

Rooted in Place: The Distinctive Ecology of Rural Social Innovation and Its Implications for Inclusive Development Policy in Indonesia

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Abstract: *Rural social innovation has emerged as a critical yet undertheorised domain within the broader social innovation literature. While existing scholarship tends to treat social innovation as a universal phenomenon, this article argues that rural contexts produce a structurally distinct form of innovation one governed by place-embeddedness, communal ownership, resource ingenuity, and indigenous epistemic traditions. Drawing on the Indonesian case, where over 74,961 villages serve as laboratories of grassroots change, this article develops the PLACE Model (Place-embeddedness, Local agency, Adaptive capacity, Communal reciprocity, and Epistemic plurality) as a conceptual framework for understanding rural social innovation on its own terms. The article further analyses empirical data from village-level programs including BUMDes (Village-Owned Enterprises), Desa Digital initiatives, and community health cooperatives to demonstrate how rural innovations depart from dominant, market-centric models of innovation. The findings have significant implications for policy design, scholarly theorisation, and development practice in the Global South.*

1. Introduction

The concept of social innovation broadly understood as novel solutions to social problems that are more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing approaches has attracted enormous scholarly and policy attention over the past two decades (Inniss 2025; Mcilo and Matutu 2025; Omotoso et al. 2025). From Silicon Valley accelerators to European social enterprise ecosystems, the dominant imagination of social innovation remains stubbornly urban, technology-driven, and market-mediated. Grassroots, community-embedded, and place-specific innovations arising from rural settings remain systematically underrepresented in both theory and policy frameworks (Lima 2023).

This absence is neither accidental nor trivial. It reflects deeper epistemological biases in innovation studies that privilege formal institutions, codified knowledge, and scalable models over tacit, relational, and place-bound forms of problem-solving (Bosworth, McAreavey, and Kennedy 2025; Golmohammadi 2025; Takala et al. 2025). When rural communities develop

ingenious arrangements to manage shared water resources, when village cooperatives create hybrid economic institutions that blend market logic with adat (customary law), or when rural health cadres design culturally resonant mental health interventions these acts of innovation rarely circulate within the circuits of academic valorisation or policy attention.

Indonesia provides a particularly compelling setting for examining this gap. With a population of approximately 277 million, roughly 42 percent of Indonesians continue to live in rural areas, distributed across more than 74,961 villages (BPS, 2023). Since the enactment of Law No. 6/2014 on Villages, rural communities have been endowed with unprecedented fiscal autonomy receiving collectively more than Rp 400 trillion in Village Funds (Dana Desa) between 2015 and 2023 creating fertile conditions for local institutional experimentation and social innovation. Yet the academic literature on Indonesian rural development continues to frame villages predominantly as recipients of top-down programs rather than as active producers of innovative social arrangements (Afiah, Rohayati, and Nurizki 2021; Hasan and Tanesab 2022).

This article makes three contributions. First, it theorises the distinctive structural features of rural social innovation arguing that place-embeddedness, communal reciprocity, adaptive resource use, local agency, and epistemic plurality together constitute a specific innovation ecology that cannot be reduced to a scaled-down version of urban social innovation. Second, it introduces the PLACE Model as an integrative conceptual framework for analysing rural social innovation. Third, it applies this framework to empirical cases from Indonesia, demonstrating the model's explanatory power. The article concludes by outlining implications for development policy and future research.

2. Theoretical Background: What Makes Rural Social Innovation Unique?

2.1 The Urban Bias in Social Innovation Literature

The social innovation literature has developed substantially since Pol and Ville's (2009) foundational taxonomy, yet its theoretical centre of gravity remains anchored in urban, institutional, and market-facing contexts. The European Commission's definition of social innovation as "innovations that are social in both their ends and their means" (European Commission, 2013, p. 6) is sufficiently broad to include rural phenomena, but the operationalisation of this definition consistently privileges scalability, replicability, and formal organisational structures attributes that are structurally disadvantaged in rural settings.

