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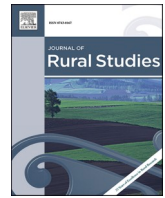


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# On the role of key players in rural social innovation processes

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## ABSTRACT

Social innovation (SI) research tends to understand rural SI processes as collective initiatives of equally engaged, supportive, and like-minded people. However, recent research has indicated that SI projects often benefit from dedicated key players who find support in their communities but also must deal with resistance and barriers. Against this backdrop, this article explores the figure of the key player in SI research and exposes the patterns of rural SI processes with the empirical cases of two small communities in Germany that jointly created rural infrastructure systems, thus seeking emancipation from remote political and economic control and marginalization. Using the empirical cases, we tested and specified a heuristic framework of key players that combines analytical dimensions at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. According to our findings, the heuristic framework is appropriate for analyzing key players in rural SI processes. Notably, we show that SI processes benefit from assertive key players and strong communities capable of joint action. Both are crucial for dealing with internal opposition and overcoming external hurdles that appear when novel approaches irritate familiar solutions and routines.

## 1. Introduction

People develop novel solutions to satisfy social needs and counteract social challenges. Although social innovation (SI) can inspire people and promise change for the better, it can also cause concerns and fears. Crucially, it can be accompanied by the loss of beloved habits and certainties and carry the risk of failure (Christmann, 2020b; Richter, 2020). While many people focus on the benefits promised by SI, others place more importance on the risks. Hence, even though innovative ideas may find enthusiastic support, they also often face resistance and opposition. This dynamic can be seen as well when innovative ideas are introduced to rural communities. Given that rural regions frequently suffer from severe economic and social problems, inhabitants may openly welcome novel approaches to counteract these challenges. Nevertheless, these regions are often associated with aging populations and tradition-oriented attitudes, which hinder the adoption of novel solutions. In addition, political marginalization and a lack of resources further complicate the emergence of innovation and social change in the countryside.

Contrary to pessimistic perspectives often found in the mainstream media, recent scholarly investigations have revealed that rural communities support SIs in varied fields such as renewable energy, local supply, social cohesion, digitalization, education, new work, and

agriculture (Christmann and Federwisch, 2019; Noack and Federwisch, 2019; Richter et al., 2020). Following the research, progressive key persons and core groups are often crucial to the realization of innovative ideas. Key actors identify societal problems, develop ideas to overcome them, push the innovation process, and motivate others to follow. Of course, rural key players are not lone fighters and must be viewed in relation to their respective communities and other actors. In some cases, SIs are driven by collective processes with shared interests and equally engaged community members. However, this is not a typical case. More often, individual change makers or distinct actor constellations are of vital importance, and the respective SI projects are established only through complex negotiations.

Despite their importance, the dynamics of rural SI processes and the distinct roles of key individuals have played only minor roles in SI research (Kleverbeck and Terstriepe, 2017; Christmann, 2020a; Novikova et al., 2020; see also the work in the project “Social Entrepreneurship in Structurally Weak Rural Regions. Analysing Innovative Trouble Shooters in Action”). To fill these research gaps, this paper identifies patterns in how key players foster SI processes in rural communities and further develops a heuristic framework of rural key players by examining the empirical cases of SI projects in two small communities in Germany.

SI research largely views the emergence of SIs in communities as a

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collaborative process of like-minded people and neglects the impact of divergent interests and key players in local negotiations. The limited attention given to agency and actor constellations can be observed in two fields of local SI research: the social school (Moulaert, 2005; Moulaert et al., 2010; van Dyck and van den Broeck, 2013; Moulaert and Mehmood, 2020; Nordberg et al., 2020) and the innovation school of SI research (Bock, 2012, 2016; Neumeier, 2012, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2016). The long-standing research of Belgian planning scientist Frank Moulaert and his colleagues views SI as the “collective satisfaction of human needs”, “changes in social relations”, and “empowering governance dynamics” (Moulaert and Mehmood, 2020, p. 3). According to the social school of SI research, SIs are reflected in the bottom-up strategies of a local civil society that actively makes decisions and contributes to the re-development of its deprived neighborhood (Moulaert et al., 2010). A SI is thus regarded as a collective effort of like-minded people rather than a negotiation between community members who may have different interests, worldviews, and social positions. Taking these differences into account, however, means accepting the social diversity that characterizes many rural communities today. By doing so, researchers can more thoroughly investigate how rural communities succeed in dealing with these differences or finding productive uses for them in SI processes.

The innovation school of SI research focuses on novel solutions for societal challenges. Innovations become SIs if they are social in their mechanisms (i.e., they evolve in the social sphere), their objectives (they are desirable to the relevant actors), and their scope (they have the potential to change society) (Bock, 2012, 2016). Compared to the social school, the innovation school takes a less normative perspective. For example, it does not presume that SIs are desirable developments *per se*. Rather, it suggests that they can produce “winners and losers” (Bock 2012, p. 59) and benefit some social groups while harming others (Neumeier, 2012; Bock, 2016). The authors observed the withdrawal of the state from rural regions and noted that SI in the countryside materializes as civic self-responsibility. From this perspective, SIs are actualized through shared social processes and collective learning among people with aligned interests (Bock, 2012; Neumeier, 2012). Regardless, even though the innovation school attaches some importance to agency, it still assumes equal collective interests and neglects the different positions and roles associated with SIs. Hence, rural innovation processes remain a black box, and the role of rural key players has not been subject to appropriate investigation, even though authors of this school have sporadically stressed the importance of core people and groups: “it is doubtful that a participation process in a social innovation will succeed without a core group or central actor pushing the whole process forward” (Neumeier 2016, p. 41).

