepreneurship was “lonely,” and one could feel “isolated” due to the nature of their work and lack of colleagues or shared workspaces to promote and support socializing. Recommendations to overcome this issue included an increase in affordable shared workspaces throughout the country, and for the location of networking events to regularly change rather than having the vast majority held in Dublin (on the east coast of Ireland). At the moment, Dublin is the central hub for entrepreneurial training and networking events, which is costly for those situated rurally/West of Ireland without subsidized transport. Rotating the locations of these events or offering subsidized transport to entrepreneurs for business-related travel were both mentioned as desirable changes to support this cohort.

An additional emotional strain for women specifically is that of experiencing pregnancy, childbirth, or miscarriage. One participating women entrepreneur highlighted this as an area that she feels has been completely overlooked and requires significant attention.

For all of the aforementioned barriers, participants shared the struggles of sourcing information. They felt that, as with financial support, supportive resources are also somewhat hidden from them. One entrepreneur in particular described that it took until the eleventh year of business for them to come across supports which they were entitled to apply for: “I’m 11 years in my business, you know it’s 11 years old and it’s only last year that I, you know, realized that there’s supports there for us” (P19). As with the financial supports, entrepreneurs expressed their desire for a central repository or

service where they could efficiently and easily establish the helpful resources they were entitled to apply for.

Theme 3: Social Support

Participants also discussed the importance of social and emotional support throughout their entrepreneurial journey.

Online Support Groups

Social media groups were viewed as a positive support system, offering individuals an easily accessible platform to reach out to and communicate with like-minded people. The remoteness of this communication style is of particular importance to those in rural areas such as the West of Ireland, as traveling is often a barrier to individuals socializing. Entrepreneurs felt that these platforms enabled them to receive nonjudgmental feedback on their business-related struggles from people who have experienced and have overcome similar struggles. In addition, participants who reported positive mentoring experiences indicated that mentors provided guidance not only on practical aspects of business development but also offered psychological support in addressing emerging challenges, which in turn had a positive effect on their self-efficacy:

When you are in these groups of like-minded people, you get to trash it all out, realize you are completely normal because everyone else thinks and feels the same. ... They are like your tribe, and when you are with your tribe, it’s just like constant encouragement, and motivation. (P12)

Perceptions from Peers

Participants described feeling a lack of support from their peers and the wider community. An influx of feedback from those without entrepreneurial experience was “confusing and misleading and often disheartening.” Much of the feedback received from peers was described as negative and unsupportive, with individuals commencing their entrepreneurship journey often being told that they “shouldn’t quit” their previous employment and “shouldn’t do that.” Regarding pursuing entrepre-

neurship, they noted that “Input is essential from experienced businesspeople, but it can get to the point where it is confusing and misleading and often disheartening” (P4).

Discussion

Throughout this research, participants voiced both the supportive and constraining elements of the infrastructural landscape in which they operate. This study captured participants’ insights through the lens of financial, resource-based, and social supports.

The landscape of financial sourcing for entrepreneurship has significantly evolved in recent decades. The economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been devastating and felt on a global scale (Howarth & Quaglia 2021). More recently, the Russian war against Ukraine has affected European product inflation levels and a myriad of costs associated with entrepreneurship (Kraemer-Eis et al., 2024). Entrepreneurs are combining traditional financial supports, such as loans from friends, family members, and banks, with newer sources such as online funding pages (Block et al., 2018; Bruton et al., 2015). Entrepreneurial intentions, actions, progress, and success are heavily dependent on a region’s economic development and its institutional environment (Van der Zwan et al., 2013). A significant portion of this environment includes entrepreneurs’ perceived lack of financial support and the complexity of its accompanying administrative procedures (Hoogendoorn et al., 2019). The results of this research conform with previous findings and highlight a lack of financial support perceived by entrepreneurs in rural Ireland as well as an off-putting perception of administrative procedures, often viewed as overly complex and time-consuming. Grilo and Thurik (2005), using 2004 survey data from 15 old EU member states and the U.S., highlighted that the majority of the involved population identified a perceived lack of financial support as a key obstacle to entrepreneurship. Investigating two data sets resulting from the Flash Eurobarometer survey on entrepreneurship across 33 countries, Grilo and Thurik (2008) then noted that in addition to a perceived lack of financial support, a perception of administrative complexities negatively impacted entrepreneurial