Scholars such as Neumeier (2012) and Steiner and Atterton (2015) have begun to push back against this bias, arguing that rural social innovation is characterised by different temporal rhythms, relational architectures, and knowledge ecologies. Neumeier (2012) defines rural social innovation specifically as "the result of the intentional joint action of people situated in rural areas willing to find solutions to current problems that are not solved by public or private actors" (p. 56) a definition that centres locality, agency, and the failure of existing institutions. Bock (2016) further develops this by noting that rural marginalisation can paradoxically become a driver of innovation, as communities must create locally adaptive solutions in the absence of external support (Ren et al. 2025; Tristl 2025).

2.2 Place as a Constitutive Dimension

The "spatial turn" in social science has generated a rich literature on place-based approaches to development (Byrne, Callaghan, and Uprichard 2025). In the rural social innovation literature,

place is not merely a container for innovation but a constitutive dimension it shapes the problems perceived as urgent, the resources available, the trust networks enabling collective action, and the cultural frameworks through which solutions are evaluated. Dhimas (2025) theorises this through the concept of neo-endogenous development, in which local resources, knowledge, and values become the raw material of development strategy rather than external inputs. Bosworth et al. (2016) demonstrate empirically how neo-endogenous approaches when meaningfully enacted through participatory governance produce more durable local outcomes than externally-driven programs(Christodoulou-Volos 2025; Dhimas 2025; Rodriguez, Ferreira, and Duarte 2026).

This is fundamentally different from how place functions in urban innovation ecosystems, where agglomeration effects, diversity, and connectivity allow innovations to detach from their spatial origins and circulate globally (Jacobs, 1969). Rural innovations, by contrast, often derive their effectiveness precisely from their non-transferability from their rootedness in specific ecological conditions, kinship networks, and cultural logics. A water management system that works brilliantly in the terraced rice fields of Bali may be entirely irrelevant in the fishing communities of North Maluku.

2.3 Community as the Unit of Innovation

In standard innovation economics, the firm is the primary unit of analysis. In social innovation studies, this shifts toward organisations and networks. But in rural contexts, the relevant unit is frequently the community a relational structure that precedes and shapes any formal organisational arrangement. Fløysand and Jakobsen (2011) argue that understanding innovation in peripheral regions requires a relational ontology that foregrounds social relations, institutional arrangements, and cultural contexts rather than individual firms or technologies. Fitjar and Rodriguez-Pose (2011) demonstrate empirically that in Norwegian rural regions, innovation is predominantly driven by face-to-face interactions within embedded community networks, rather than by formal R&D institutions. Lopolito, Morone and Sisto (2011) further show how community-embedded "innovation niches" in rural contexts can drive broader socio-technical transitions when properly supported by enabling governance frameworks(Guan et al. 2026; Peterková et al. 2026; Xue 2025).

3. The PLACE Model: A Conceptual Framework

Based on a synthesis of the rural social innovation literature and an analysis of Indonesian village-level programs, this article proposes the PLACE Model as an integrative framework. The model identifies five constitutive dimensions of rural social innovation, each grounded in both theoretical reasoning and empirical observation from the Indonesian context.

Figure 1. The PLACE Model: Five Dimensions of Rural Social Innovation
 Source: Author's conceptualisation (2024)