Reviewing both strands of local SI research shows that SIs are regarded as collective acts of emancipation made by marginalized groups or neighborhoods. However, such a value-laden view of bottom-up initiatives seems to lose sight of the processes that take place in local communities, where SIs can often prevail only through complicated negotiations and with the support of influential key actors or core groups. In this paper, we shed light on these negotiations and the role of rural key actors using the concept of key players in spatial transformation introduced by Gailing and Ibert (2016) and other researchers (Christmann and Kilper, 2018) (Section 2). Based on this approach, we developed a conceptual framework for key players in rural SI processes. This framework provided a theoretical lens for our analysis of the case studies (Section 3). Later in the paper, we justify the selection of these case studies and introduce the applied research methods (Section 4). Subsequently, we present the results of the empirical study (Section 5), discuss them from a cross-case perspective (Section 6), and explore the implications of our findings for future research on rural SI processes (Section 7).

## 2. The concept of key players in regional development processes

Some empirical reports and recurring observations from experts in social-science-based spatial research are responsible for this recent emphasis on key players in regional development processes.<sup>1</sup> They noted that in processes of spatial development, whether urban or regional, the actions of prominent individuals are often significant in shaping the processes and initiatives of socio-spatial transformation. As Gailing and Ibert (2016, p. 391) put it, key players have “a decisive role [...] in complex processes of change”. They appear as exceptional personalities who can, for example, act as thought leaders, instigators, or door openers. Such personalities are thus able to promote or even impede specific socio-spatial processes. In previous research on SI processes, we observed actors who stood out from others in the same initiative because they proved to be particularly important in the process (Christmann, 2020a,b; Richter, 2020; Richter et al., 2020). In the social science literature, numerous concepts deal with the figure of the key player, although very few are related to spatial development processes or transformations. However, some of them do address innovation processes.

Researchers in the social sciences and economics have long been aware that some personalities have a special influence on social or societal processes. Some of the most prominent contributions in this area are from Joseph Schumpeter (1934, orig. 1911) in the “Theory of Economic Development” and Max Weber (1968, orig. 1922) in the “Theory of Domination”. Schumpeter saw the “dynamic” entrepreneur as a specific type of actor who develops and enforces “new combinations” (1934, p. 99) of production factors in economic life. Against the background of competencies like initiative, the ability to act with foresight and authority, such entrepreneurs move against the current with their ideas and brings about change. Schumpeter explicitly emphasized that not many people have the privilege of possessing such skills. On the other hand, Weber focused on the charismatic leader who initiates change and appears as an outstanding figure. The starting point of this approach is the concept of charisma, which originates from the religious context and is associated with outstanding abilities. The charismatic figure is considered to be a personality endowed by a special gift. However, Weber asserted that such individuals also owe their leadership to their followers, who attribute these abilities to the charismatic leaders themselves. The hallmark of Schumpeter and Weber’s concepts is that they explain key players primarily in terms of their personality traits and competencies. In this respect, they are quite one-sided.

In contrast, some economic-based concepts in innovation research mainly analyze the work of key players in the context of network structures. Particular competencies are only of interest with regard to how these individuals use their positions in networks. For instance, Vedres and Stark, 2010 indicated that individuals who simultaneously belong to multiple groups act as multiple insiders. Crucially, they occupy a network position in the “structural fold” of these groups and, in this way, create intercohesion through which new forms of knowledge and innovation can be generated. Ronald Stuart Burt (1992, 2004) analyzed figures who are not members of the groups that they connect. He concluded that they are nevertheless able to fill “structural holes” between groups and close gaps by working as information brokers (i.e., by providing the groups with specific knowledge). Since they draw knowledge from the groups in this function, they are able to access new knowledge and combine knowledge elements in novel ways. This is a phenomenon that Michael L. Tushman (1977) described as “boundary spanning” for organizational research in the 1970s. These approaches

<sup>1</sup> See the work of researchers at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS), Germany, who carried out the project “Key Players as Driving Forces in Spatial Development” (2013–2015). This project investigated the modes of action and functions of key players in spatial development (Gailing and Ibert, 2016; Christmann and Kilper, 2018).

are one-sided because their analytical focus is primarily on networks.

To some extent, the consideration of individual personalities and their influences on transformations is also significant to political science, although it is usually more a matter of analyzing collective actors who must coordinate their actions in complex political processes and governance constellations. In particular, the concept of the “policy entrepreneur” by John W. Kingdon (1984) should be highlighted. Kingdon described a type of political key player who anticipates certain policy problems, reacts to them, and strives to develop innovative policy alternatives. This actor is highly skilled at developing long-term strategies for implementing ideas, recognizing and making targeted use of “windows of opportunity”, and engaging in targeted agenda-setting in the public arena. The respective individuals are considered to be “entrepreneurs” because they benefit in some way from the policy changes that they bring about (e.g., through an increase in influence). Such approaches emphasize not only the special competencies of key players, which take the form of a pronounced strategic ability in this case, but also the structural aspects, such as political power structures, within which key players must act and position themselves. Even though the specific political processes in a region – as well as other contextual conditions such as the specific economic structure, the social structure and cultural factors – are important for conceptualizing the actions of key players, a structural approach cannot adequately describe how and why innovation occurs.

Thus, although key players have long been recognized as important in shaping social processes, previous conceptions of them have remained rather fragmentary and biased. Moreover, the role of such actors in the context of spatial transformations has barely been examined.

