

## **Case Study**

# **University Engagement in Rural Development: A Case Study of the Northern Rural Network**

**Jane Atterton**

Centre for Rural Economy  
Newcastle University  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK  
[Jane.atterton@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Jane.atterton@ncl.ac.uk)

**Nicola Thompson**

Centre for Rural Economy  
Newcastle University  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK  
[Nicola.thompson@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Nicola.thompson@ncl.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

The Northern Rural Network was founded by the Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University, North East England in 2000. It was established with the aim of bringing together researchers and practitioners to share knowledge about pertinent issues in rural development. Its conceptual foundations were based on particular ideas about the value of bringing into constructive dialogue people and organisations with different knowledge, roles and perspectives on the regeneration of rural areas. As such the Network is grounded in ideas about the value of neo-endogenous approaches to rural development. In this case study paper we examine the Northern Rural Network as an initiative in putting neo-endogenous rural development into practice.

Keywords: universities, neo-endogenous rural development, knowledge exchange, Northern Rural Network

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### **1.0 Introduction**

The Centre for Rural Economy (CRE) was established in 1992 as a result of an endowment to Newcastle University raised in memory of the 10th Duke of Northumberland<sup>1</sup>. The endowment was to fund academic research into rural development issues. Throughout the 1990s CRE sought to do this research collaboratively through engaging with those involved in the practice of rural development in the north of England. This was in recognition of the value of the knowledge and expertise of practitioners at a time when the study of the rural economy was emerging as a field of research in the UK.

The early events established a particular style of interaction. Although convened by CRE, the events were held outside the University in rural localities. These events aimed to bring together researchers and those involved in the practice of rural development in a wide variety of contexts including local and regional officials, leaders of voluntary organisations, business people, development professionals and community leaders. Different rural locations were chosen not only to reach out to a diverse rural constituency, but also in order

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<sup>1</sup> The Duke of Northumberland is a major land owner in England. For full details of the role of the family in rural development please see Murdoch, Lowe, Ward, & Marsden (2003, p. 114-119).

to see the issues ‘on the ground’. Workshops on ICT and rural development, for example, included site-visits to internet-based businesses, a ‘telecottage’, rural back-offices and a rural ICT consultant (Ray & Talbot, 1999).

Through the events CRE sought to engage with, and help define as an object of research and policy making, contemporary development issues facing the rural areas of the north of England<sup>2</sup>. The style of the events was informal but didactic. Debate was encouraged that was probing and questioning, explicitly drawing out firm practical lessons.

These regional engagement activities sought to help build shared understandings of the rural challenges faced in the North and provide a forum for practitioners and researchers to come together and discuss contemporary issues in a neutral setting. The impetus behind the engagement came from CRE as a research centre with a mission to play a role in rural affairs in the north of England. In this sense, it was a unilateral action. However, the timing was propitious. In the UK during the post-Thatcher period notions of a much more co-ordinated relationship between government, society and the economy were in vogue. Furthermore, promotion of regional policy at the EU and national levels was stimulating innovations in governance arrangements (Valve, 1999; 2006). At the same time, the rural economy in the north of England was seen to be undergoing structural change<sup>3</sup>. There was a growing demand for opportunities to share knowledge on emerging trends and subsequent policy initiatives on the part of both researchers and practitioners.

It was in the context of building on the success of these earlier engagements that the Northern Rural Network (NRN) was conceived. The Countryside Agency (the then English rural development agency) and a number of local authorities gave their support to the idea of a more formal and co-ordinated project enabling the launch of the NRN in 2000. A decade later the Network has 1,300 members from across the three northern regions<sup>4</sup> and beyond (see Figure 1). Membership is open to anyone with an interest in rural development and is drawn from a wide range of practice and research contexts. Since 2001 the NRN has been funded by a combination of the Northern Rock Foundation (a charitable foundation), One North East (the Regional Development Agency for the North East of England), Newcastle University and a range of other rural development organisations. The Network has five objectives:

- To provide an independent forum to promote learning and understanding of contemporary issues and challenges facing rural development in the North;
- To showcase applied research from within the North and beyond, to inform analysis of the current state of rural economies and communities in the North;
- To facilitate the exchange of best practice and highlight innovation in rural development;
- To provide a forum for networking amongst rural development practitioners, including public, private and voluntary sector bodies, and including post graduate students;

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<sup>2</sup> The north of England continues to face a range of development issues most notably adapting to the changing sectoral composition of the rural economy, meeting the needs of small and home based businesses, mobilising increasingly diverse and poorly resourced communities, addressing a growing affordable housing gap, accessing appropriate information and communication technology, and responding to population ageing (Thompson & Atterton, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> For full explanation of this trend please see Woods (2005, p. 72-90).