engagement levels. Furthermore, using the same data set, Hoogendoorn et al. (2019) found that this perceived barrier existed regardless of entrepreneur type. Focusing specifically on the agri-food sector, Zalewski et al. (2022) outline that due to both external (increasing demands) and internal (increasing labor and resource costs) influences, European Union farms would greatly benefit from increased investments. Participants in this research explained feeling as though they were looked at by funding bodies as inferior if they were not export-oriented. This may be potentially due to the positive effect of export-orientation on early-stage entrepreneurship in higher-income countries that has previously been recorded (Hessels & van Stel, 2011). Entrepreneurs of this research expressed that additional funding could be used to create some sort of salary for those who are self-employed, offering some financial security. This implication of entrepreneurship as being accompanied by financial insecurity, low wages, and a lack of benefits is already a common viewpoint across society (Nyström, 2021).

Digitalization is increasingly gaining importance in modern society for entrepreneurial activity, and this is particularly true for those situated rurally. However, only approximately 60% of rural areas have sufficient access to high-speed internet connections compared to over 80% of the entire EU population (Augère-Graniar & McEldowney, 2021). This limits rural communities’ access to information and communication technologies, creating a sense of a rural-urban divide accompanied by economic and social obstacles. On a global scale, approximately 20% of rural businesses generate a minimum of 80% of their revenue through their online sales (Score, 2019). In analyzing the trends of rural hubs development, European-wide funds, and regional funding initiatives, Dyba et al. (2020) highlighted the potential of digital hubs and diversified financial support to drive rural development and economic growth and support rural entrepreneurial success. However, participants in this study did not explicitly mention such initiatives, which may reflect limited availability or awareness in the region.

European policies have increasingly focused on supporting entrepreneurship in recent decades, with a specific focus on promoting and supporting

innovation in small- and medium-sized enterprises. In Ireland, although multiple supportive programs are available to entrepreneurs, participants in this research felt that more could be done to support their endeavours. While these initiatives have had a positive impact, further dissemination of such support is needed to reach those most rurally located. Additionally, the application procedures and requirements to receive their support are seen as cumbersome, numerous, and complex. Oftentimes, they require specialist consultants, thus increasing the financial burden felt by these business owners (Zarbà et al., 2014, 2022). Recognizing how crowdfunding digital platforms are quickly flourishing, the European Crowdfunding Service Provider Regulation was developed with the aim of providing a framework for regulating crowdfunding activities within the EU. Through requirements such as ensuring that crowdfunding services are licensed and various investor protection measures are in place, this regulation hopes to increase individuals' confidence and sense of security in crowdfunding and thus support the overall growth of its industry. However, this regulation has its challenges. Strict legal requirements and excessive disclosure requirements may burden and limit crowdfunding services and make this method of finance sourcing less attractive to entrepreneurs (Sasso, 2024).

Similar to previous research, entrepreneurs in this study described problems that are location-specific and present major issues in rural areas. These include, in comparison to urban entrepreneurs, an increase in transportation costs and subsequent financial struggles, and a lack of access to facilities (European Commission, 2023). The term "Transport Desert" has been used to describe rural areas with insufficient public transport services and the resulting limitations on citizens (The Country-side Charity [CPRE], 2020). In Ireland, the Department of Transport has connected over 190 towns and villages to public transport networks since mid-2022 and reduced fare cost by an average of 20% (National Transport Authority, 2022). While this is a step in the right direction, the frequency of these services and their practical implications for rural environments, and more specifically, rural entrepreneurs, have yet to be investigated.