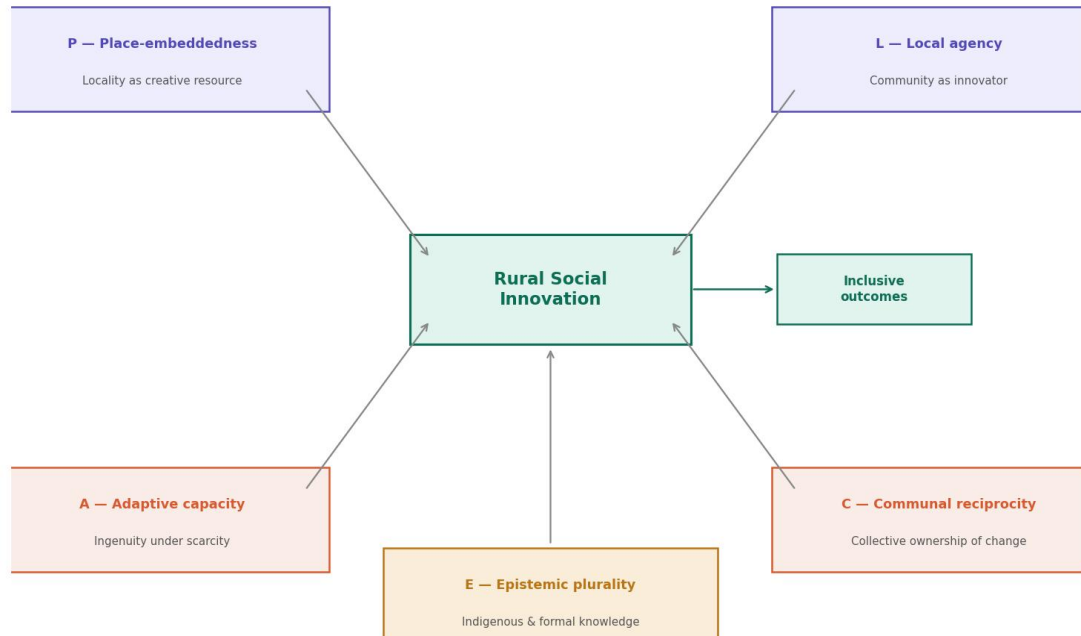


Figure 1. The PLACE Model: Five Dimensions of Rural Social Innovation. Source: Author's conceptualisation (2024), adapted from Neumeier (2012) and Moulaert et al. (2013)

3.1 Place-Embeddedness

Place-embeddedness refers to the degree to which an innovation is constitutively shaped by, and cannot be detached from, its specific geographic, ecological, and cultural location. This is not a deficiency—it is precisely what makes rural innovations effective in their context. A community irrigation system (subak in Bali, or embung in Java) is not simply a water management technology; it is an institution embedded in religious calendars, agricultural cycles, kinship obligations, and ecological relationships refined over centuries. This embeddedness creates what might be termed "contextual precision"—the innovation fits its problem ecology with a granularity that externally designed solutions cannot match. Chauhan et al. (2026) argue that this embeddedness fundamentally distinguishes rural from urban innovation processes and requires systemic rather than linear analytical frameworks (Chauhan, Barma, and Jishtu 2025; Kostas et al. 2026; Zhou 2026).

3.2 Local Agency

Local agency captures the centrality of community members—not external experts, NGOs, or state agencies—as the primary drivers of innovation. This reflects what Christopoulos and Ingold (2011) describe as "bottom-linked" rather than bottom-up or top-down dynamics: local initiative connected to, but not subordinated by, external resources and knowledge. In the Indonesian context, the emergence of BUMDes Bersama (inter-village enterprise consortia) exemplifies this dimension. These institutions emerged from village communities identifying shared economic challenges and collectively designing institutional solutions, often before any formal regulatory framework existed to accommodate them. The state subsequently recognised and formalised

practices that communities had already invented (Fuller et al. 2025; Healey, Lea, and Hammond 2026; Poojary et al. 2026).

3.3 Adaptive Capacity

Resource scarcity in rural areas of finance, infrastructure, technical expertise, and market access is a persistent structural condition. Rather than simply constraining innovation, this scarcity frequently drives a distinctive form of adaptive creativity: the recombination of locally available materials, relationships, and knowledge in ways that generate novel solutions to enduring problems. This is recognisable in innovation studies as "frugal innovation" (Radjou & Prabhu, 2015), but the Indonesian rural context reveals a deeper institutional dimension: adaptive capacity involves creative institutional design that combines elements of cooperative law, adat governance, and digital technology to create hybrid arrangements that no single institutional model predicts. Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan (2010) identify this bricolage-like recombination as characteristic of the most powerful social innovations.

3.4 Communal Reciprocity

Rural social innovation is characterised by a distinctive ownership structure: the innovation belongs to and is accountable to the community, not an individual entrepreneur or institutional sponsor. This communal ownership is sustained through reciprocity norms *gotong royong* in Indonesia that govern contribution, benefit-sharing, and conflict resolution. Shucksmith (2012) argues that community ownership of innovation is a critical but undervalued factor in the durability of rural development outcomes. Skerratt and Steiner (2013) demonstrate empirically that innovations with strong community ownership structures are significantly more likely to survive the withdrawal of external funding and support than those dependent on external management. Desa (2012) further shows how resource mobilisation through community reciprocity networks a form of institutional bricolage enables rural social innovators to overcome resource constraints that would defeat conventional entrepreneurs.