<sup>4</sup> England is split into nine administrative regions. Each region has a Government Office, a Regional Development Agency and a series of other public regional bodies/offices. Over the last decade the regional level has been significant in economic development and regeneration planning with a series of implications for rural development (see Ward, Lowe, & Bridges, 2003).

- To use the dialogue within the NRN to shape new academic and applied research agendas in the North and beyond.

These objectives are pursued through a series of events and activities. The longest standing activity type is the large seminar. These day long events typically involve 80 – 120 people and focus on issues of current pertinence. The events usually feature a series of presentations on policy, research and case studies of interesting practice. There are three large seminars a year at venues across the north of England. The second type of event is the short course. These are one or two days and are either on a specific topic for a particular group of practitioners or a general introduction to rural development for those relatively new to professional or voluntary roles in rural affairs. The third activity type has been introduced since 2008. This is follow-up activity on a specific event. Follow-up is pursued where there is demand from the membership and CRE can usefully continue to play a role in facilitating action. The fourth strand of activity has also been introduced to the project since 2008. This is a major survey of the businesses in the rural north east accompanied by a programme of sharing and discussing the findings with a range of groups and organisations across the region. Also included in project activity is a commitment to communicate with practitioners and researchers from outside the north of England about the NRN model and experience and provision for a project ‘critical friend’. Finally, there is a project web site which includes an extensive archive section detailing all the past events and a series of business survey pages providing much greater detail on this strand of the project. NRN is now overseen by a steering group comprised of representatives from the private, public and voluntary sectors and the University and is chaired by a group member from outside academia. The group determines the topic areas for large events, offers advice on all other aspects of network activity and reviews project progress. A group of staff in CRE form an NRN management team.



Figure 1. Map of the northern English regions

## 2.0 Neo-endogenous Rural Development

The NRN was, in many respects, a pragmatic initiative founded to meet an identified need. It was established through recognition of the value of close engagement with practitioners both to research and to developing practice. However, it was also founded in a specific conceptual context, at a time when researchers from the Centre were publishing on changing approaches to rural development (Lowe, Murdoch, & Ward, 1995; Ray, 2001). During the period in which the Network was founded there was growing interest in notions of neo-endogenous rural development. This thinking has continued to guide the development of NRN and underpins the approach taken to the events and activities. In this section we explain what we mean by neo-endogenous rural development and how it underpins the Network project.

The classic formulation of rural development, prevalent in post-war Europe, was an exogenous model ('driven from outside'), which put industrialisation at the centre of development. The key principles of this model centred on economies of scale and concentration. Urban centres were regarded as growth poles for the economic development of regions and countries. In other words, the main forces of progress were conceived of as emanating from outside rural areas. Rural areas were distant technically, economically and culturally from the main (urban) centres of activity. In all of these respects they were 'backward' and marginal. From this perspective, the basic policy response was a combination of subsidising the improvement of agricultural production, and the encouragement of labour and capital mobility. Knowledge, in this model, is imposed on rural localities from outside. Solutions are generated through external research effort and are not necessarily appropriate to specific localities.

Most European countries adopted an exogenous approach to developing their rural areas but it was particularly strongly pursued in France, Ireland, the UK, and across Scandinavia. However, by the late 1970s there was growing evidence that the model had not worked in many places (and indeed had been to the detriment of many rural areas) and it became clear that an alternative territorially and locally based approach needed to be considered (Stohr, 1983; 1990). Exogenous development was criticised as *dependent development*, reliant on continued subsidies and the policy decisions of distant agencies or boardrooms. It was seen as *distorted development*, which boosted single sectors, selected settlements and certain types of business (e.g. progressive farmers) but left others behind and neglected the non-economic aspects of rural life. It was cast as *destructive development*, which erased the cultural and environmental differences of rural areas and hence was unresponsive to the local knowledge held within these localities, and *dictated development* devised by experts and planners from outside local rural areas (Lowe et al., 1995).