Participants in this study expressed the high

value they place on receiving feedback via mentoring programs and training. This has been shown as a heavily influential factor to entrepreneurs' activity, with huge variations in experiences documented (Domurath et al., 2019; Grimes, 2017). Entrepreneurs in rural Ireland expressed a desire for more long-term mentorships to be made available, as the vast majority of those currently offered are short-term and consist of a limited number of encounters. Though one-off interactions do enable entrepreneurs to gain feedback, the literature regarding mentoring emphasizes the benefits of a longer-term relationship, as feedback is more positively received from someone the entrepreneur trusts (Allen et al., 2017; Strike & Rerup, 2016). Humberd and Rouse (2015) suggest that feedback should only be given as part of an already established mentorship, with feedback from a long-term relationship offering benefits that a one-off discussion cannot (Fisher et al., 2017). Investigating this relational dimension of feedback interactions, Van Werven et al. (2023) further supports the notion that changes in epistemic stance are influenced by affiliation and cooperation between entrepreneurs and feedback providers. In their study, they highlight the lack of research investigating early feedback interactions and note that the majority of existing work focuses on one-off interactions. Of the programs and training courses available to entrepreneurs in Ireland, participants of this study expressed frustration with the limited spaces that these programs offer. Additionally, of the participants who attended and completed such programs, feedback on the quality of its contents varied greatly.

Phelan and Sharpley (2011) investigated the agritourism sector in the United Kingdom and found that while farmers' skills and competencies are increasing, there remains a lack of some of the fundamental skills required for developing a successful business. Similar to this research, their study highlights the need for skills training, various support systems, and rural development policies to improve the quality of life and level of success of rural entrepreneurs. Although no research exists evaluating entrepreneurial training courses specifically and solely in Ireland, it is clear from the participants involved in this research that an increased

intake of skills training workshops, as well as a general increase in the quantity of workshops available and method through which they are offered (e.g., in person, online, hybrid) is a shared desire among these agri-food entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs involved in this study spoke positively of their experiences with supportive social media groups, noting that they are easily accessible platforms for contacting like-minded people without the additional hassle of traveling. With the advancement of digital technology, such online communities provide entrepreneurs with diverse learning opportunities for discussing ideas, developing their skills, and voicing the struggles they experience in relation to their profession (Autio et al., 2013; Leonardi, 2018; Nambisan, 2017). Gathering data from a Reddit group with over 380,000 users, Schou et al. (2022) investigated how entrepreneurs learn as part of online communities. Their findings highlighted that entrepreneurs do not only learn through passive observation but also through active discussions, which they termed “entrepreneurial learning conversations.” There was a shared desire from participants of this research for an increase in resources and courses not only for furthering entrepreneurial skills, but also for promoting confidence and self-belief. Oftentimes, entrepreneurs felt low in confidence due to receiving an abundance of negative feedback from peers. This is in line with previous suggestions, which recommend programs for confidence-building as a possible method to tackle the lack of social support felt by entrepreneurs (Roper & Scott, 2009).

Entrepreneurs involved in this research expressed feeling unsupported by their peers, family members, and the wider community. An emotionally supportive environment can have a significant impact on entrepreneurial activity. Edelman et al. (2016) highlighted that for young adults, such support from family members is of particular importance, noting that familial cohesiveness positively impacted start-up activities. Entrepreneurship is rooted in society, with emotional support playing a critical role throughout the early stages of entrepreneurial endeavours (Downing, 2005; Klyver et al., 2018). Such studies have shown that a family environment that is supportive and encour-

aging is superior in comparison to one that is distant (Cogan et al., 2022). Throughout this research, similar negative emotions were described in relation to perceived support from peers. An individual’s belief in their own capability to perform and complete tasks relating to entrepreneurial outcomes, termed entrepreneurial self-efficacy, plays a vital role in the likelihood of individuals pursuing entrepreneurship and their activity levels throughout (Chen et al., 1998). Neneh (2022), in studying a sample of 300 women, found that the support of peers plays a buffering role in entrepreneurs’ lives by significantly lessening the emotional exhaustion experienced as a result of entrepreneur-related stressors. Similarly, training courses, while offering practical advice to nascent entrepreneurs, are also an effective moderator of stress reduction. However, this is more relevant for women, as the interactions during training programs help to reduce entrepreneurial stress and act as a method to break feelings of isolation. Conversely, for males, such interactions can increase this stress (St-Jean et al., 2022). While research indicates an overall positive effect of entrepreneurial education and training, the theoretical understanding behind how and why such training improves entrepreneurial competence remains undefined (Bhatt, 2021; Martin et al., 2013).