In “Key players: space as object of and resource in processes of change”, Gailing and Ibert (2016) presented the concepts most discussed in the research literature to date on key players. They provided a helpful attempt to categorize the different approaches. Namely, they distinguished between “leadership” approaches, which take a micro perspective and primarily describe the specific personality traits and competencies of key individuals; approaches to “intermediaries”, which take a meso perspective and examine key individuals in the context of networks; and approaches to “governance pioneers”, which take a macro perspective focusing more on structural aspects and the framework conditions of key individuals’ actions. In addition, Gailing and Ibert (2016) attempted to tease out spatial aspects in their previous approaches, showing that there is not much to be gained in this regard. The authors did not develop their own conceptual approach to the analysis of the key players in their paper. However, they suggested that future approaches should conceptualize these figures in the field of spatial transformations, and they even used the title of their paper to indicate that space should not only be conceptualized as an object but also as a resource for change. We incorporated this idea into our own paper, although the concept that we propose is most strongly characterized by a combination of micro, meso, and macro perspectives.

### 3. A conceptual framework of key players in rural social innovation processes

Although the existing approaches to key players in rural contexts are quite diverse and inspiring, the potential of a conceptual combination has not yet been explored. Thus, there is a lack of a concrete concept that bring together previous theoretical considerations about key players and makes them fruitful for empirical research on SI processes in structurally weak rural regions, where individuals are often responsible for beginning their corresponding innovations and advancing them further. In this paper, we propose a framework to fill this gap (based on our work in the project “Key Players as Driving Forces in Spatial Development”).

According to our observations, there have always been certain actors in socially innovative initiatives who stand out in some regard and contribute particularly important work to the development of novel ideas and/or their implementation. To describe the functions and

actions of these key players, we present a heuristic concept that (i) outlines the specific competencies of the key players (micro perspective), (ii) illuminates them in the fabric of their social relations with other actors (meso perspective), and (iii) takes into account the specific structural context in which they operate (macro perspective) (see Fig. 1). Following our approach, key players must never be looked at in isolation even though they hold prominent positions in their initiatives (cf. Christmann and Kilper, 2018). The framework thus aims to overcome the biases of a micro-, meso-, or macro-oriented consideration of key players (cf. Gailing and Ibert, 2016, pp. 393–397) and unite these dimensions in one approach.

In the heuristic concept, the rural region in which the socially innovative process takes place is assigned a double function. On the one hand, the rural region is the object or reference point of both the innovative ideas and the actions of key players. Key players typically analyze the challenges in their region and try to overcome them by creating novel approaches in cooperation with other actors. On the other hand, the rural region is simultaneously a resource for the key players, such as when they mobilize their local network relationships, which should be seen as part of the socio-spatial fabric of the region, or use other specific resources (e.g., when they use the natural beauty of the region to enter into soft tourism or address economic problems) (cf. Gailing and Ibert, 2016, p. 391).

The concept is dynamic because it assumes that the functions and actions of key players can change during the innovation process, depending on which phase the process is in. For example, key players may be particularly important in the early stages because they contribute important ideas and begin the process itself. As the process progresses, however, they are more likely to demonstrate competencies in obtaining key resources. They may even become less important, and other key players who are better able to procure key resources may come to the forefront instead.

The following is an outline of how the heuristic approach suggests analyzing the competencies (micro perspective), social relations (meso perspective), and structural context (macro perspective).

#### 3.1. The competencies of the key players (micro perspective)

The concept distinguishes between four competencies that have emerged as driving factors in SI processes and are embodied either fully or partially by key players. Ideally, a key player embodies all four dimensions.

- *Dimension 1: set of specific skills.* This dimension refers to the personality traits (e.g., authenticity or trustworthiness) and individual skills (e.g., strong communicative competence or the ability to convince as well as to motivate others) that an individual may leverage.
- *Dimension 2: strong interpretive ability and the availability of specific forms of knowledge.* This primarily cognitive dimension helps an individual to analyze existing problems, identify levers for change, and develop novel ideas, particularly to conceptualize new problem definitions and create novel values as well as options for solutions. The aspects of this dimension allow for an individual to form a new viewpoint and also make the specific forms of knowledge needed in the field of action available to them.
- *Dimension 3: strong capacity for action.* This dimension refers to the motivation and ability to act, given that an innovative initiative requires more than just an accurate analysis of existing problems. Rather, people who are good at putting things into action and possess the ability to realize their own ideas or those of others are required. The dimension describes the ability to organize the required resources, convince people in the community to engage, set trends for new practices, and collaborate with representatives of the administration as well as political decision makers.

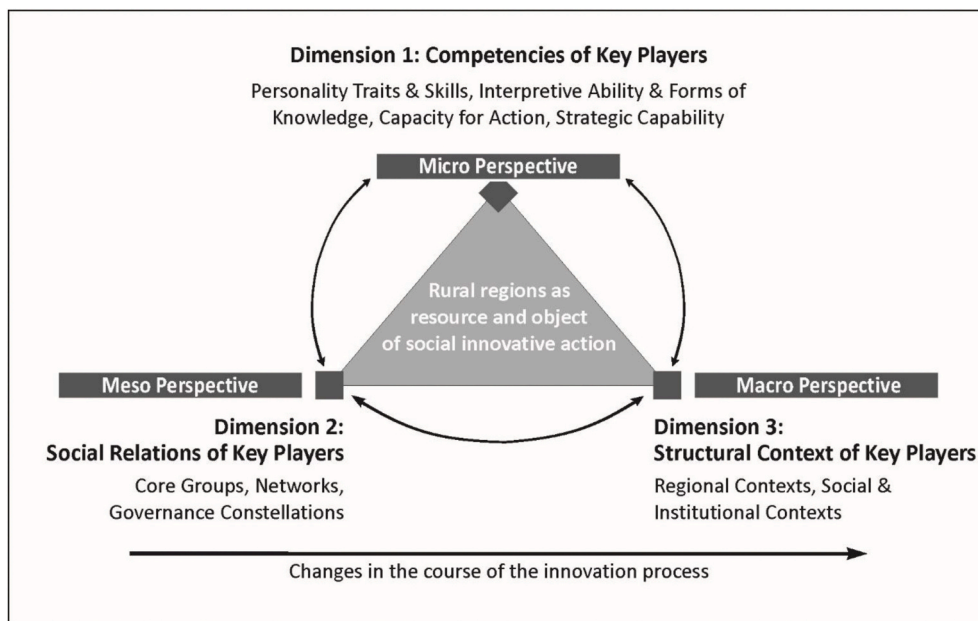


Fig. 1. Heuristic concept for the analysis of key players (own representation, first published in Christmann and Kilper, 2018).