One response to the problems of the exogenous model encouraged the exploration of so-called endogenous approaches to rural development ('driven from within') based on the assumption that the specific resources of an area – natural, human and cultural – hold the key to its development. Whereas exogenous rural development saw its primary challenge as overcoming rural differences and distinctiveness through the promotion of universal technical skills and the modernisation of physical infrastructure, endogenous development saw the main challenge as *valorising difference* through the nurturing of locally distinctive human and environmental capacities (Bryden & Hart, 2004; Shucksmith, 2000; van der Ploeg & Long, 1994; van der Ploeg & van Dijk, 1995;). The endogenous model mainly concerns the mobilisation of local resource endowments. Local people and institutions, rather than external

actors, were the initiators of economic development programmes and the creators of local comparative advantage (Coffey & Polese, 1984).

The spread of endogenous development ideas amongst rural development researchers and practitioners elicited a critique from researchers at CRE (Lowe et al., 1995; Ray, 2001). They argued that the notion of local rural areas pursuing socio-economic development autonomously of outside influences may be an ideal, but it is not a practical proposition in contemporary Europe. Social and economic development processes in any locality will include a mix of endogenous and exogenous forces. The local level must interact with the extra-local. The critical issue therefore becomes the balance of internal and external control of development processes and how to enhance the capacity of local areas to steer these larger processes and actions to their benefit. This is the notion of neo-endogenous development.

Neo-endogenous development incorporates ideas from the endogenous model concerning local capacity-building. Development should be re-oriented so as to valorise and exploit local territorial resources (be they physical or human) with the objective of retaining as much as possible of the resultant benefit within the area concerned. It also means local territorial partnerships assume responsibility for the design and implementation of development initiatives and in this they must make full use of both internal and external markets, institutions and networks. In this way, rural areas are no longer seen as playing a passive, dependent role in the global economy but are able to generate innovative processes and shape future development (Bryden & Munro, 2000, p. 111).

The focus then is on the dynamic interactions within local areas and between local areas and the wider political, institutional, trading and natural environments. Dense local networks are important for building social and economic capital but strategic extra-local connections are vital in positioning the territory to its best advantage. Such connections may be created and maintained by a variety of actors including local leaders, NGOs, public agencies, business networks and, importantly for this case study, universities.

Neo-endogenous rural development provides a framework for understanding that rural development requires different kinds of actors who perform different roles in rural society and economy. While the resourcefulness and resilience of local actors are crucial, other actors with national and global connections also have a vital role to play in linking localities into broader circuits of capital, power and knowledge. Universities can facilitate this linking process. While rooted in localities and regions universities look strongly outward for their research links and recruitment of staff and students. From this perspective, the University is seen as an institution that can potentially link endogenous and exogenous actors and their knowledge bases. This clearly depends not only on the extent and quality of the university's local and extra-local connections, but also on the role and outlook of the university in knowledge production and exchange. From a neo-endogenous perspective, the university is not conceived as the source of universal wisdom which rural communities and businesses must use in order to capture the benefits of knowledge. Rather, the university is seen as an active agent that can make and valorise links between local systems of knowledge and broader national and international circuits of knowledge and expertise. It is this concept of the university, and its potential role in the development of rural territories, that provided the intellectual foundations for the NRN.

### 3.0 Empirical Sources

The decade since the foundation of the NRN has provided sufficient time to evaluate and reflect upon the experience of putting neo-endogenous rural development into practice. In the remainder of this case study paper we offer some analysis of the successes and limitations of the NRN approach in achieving this. The NRN includes a wide range of research and engagement activity. Most of the membership encounters the NRN through events and it is this experience which forms the basis of their perception of the Network's value and role. As such we concentrate on the feedback from events in this paper.