In describing the stark differences between rural and urban entrepreneurship, Fortunato (2014) suggests that rural entrepreneurship be treated as a distinct, separate area, as it presents unique opportunities and support in comparison to other areas of entrepreneurship. The findings of this research further support that suggestion as they highlight issues that are location-specific, such as increased travel costs for networking and training events. Furthering this, in their review of rural entrepreneurship, Tabares et al. (2022) suggest that research in this area should give increased attention to entrepreneurship in relation to women in rural areas. With the diversity of financial aid, supportive resources, and a range of environmental factors such as cultural norms varying across different regions and countries, such research will require recruiting specific cohorts and investigating the support available to them based on their place of residence. For example, in Ireland, the *Our Rural*

Future Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 is considered to be the government's action plan for recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. With a vision of transforming the opportunities and quality of life for those living in rural areas, this policy and its actions align with the current United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Its measures include but are not limited to supporting the expansion of high quality broadband connections, which will enable more individuals to work remotely and conduct their business online; provide grants to businesses situated in rural towns and villages; develop training to improve the digital skills of the population; and further develop unique Irish locations and experiences (the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, the Gaeltacht regions). Not only will the actions of this policy focus on adults in rural areas, but it will also look to obtain opinions and viewpoints from young people in these areas through consultation events and workshops (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2021). While participants discussed transportation challenges and long travel distances, other forms of logistical or built environment infrastructure, such as processing facilities or storage capacity, were not raised as prominent barriers during the focus groups. This absence is noteworthy and suggests either limited exposure to such facilities or that other issues (financial, social, informational) were more salient at this early stage of business development.

Research Limitations

This research reflects a point in time and therefore may not be an accurate reflection of existing or ongoing needs. This research is also specific to a relatively small region. Currently, there is a scarcity of research that explores the perceptions of entrepreneurs regarding their support, particularly in the agri-food sector. Much of the entrepreneurship research is quantitative in nature and fails to recognize the substantial role that qualitative investigation can play in understanding factors that influence entrepreneurial activity.

Practical Implications

This study possesses several practical implications. As encountering stressors is an integral aspect of

entrepreneurial endeavours and without a supportive environment, it can negatively impact entrepreneurial activity, it is essential that the effectors of such stress are well understood. A thorough understanding of the perceived supportive infrastructure for entrepreneurs in rural areas will enable policymakers, governing bodies, and nongovernmental organizations to develop an environment in which entrepreneurial activities may flourish. Increasing the availability and promotion of relevant peer support groups, available both online and in-person, will offer entrepreneurs an easily accessible, low-cost tool through which they can connect with like-minded individuals, engage in active learning, and receive constructive criticism from experienced people regardless of their differing locations. On an economic scale, developing an environment that supports entrepreneurs' physical and emotional needs will in turn positively impact the global gross domestic product. This research offers a more thorough understanding of the drivers of entrepreneurial behavior, critical for policymakers and educators to develop effective educational programs and public policies.

Future Research

Future research could examine infrastructural needs across different rural regions to identify whether the patterns observed here extend beyond the West of Ireland. Longitudinal studies would help determine how infrastructural needs evolve as entrepreneurs progress beyond the early start-up phase. Additionally, targeted research into the experiences of women entrepreneurs and the effectiveness of mentoring or peer support programs would provide valuable insights for designing more equitable and context-appropriate supports.

Conclusions

This study examined the infrastructural landscape surrounding agri-food entrepreneurs operating in rural areas of the West of Ireland and explored how these entrepreneurs perceive and engage with the support available to them. The findings provide nuanced insight into both the enabling and constraining features of their operating environment, illustrating the complex interplay of financial, resource-based, and social support that shape

entrepreneurial activity. Although the results align with international research, direct comparisons remain challenging due to regional variations in the availability, accessibility, and relevance of entrepreneurial support. Nevertheless, the study offers policymakers, government agencies, and nongovern-

mental organizations a clearer understanding of the specific needs and priorities of agri-food entrepreneurs in this region. Such understanding is essential for the design and adaptation of policies and programs that can more effectively foster rural entrepreneurial development.

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