- **Dimension 4: strong strategic capability.** This dimension involves a high degree of reflexive action and, thus, the ability to act strategically. The dimension outlines the ability to systematically implement novel ideas with a long-term perspective, form alliances, and identify and exploit so-called “windows of opportunity” with high precision.

### 3.2. The social relations of the key players (meso perspective)

In order to avoid essentialist thinking, which takes the seemingly objectively given special abilities of the individual as its sole starting point, key players must always be considered in their social fabric. This includes the need to take the relationships between key players and their followers into account, which has been highlighted by Weber (1968, orig. 1922).

Furthermore, from our empirical evidence, some socially innovative initiatives even have a core group (e.g., three to four) of key players who form a task force and jointly drive the innovation process. Hence, the competencies described above can be distributed among several people. The success of an innovative initiative often depends largely on finding key players who can complement each other and work well together. Sometimes, however, prominent actors can also be found in the region who act as antagonists and take strategic actions against the initiative.

Taking these concerns into account, the heuristic approach proposes to analyze (i) the actions, roles, and collaboration of key actors in any existing core groups; examine (ii) the broader social network in which the actors are anchored and mobilize other actors for their cause; and consider (iii) governance constellations with different stakeholders if key players are represented and promote their cause there.

### 3.3. The structural context of the key players (macro perspective)

Finally, the heuristic approach addresses the structural contexts of the regions that the key players act in as well as those that these actors come from or operate in. Therefore, the structural conditions of the respective rural regions must be examined from an economic, political, socio-structural, and institutional point of view. Likewise, the framework that the key players provide for their socially innovative actions must be analyzed, including its opportunities, resources, and restrictions. It is also important to clarify the concrete challenges that can be observed in the regions and to which the actors respond with

innovative approaches. Furthermore, the institutional embedding of key players should be examined (e.g., they may be a local leader, important local entrepreneur or administrative employee, association board, or well-known civil society actor) to identify their social status, authority, and, if applicable, position in the local power structure.

## 4. Materials and methods

To investigate the role of key players in rural SI processes, we decided that a qualitative, reconstructive research design was the most appropriate option. Against the background of the empirical project “Innovations in Rural Communities. Conditions, Actors, and Processes of Creative Community Development” and its database we reconstructed and systematically compared two empirical cases of rural SI processes along the categories and dimensions of the conceptual framework. This way, we investigated whether the empirical findings supported and specified the framework or if differences were present that required further analysis or even a revision of the framework. In particular, we isolated the features that characterized rural key players and explored how they fostered SI processes in rural communities. Analyzing two cases instead of only one enhances the empirical foundation and enables the development of a more theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2009). Compared to a multiple-case comparison, a two-case comparison allows for a deeper analysis and description of each case.

In the present study, the criteria for selecting the cases were fourfold. First, each case should offer a novel solution that counteracted societal problems in a rural community. Second, the involved local persons or observers should have experienced and communicated the solution as new and different to existing solutions. Thus, an innovative semantic should be noticeable (Rammert, 2002, 2010). Third, the selected cases should have reached a mature stage in the innovation process. In particular, the novel approach should have already been implemented. Fourth, the selected cases should be situated in remote and structurally weak rural communities. By focusing on these places, we expected to find cases with a high problem pressure and lack of powerful problem-solving institutions, meaning that the observed SIs would be more likely to occur in local bottom-up processes. Moreover, we specifically targeted SI in remote rural communities to argue against prevailing stereotypes that view rural regions as mainly tradition-oriented and hostile to innovation (Nell and Weiland, 2014; Shucksmith and



Brown, 2016).

First, we selected and analyzed six empirical cases of SI in rural communities. In one of these cases, a single key player had a dominant role in the innovation process. In three cases, a core group or pair of engaged persons pushed the process. In the remaining two cases, external organizations from beyond the local area drove the process. For the purpose of this article, we exemplarily analyzed only two cases: one with a dominant single key player and another with a pair of key persons. The cases are also characterized by a similar object of innovation. The people of Bixdorf<sup>2</sup> built a local bioenergy plant and a joint heating system, whereas the people of Kulwitz<sup>2</sup> created a collective sewage treatment plant together with a local heating system. While the technical solutions existed before, the way in which they were realized by these rural communities was new and unusual (see Table 1). Our selection of the two cases followed the “most similar systems” comparative approach (Przeworski and Teune, 1970; Ward, 2010). In this approach, many attributes are kept constant between the cases, which allows the relevant attributes to be investigated in more depth. Commonalities regarding the key player-driven SI process and the characteristics of rural key players were identified, which allowed us to deduce patterns of the process and the social figure.