This analysis is based on three sources of empirical evidence. The first is an external evaluation conducted by an independent consultant commissioned by the project's funders (European Economic Development Services, 2004). This involved approximately 20 interviews with the members and managers of the Network and a review of all the documentary evidence on Network activity. The second is the activity feedback that those managing the project collected during 2008/09. After nine events the participants were emailed an electronic questionnaire which enabled them to provide anonymous responses to a range of closed and open ended questions on the quality of the event, what they have learnt and what, if anything, they would like to see happen next. The cumulative total number of attendees to the nine events was 620. There were 293 responses to the online feedback questionnaire giving a response rate of 47%. The analysis of the feedback from the nine events was reported back to the membership in July 2009 (Northern Rural Network, 2009). The third is a report from the NRN 'critical friend', a role (funded through the project resources) for an experienced action orientated researcher to offer ongoing advice in a constructively critical manner (Research for Real, 2009). This report is based on participant observation of selected Network activities and the working practices of the management team throughout 2008/09.

### 4.0 The NRN and the Practice of Neo-endogenous Rural Development

In order to examine the relationship between the practice of running the Network and the concept of neo-endogenous rural development we examine a series of themes.

#### 4.1 *Does the Network Support Neo-endogenous Rural Development?*

One of the aims of the external evaluation was to review the NRN, in order to draw broad conclusions on its role and contribution. The evaluation found that "the NRN has contributed towards placing CRE and the University at the heart of rural economic regeneration in the region and beyond" (European Economic Development Services, 2004, p. 2). It also reported that the Network was "successful" and "valuable" and that the project had supported neo-endogenous development in thirteen different ways:

- addressing local and regional needs;
- identifying relevant knowledge;
- facilitating access by a wide number of relevant individuals and organisations;
- encouraging the development of new products, processes and capabilities;
- transferring relevant experience;
- improving the quality of labour;

- training people in the use of ICTs and other technologies;
- supporting local enterprise and initiative;
- encouraging innovation;
- encouraging supply chain formation and partnerships;
- enabling local communities and businesses to interact among themselves and with the wider political, institutional, trading and voluntary sectors;
- highlighting and focusing upon issues of social exclusion and;
- generally building capacity to make the most of the opportunities and respond to the threats arising from external change (European Economic Development Services, 2004, p. 18).

The external evaluation was therefore useful in pointing to the ways in which the membership perceived that the activity had been valuable. It also recommended that further steps were taken to more closely link activities to the needs of rural organisations in part through their closer involvement in shaping the work of the Network. The positive messages about the value of the Network contained in the 2004 evaluation provided a form of validation for the argument that the Network was contributing to neo-endogenous rural development. However, there remained important questions about exactly *how* the activities contributed to the thirteen dimensions and the ways in which this contribution could be enhanced and improved. Far more information on the membership's experience of the Network was required to achieve this understanding. Thus, the management team began to collect feedback on every event and activity to build a fuller picture of the value of NRN.

#### ***4.2 How Does the NRN Support Neo-endogenous Rural Development?***

Analysis of feedback consistently shows that members place most value on two aspects of Network events: learning from the substantive content of the presentations and networking time. Most of the positive comment received relates directly to the speakers and the quality of their input. It is clear that people learn a great deal from listening to the substantive presentations. What is also apparent is that the membership particularly appreciates hearing from those running their own businesses and projects. Members particularly value the capacity of the University to attract quality speakers and it is respected as an impartial organisation to lead the Network. The University is one of the few types of organisation that can run events on issues of controversy and debate while still being perceived as independent. This enables actors from a wide variety of backgrounds and geographies to come together and exchange knowledge and experience. Members value a chance to hear new perspectives and to reflect on the implications for their own practice or for research, outside the constraints of the workplace.

For all the events a substantial number of attendees also identify networking as one of the best features. Over a number of years NRN events have provided a series of networking opportunities, a neutral space where people who have common interests but who may not have cause to meet can have a conversation. Such networking tends to occur in the informal or social periods during events rather than being orchestrated. This is reported as a benefit but exactly what such interactions lead to or result in has not (yet) been captured through feedback.

As would be expected there were also some critical comments and suggestions for improvement. Many of these relate to practical organisational matters, mundane but important to ensuring that members can participate effectively.