This work is based on a long-term investigation that was conducted by the authors and further researchers at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS) between 2015 and 2018. A mixed-methods approach was applied that included problem-centered qualitative interviews (Witzel, 2000), participatory observation (Dewalt and Dewalt et al., 2011), document and media content analyses (Bowen, 2009; Kuckartz, 2016), and quantitative data from household surveys (see Table 1). The sampling strategy of the qualitative interviews followed the snowball procedure, with initial key player interviews and subsequent interviews with persons proposed by former interviewees. Moreover, we sought out interviewees with divergent perspectives on the innovative undertaking. Saturation was reached when further interviewees did not contribute more significant information to the identified perspectives. The participatory observations concentrated on key events, such as the meetings attended by the local communities, and followed the principles of focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005). The data analyses were conducted using grounded theory methods (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

We analyzed the qualitative data in three steps. First, we reconstructed ex-post the innovation processes with regard to the object of innovation. Hence, we collected and assembled mainly factual knowledge and moved it into a process-related and temporal order. This was done with the triangulation of the information from the qualitative interviews, the participatory observations, and the documents and media reports. Second, we revealed the social dynamics and roles of the key players in the innovation processes. This required interpretative work, given that such knowledge is less obvious. The categories and dimensions of the conceptual framework directed our attention, but the framework did not serve as a tight assessment grid at this point. While we treated both cases separately in the first and second steps, our third analysis was comparative. Following the categories and dimensions of the conceptual framework, we deduced the commonalities and differences between the cases, which enabled us to identify the patterns of rural SI processes and the social figure of key players. Based on these results, we critically reviewed the conceptual framework. This way, we explored whether the findings provided empirical evidence for the theoretical framework, where they can help to specify the theory, and where they may suggest further revision.

## 5. Results

In accordance with the analytical procedure, we present the reconstructed SI processes in two stages. First, we introduce the cases by describing the innovation processes, mainly based on factual knowledge. The focus here is on the object of innovation and its societal circumstances. This is followed by a more interpretive analysis that reveals the role of the key players in the negotiation processes. This will be done separately for each case to expose its respective logic.

### 5.1. Key players with complementary competences: social innovation dynamics in Bixdorf

The first thoughts on the installation of a local biomass cogeneration plant and village-wide heating system in Bixdorf date back to the 2000s, when the rising oil price and outdated oil heating installations put increasing pressure on the search for alternatives. Independent of each other, two local key players—the mayor of the village and an environmental activist—got to know local biomass power plants during vacations in other parts of Europe. In 2009, the two key players became aware of each other's thoughts and agreed that such a plant would be a promising solution for the own village. With the support of the LEADER local action group,<sup>3</sup> the two commissioned a feasibility analysis. It revealed that a cogeneration plant that incinerated wood waste and produced electricity in addition to heat energy would be the best solution. Delivering and selling the produced electric current to the electric power net would generate extra income and make the initiative profitable. Moreover, running a biomass plant with wood waste seemed to be a perfect ecological solution, given that this resource is widely available in the wooded environment of Bixdorf.

In parallel with the exploration of technical solutions, the two key players organized community meetings and informed about the possibility of replacing the old and expensive oil heating systems. The discussion process was accompanied by community-wide study trips to existing biomass plants. However, the other plants only served farms, not a whole village. The combination of a local heating system and electricity generation was without precedent. Notwithstanding the accompanied risks, the majority of the community agreed to build a biomass cogeneration plant and heating system. 29 out of the 50 existing households founded a cooperative that served to install and operate the system. To keep the costs low, the cooperative members agreed to complete parts of the work with personal contributions. Thus, groups of residents dug channels and laid pipes, which was hard work and even became a social event.

The project attracted a lot of public interest. Newspapers and TV channels reported on it, and Bixdorf was named the bioenergy village of the year in a nation-wide competition. However, the hopes of the residents were not fully met. The falling oil price produced losses and the promised ecological effect did not fully materialize because the local wood waste was too humid, meaning that raw material had to be delivered over longer distance. In the light of these unfulfilled hopes, the initial enthusiasm of the residents has cooled down. The activist understood this as the curse of innovators: “If you are the pioneer, you cannot learn from others. Thus, you must jump in at the deep end. [ ... ]

<sup>3</sup> The LEADER program has been a European Union rural development funding program. Since 2014, it operates under the name Community-led Local Development, even though the former title LEADER is still present. The LEADER program aimed to foster innovation and cross-sectoral collaboration. The latter has been realized by means of public-private Local Action Groups.

<sup>2</sup> We changed the real names of the villages to guarantee the anonymity of the key players and other actors.

**Table 1**

Overview of the case studies.

Case study	Social innovation	Village			Empirical data (sum of both case studies)
		Number of inhabitants	Location	GDP per capita <sup>a</sup>	
Bixdorf	Local bioenergy plant and heating system that uses regional wood waste and enables more independence from fossil fuels. Joint realization in a local cooperative.	About 147	Remote, about 70 km from the next city, federal state of Thuringia, Germany	26,397 EUR (34.6% below the German GDP)	20 Transcripts of problem-centered qualitative interviews, 22 pages of field notes of participatory observations, 16 documents on the innovative projects, 52 media reports, and quantitative data from household surveys (39 responding households)
Kulwitz	Group wastewater treatment system and joint heating system that uses lost heat from a local biogas plant. Joint realization in a local association.	About 139	Remote, about 61 km from the next city, federal state of Saxony, Germany	27,465 EUR (31.9% below the German GDP)	

<sup>a</sup> 2018 data on the county level from [Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg \(2020\)](#).

That's the price of innovations. The first one faces the most challenges" (B-KP2)<sup>4</sup>.

Investing in a novel technology is risky for all contributors. Nonetheless, the majority of this community joined the innovation project. We find that the engagement and personal capacities of the two key players and the beneficial structural conditions were pivotal to the agreement of many residents. The two key players built a beneficial team with complementary competences. The mayor, a man with long-lasting family roots in the region, was described by the interviewees as a "man of action" (B-KP2) who "fights for his village" (B-RS). The activist moved to the village years ago. He has an academic background and skills in writing funding applications and maintaining contact with regional and supra-regional networks. The key persons sought to convince people to join the initiative by referring to the expected cost benefits, the chances of energetic self-supply, and the creation of sustainable values for future generations in Bixdorf. However, the key players faced resistance in the meetings: "Certainly, we had very lively discussions with opponents and people expressing their concerns" (B-KP2). In this situation, the authority and the persuasive power of the mayor, rather than an ideal participatory process, made people join. According to the activist, the mayor talked the people into the project, and they placed their trust in him because he had already successfully realized several projects. While the mayor was crucial for local support, the activist ensured access to external financial resources and knowledge. His contacts with the LEADER group secured financing for the feasibility analysis and the study trips. Notably, the well-maintained contact with the county commissioner paved the way to obtaining credit from a regional bank.

Structurally, the innovative project benefitted from the strong community spirit in Bixdorf. Interview partners repeatedly described their feelings of belonging: "[We have a] social cohesion; even visitors realize this" (B-KP1). The residents regularly meet for bowling or playing cards, and festivities such as the kermis are "acknowledged for their beauty and diversity" (B-LR). The social cohesion goes in hand with cooperativeness and a readiness to jointly realize tasks and projects: "If we are going to undertake something in Bixdorf, you can ask everyone. Who is available, joins" (B-KP1). Besides the characteristics of the community, the political circumstances also supported innovation. Bixdorf enjoys a degree of autonomy that few other villages of this size have. While rural communities in the federal state of Thuringia have succeeded in maintaining some independence, villages and towns in other parts of Germany have suffered from an extensive centralization policy, leaving behind thousands of marginalized villages (Neu, 2010; Henkel, 2016). Even though the village is part of a joined administrative unit,<sup>4</sup> it still

administers its own budget, has the authority to make decisions about, for example, development plans, it has a mayor, and an own community council. However, the community cannot affect external conditions such as the oil price and legal regulations. Both the falling oil price and a reform of the Renewable Energy Act that penalized small electric current suppliers negatively impacted the financial sustainability of the innovation project.

## 5.2. Key player as an intermediary: social innovation dynamics in Kulwitz

The first stimulus for the innovative wastewater treatment system in Kulwitz resulted from the decision of the local municipality that obligated each homeowner to install a single sewage treatment system. The residents of Kulwitz were dissatisfied with the decision because it forced them to adopt individual solutions instead of providing communal facilities, which was the cheapest solution for the municipality "but the most expensive one for the residents" (K-KP). At that time, a resident of Kulwitz asked his neighbor if the installation of a group sewage treatment plant would be a cost-saving alternative. This neighbor, who was a lecturer in water management at a university in the next city, was fascinated by the idea. He prepared an overview of the possible solutions and introduced them to the residents at a community meeting. The people of Kulwitz expressed their interest but asked for more details. The neighbor, who became the key player in the initiative, asked a student if she would write her diploma thesis on rural wastewater treatment systems. She agreed and found that group sewage plants would be the most appropriate and economic solution. According to the key player, the thesis was the decisive factor in resolving doubts among the residents. In response, they decided to create two group sewage treatment systems and founded an association to organize the interests of the 45 members. All households agreed to join.

However, the municipality did not support the plans. It argued that a unique sewage treatment solution in one of their 12-member villages would raise costs for the other communities. This was a difficult situation because, as a politically dependent community, Kulwitz relied on the approval of the local authority. In this situation, the key player made use of his political contacts with a minister in the federal state of Saxony. He convinced the politician that group sewage treatment systems were viable solutions, and the ministry invited the conflicting parties to a meeting. At this occasion, the minister announced that the wastewater treatment initiative would be a pilot project and asked the municipality to give its approval. The time until the final approval was used to enhance the initial plans. The channels required for the sewage treatment system and the still-unused heat from a local farmer's biogas plant provided the opportunity to additionally install a local heating system. In August 2011, the plans were approved, and the people of Kulwitz, together with local firms, began to realize them. To save costs, each member of the association committed to contributing 80 h of work. All together—"young and old", "welfare recipients next to managers" (K-KP)—dug channels and laid pipes. In 2012, the two group sewage treatment systems and the local heating grid were put into operation.

<sup>4</sup> Used interview data throughout the article: B-KP1, first key person, mayor of Bixdorf; B-KP2, second key person, "the activist", living in Bixdorf; B-LR, local resident in Bixdorf; B-RS, regional stakeholder, LEADER manager; K-KP, key person in Kulwitz; K-R1, resident 1 of Kulwitz; K-R2, resident 2 of Kulwitz; K-RP, former minister of the federal state of Saxony.

Until today, the project attracts public attention. As a pilot project, it has been introduced at regional conferences, it received considerable media coverage, and it was awarded at the national competition “Country of Ideas”. Notwithstanding the great public interest, only a few communities have attempted to adopt the solution, and only one has succeeded.

In Kulwitz, the key player had a particularly strong role. Except for the first stimulus, the project was mainly driven by this person. The former minister confirmed the importance of the key player: “It is always about the front man; you always need someone who takes the responsibility. Someone who also has the knowledge and is able to organize, and for all of this, [the key player] is the ideal man” (K-RP). The key player enjoys the respect of community members and external stakeholders thanks to both his competences and his position at the interface between two worlds: a domestically oriented rural world and an outer world of academic research, political contacts, and media presence. The key player is, as we have it earlier called, an “embedded intermediary” (Richter, 2019). Locally, he was integrated into the village because of, for example, his long-lasting family roots and engagement in the volunteer fire brigade: “In villages, the central link is the fire brigade, [...] and if you are not a member, you don’t belong to the village” (K-R1). At the same time, his position at the university and his involvement in supra-regional networks mean that he was not tied to the rural environment. This gave him the self-confidence needed to question the municipality’s policies and ask the minister to moderate the conflict.