However, more importantly the feedback also shows that the members want more meaningful opportunities to ask questions and comment on issues. It was apparent that having traditional ‘Q and A’ time in the programme was not creating sufficient opportunity for members to probe and question the content of presentations. Closely related to this was a consistent message on the model of knowledge circulation. The events have, to date, been heavily focused on the delivery of a series of power point presentations. Given our aspiration for knowledge exchange, without careful design this approach risks being perceived as knowledge transfer from ‘experts’. The University has a critical facilitating role in negotiating who has relevant knowledge and how this can best be shared. Putting this into practice requires extremely careful programme design and the use of a variety of techniques.

### ***4.3 How is NRN Working to Improve Knowledge Circulation?***

Through engagement with an experienced researcher and project manager from outside the Centre for Rural Economy during 2008/09 we were able to enhance our understanding of techniques for more effective knowledge circulation. Dr. Cathy Sharp from Research for Real was selected as the project’s critical friend on the basis of experience in using participatory and action research techniques to bring different actors into meaningful dialogue. This took forward thinking on how to ensure wider and deeper participation by all Network members.

In May 2009 Research for Real reported to the NRN management team (Research for Real, 2009). The report recognises that the membership is generally positive about the content and nature of the Network activity reflected in the high degree of continuing engagement, although constructive criticism is also offered.

The report focused on why members were criticising the knowledge circulation model that was usually practised. This offered an opportunity to reflect on the attitudes and working practices of the management team; “there is a sense that the task of the management group is to compile a full programme of expert speakers. There is little space in the usual format to do very much differently, yet some of the comments made by delegates in questionnaire feedback suggest there would be an appetite for more opportunities for knowledge exchange (rather than knowledge transfer)”. The report suggests that “a better balance could be struck between delivery of content through presentations and processing of content and discussion of practical experience amongst delegates, without losing the value that the formal input obviously does have” (Research for Real, 2009, p. 3). This critique has assisted the management team in developing their understanding of how the value can be enhanced in ways which ensure the integrity of the learning opportunities.

The report ends by arguing that the knowledge about what members value needs to be deployed more effectively. Different members are looking for different things with some being happy with more of a knowledge transfer model and others wanting more opportunities for exchange. In making these recommendations the report also comments on changing the role and attitudes of the membership; “It would be helpful if the management group were more candid in their conversations about what members can expect from the network. This is not to play down the offer, but to encourage more appropriate, perhaps more active, expectations of network members and a clearer understanding of respective role and boundaries” (Research for Real, 2009, p. 5). In short, there is recognition that the management team has a role in encouraging and supporting members to be more active participants in the Network. It is this area that the organisers are focusing on in the future, with the overall aim of enhancing the role of the University as a valuable actor in neo-endogenous rural development.



## 5.0 Conclusions

Although founded to meet a need identified by actors outside the University, the NRN represents a genuine desire by researchers at CRE to engage with rural development practitioners in knowledge exchange. This exchange takes place at events which bring together individuals with different experiences and knowledge. The European Economic Development Services (2004) report highlighted the contribution of the NRN in supporting neo-endogenous development in a number of different ways. Regular feedback shows that NRN events are highly valued by attendees, in particular for the networking opportunities offered and for the chance to hear and reflect upon different perspectives outside the constraints of the workplace.

Experimentation with a range of different participatory techniques in recent NRN events has helped to encourage greater knowledge exchange rather than knowledge transfer. More generally, pushing the meaning of what it is to do neo-endogenous development requires reflection on how the structuring of events implies particular understanding of the role of different actors in knowledge circulation. NRN events are now being structured to build members expectation that they will need to work with the University in post event follow-up activities. The success of this kind of activity will depend on the greater involvement of NRN members beyond simply being the audience at events. Only when greater value is placed on the participation of practitioners and space provided for them to make a fuller contribution to generating new ideas and approaches, can the University be said to be playing a pivotal role as a neo-endogenous facilitator making a practical difference to rural development in the north of England.

## 5.0 Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Terry Carroll, Cathy Sharp and the anonymous reviewer for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. Thanks also to Ann Rooke for providing the map.

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