Although the authority, competence, and exclusive position of the key player were important factors in convincing the local community to join the project, they did not explain exactly *how* he managed to convince them to join. When asked about his strategy, the key player mentioned principles such as “involving people in decision-making”, “ensuring high transparency”, and “creating clear rules” (K-KP). Interviewed residents highlighted the professionalism of the key player: “everything he makes is one hundred percent, one hundred percent” (K-R2). He left nothing to chance and attached importance to precise and transparent calculations. His argument for the local community was mainly related to the possibility of cost savings. Thanks to his position as a university lecturer, he had the communicative skills “to recognize how a group reacts and how to steer the group dynamics in the right direction” (K-KP). However, it cannot be said that the key player directed the project without democratic control. The association made major decisions by majority vote, and the key player was outvoted when it came to deciding on the type of sewage treatment plant to be purchased. Eventually, it was a mixture of authority, competence, position, communication strategy, and promised benefits that made the people follow his lead.

While the key player had a crucial role in Kulwitz, the realization of the project clearly benefited from the supportive community and beneficial structures. Interviewees described the people of Kulwitz as a “committed community” (K-RP) where people like to chat in the evenings “under a lime tree” in the middle of the village (K-R2) and celebrate events around the year. Digging the channels together certainly was strenuous work. However, according to the key player, working jointly introduced feelings of belonging that the people greatly enjoyed: “It was like in the past, and you could see how they closed the ranks. [...] This alone was worth the effort” (K-KP). Besides the community spirit, self-efficacy played a role in the determination of the community. Repeatedly, interview partners reminded of projects that the community had jointly realized in the past, such as building houses for a village shop and the fire department. These experiences gave the residents the confidence that their efforts would not be in vain, something that might have been missing in the communities that finally rejected to adopt the idea. However, an analysis of the structural preconditions must also acknowledge the barriers. Above all else, it was the negative stance of the local authority and, eventually, the village’s own political and administrative dependence that threatened the project. In this situation,

it was a clever move to overrule the local authority by seeking out support from a higher political power.

## 6. Discussion

Beyond the analysis of single cases, a cross-case comparison enables a more conceptual understanding of key-player-driven rural SI processes. Thus, we compare the cases based on the heuristic framework that allows for the deduction of commonalities and differences at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (see Table 2). At first glance, the two cases have many things in common. Both innovation projects have completed infrastructures in joint community initiatives under the guidance of key players. Both succeeded in overcoming internal and external hurdles and were supported by most members of their rural communities. However, a closer look also reveals differences that provide interesting insights into the phenomenon. Thus, in a first analytical move we present insights by highlighting the differences between the cases.

**Table 2**  
Cross-case comparison of the role of key players in rural SI processes.

Analytical dimensions		Case studies	
		Cogeneration plant and biomass heating system in Bixdorf	Wastewater treatment and local heating system in Kulwitz
Micro	Individual traits and skills	A pair of key players with complementary traits and skills; key player 1 (mayor) is a “man of action” with persuasive power based on authority; key player 2 (activist) contributes analytical and communicative skills	One key player with personal authority, self-confidence, and communicative skills (e. g., uninhibited when talking to people and the media)
	Interpretive ability	Identified the rising costs and unpredictability of the oil price as a threat; addressed local beliefs on the value of economic and social sustainability	Addressed concerns about rising costs and resentment toward the decisions of the local authority
	Capacity for action	Key player 1 knows how to motivate the local people; key player 2 knows how to mobilize external resources	The key player has high technical expertise, the capability to convince and motivate the local people, and the courage to resist the pressure of the municipality and ask a higher political authority for help
	Strategic capability	Experienced in planning and implementing projects	Acts very professional (e. g., always well prepared and leaves nothing to chance); calculated savings could be fully realized
Meso	Social relations of key players	Bonding social capital of the mayor in the local community used to make people join; Bridging social capital of the activist used to mobilize financial resources and knowledge	Embedded intermediary with both social integration in the village and involvement in supra-regional networks; contacts with higher political institutions paved the way to overcome obstacles
Macro	Structural context	A strong sense of community and a readiness to help were just as conducive as the village’s degree of political independence; the falling oil price and legal reforms had adverse effects	Strong community spirit; experiences with self-efficacy due to previous jointly realized projects; the village’s lack of political autonomy threatened the project



One obvious difference is that the case of Kulwitz had only one key player, whereas Bixdorf had a pair of key players. This adheres to the established heuristic model insofar as it has been assumed that key players not necessarily must be single persons but can also be a core team of two and more influential persons. Notably, the two key persons contributed complementary competences, such as power of action and communication skills, to the project. While one of them benefited from bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) and knew how to motivate the local people, the other one understood how to use the acquired bridging social capital (ibid.) to mobilize external resources. As evidenced by the two cases, the beneficial attributes of the key players can be embodied by a single person or distributed over multiple key players. However, to avoid tensions and competition, a complementary distribution of competences seems more appropriate than an equal distribution.

### 6.1. Attributed authority: key players in social innovation processes

Key players in SI processes are influential actors with the ability to convince people to support a novel solution in the interest of an expected improvement, even if it deviates from proven practices. This is possible due to their specific personal traits and ascribed attributes. We found that key players are persons with strong beliefs in societally desirable goals and the courage to follow these goals, irrespective of barriers and the risk of failure. They are change makers who like to talk to people and often have a likable character or charisma. According to Weber (1968, orig. 1922), charisma is largely attributed to a person by their followers. In our cases, the people mainly attributed the power of action and resolution (mayor of Bixdorf), the far-reaching contacts and competences (activist in Bixdorf), and the expertise and courage (key player in Kulwitz) to the key players, which made them believe in their authority. Simultaneously, democratic procedures distributed decision-making power and prevented key players from exploiting their power.

To make people follow innovative ideas, additional structural conditions are required. Incentives to join arise from the threatening nature of a social problem as well as expected improvements (e.g., in the form of saved costs). Key players have the ability to recognize problems and opportunities and convince others that alternatives are desirable and obtainable. However, beneficial structural conditions are necessary for the realization of these alternative solutions. As demonstrated by the two cases, existing structures tended to persist during the project. In this situation, the novel solutions could only be developed and fostered through regulatory loopholes or artifices that the key players understood to detect and use. In accordance with the heuristic framework, understanding key players thus requires consideration of the interplay of personal and attributed characteristics, social relations and networks, and structural conditions.

### 6.2. Gallic villages: dynamics of rural social innovation processes

The developed approaches deviate from typical solutions in their material and social terms. A combined heating and energy production system that uses wood waste had never before been realized in a rural community in Germany. Likewise, installing a combined sewage treatment and heating system for a whole community was without precedent. What makes the initiatives even more innovative, however, is the accompanied social process. Local communities under the leadership of key players took action and jointly realized their own solutions instead of delegating responsibility to public authorities or private homeowners, which are the dominant ways of providing rural infrastructures. On the one hand, it is a particular achievement that these local communities could reach an agreement and jointly realize their plans. On the other hand, the initiatives are forms of emancipation from the villagers' prescribed roles as compliant receivers of external political decisions and passive users of infrastructure. This spirit of independence was addressed in interviews with partners from both villages, as they independently described the respective place with the metaphor of the

"Gallic village" (K-R1, B-RS). The metaphor is interesting because Gallic villages stand for small but self-confident communities that successfully resist a seemingly overwhelming powerful opponent. Furthermore, SIs in rural communities are often understood as responses to unmet needs that arise from the withdrawal of the state and the market (Neumeier, 2012; Bock, 2016). Contrary to this dominant view, we find evidence that rural SIs can be expressed in the search for more autonomy from remote political control and all-embracing regulations.

Regarding the existing branches of SI research, we find that the investigated cases share characteristics with both the social and innovation schools of SI research. In line with the social school, the investigated SIs are novel forms of social regulation and emancipation. In line with the innovation school, these SIs are not only reflected in social processes but also represent factual novelties that people regard as promising for solving a problem or satisfying their needs. Last but not least, our results provide evidence that SIs do not necessarily produce outcomes as desirable as initially promised. As shown in the case of Bixdorf, external conditions can change and undermine the original objectives. Consequently, not only may the promised monetary advantages fail to materialize, but social life can also suffer if the project produces winners and losers. This can be observed in Bixdorf, where an additional household survey revealed that a majority of the residents believed that the innovation project had a negative impact on the social cohesion of the village.

Supporting our treatment of these initiatives as SI, the promoters in both Bixdorf and Kulwitz faced external and internal resistance when pursuing their novel solutions. Internally, overcoming this opposition relied on a mixture of promising desirable outcomes and exerting—indirect rather than direct—social pressure. However, we did not find indications that those who did not join the initiatives – in Bixdorf every third household rejected to join, in Kulwitz initially five out of fifty, later all households hook up with the initiative – experienced noticeable social consequences such as social exclusion. Overcoming external barriers, in turn, was possible due to a strong community spirit and a belief in the self-efficacy of the community, resulting from previously successful local initiatives. The joint implementation of the innovative project made people experience a reinforced community spirit just like "the heating pipes that bind the people together" (B-RS).

## 7. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, we noted that SI research in local environments has widely neglected the internal dynamics and actor constellations that pave the way for the establishment of novel solutions. This is a research gap because it neglects the observation that SIs often emerge in complicated negotiation processes and by the virtue of engaged key players or core groups. Against this backdrop, the article reconstructed rural SI processes to better understand the decisive role of key players and the efforts undertaken to overcome the forms of resistance that face any innovation. We introduced a heuristic framework to analyze key players in SI processes that combines three perspectives: personal abilities (micro perspective), social networks (meso), and structural conditions (macro). Using the two selected cases, we demonstrated that the framework is valuable for empirical analyses.

The study revealed that rural key players can obtain collaboration and support for the novel solutions primarily by taking advantage of their local authority. Typically, this authority consists of a mixture of attributed abilities, competences, and personal traits. Moreover, rural key players act as intermediaries between rural communities and supra-regional networks. This ensures that the local community will trust them and enables them to mobilize crucial external resources, such as financial means, political power, and public recognition. In addition, certain (structural) conditions are necessary to establish novel solutions, namely a situation that local people experience as challenging, utilizable resources on site, and a minimum degree of openness among local and regional institutions.

Furthermore, we found that SIs in rural regions have a double nature. They stand for both a novel intervention (in our cases, new technical solutions) and novel forms of social interaction and governance (such as the organization of a community to emancipate itself from the dependence of external infrastructures and regulation). Thus, neither the innovation school nor the social school of SI research is sufficient to explain rural SI processes. Rather, a combination of both strands is required. Likewise, SIs should not be understood simply as compensations for inadequate services due to the withdrawal of the state and the market from rural regions, as research often claims. Following our evidence, SIs must also be seen as forms of emancipation from political and economic remote control and marginalization. This requires both powerful key players and local communities capable of joint action.

This study also has limitations. The case selection according to the most similar comparative approach enables the reconstruction of exemplary key-player-driven SI processes in rural communities but provides still limited evidence for the generalization of the results. Further empirical research using other types of SI and rural settings is needed to specify and consolidate the concept of key players in rural SI processes. Future research should also focus on how a successful rural SI project can be adopted by other communities. The present cases have attracted a great deal of public attention for their innovative solutions, but these solutions have not spread widely. This suggests that these cases benefited from the coincidence of conditions—the presence of competent key players, a strong community spirit, and surmountable external hurdles—that may not often exist elsewhere. Exploring such topics could bolster SI research that not only focuses on the desirable outcomes but also on resistance, ways of overcoming hurdles, and even failure.

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