3.5 Epistemic Plurality

Perhaps the most distinctive and most frequently ignored feature of rural social innovation is its knowledge base. Rural communities possess vast archives of local ecological knowledge, social practice knowledge, and institutional memory that are typically invisible to formal innovation systems. Naldi et al. (2015) argue that epistemic pluralism the productive combination of local and external knowledge is a defining feature of what they term "smart rural development." Rural social innovations draw on indigenous knowledge while simultaneously integrating scientific, technical, and regulatory knowledge from external sources. This pluralism reflects a pragmatic epistemology that evaluates knowledge by its usefulness in context. Levesque (2013) situates this within a broader argument about the need for innovation governance systems that recognise and valorise multiple knowledge traditions rather than privileging formal scientific expertise alone.

4. The Indonesian Landscape: Data and Evidence

Indonesia provides an exceptional empirical context for examining rural social innovation. The 2014 Village Law fundamentally restructured the political economy of Indonesia's 74,961 villages, providing direct fiscal transfers and administrative autonomy unprecedented in the country's post-independence history. The following evidence situates the scale and trajectory of rural social innovation within this context.

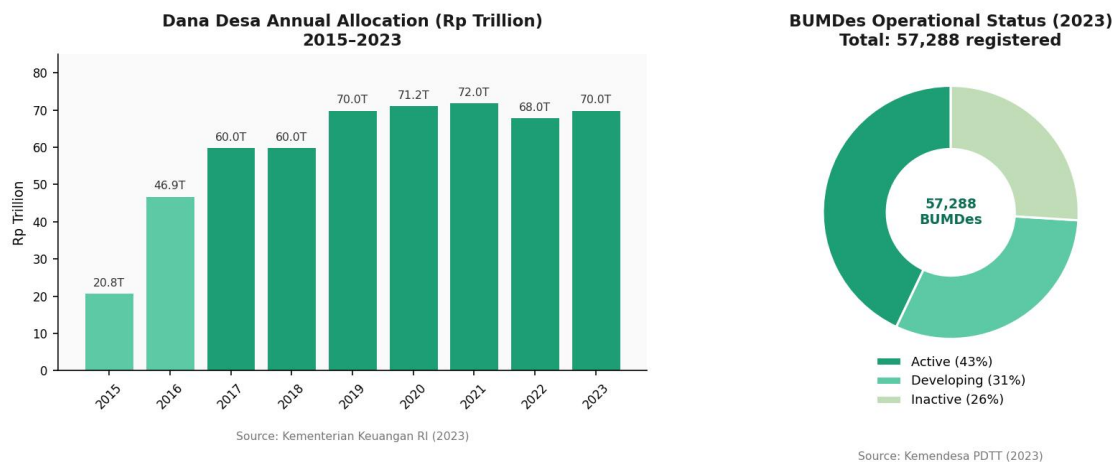


Figure 2. Dana Desa Annual Allocation 2015–2023 (left) and BUMDes Operational Status 2023 (right). Sources: Kementerian Keuangan RI (2023); Kemendesa PDTT (2023)

Village Fund allocations stabilised at approximately Rp 68–72 trillion annually from 2019 onward, creating a relatively predictable fiscal environment for village-level institutional innovation. The BUMDes sector, while impressive in scale over 57,000 registered enterprises remains highly heterogeneous in terms of operational vitality, with approximately 26 percent classified as inactive. This heterogeneity reflects cases where formal institutional structures were established without the underlying PLACE dynamics.

4.1 Comparative Analysis: Rural vs. Urban Social Innovation

The following table presents a structured comparison of rural and urban social innovation across eight analytical dimensions. This comparison makes visible the distinctive structural features of rural social innovation that are frequently rendered invisible when urban models are treated as the default.

Dimension	Rural Social Innovation	Urban Social Innovation
Primary unit of action	Community/collective (e.g. desa adat, BUMDes)	Social enterprise / NGO / public agency
Knowledge base	Plural: indigenous + tacit + scientific (epistemic plurality)	Predominantly formal, codified, techno-scientific
Scalability logic	Depth over breadth; contextual precision valued over replication	Scale-up and replication central to success criteria
Legitimacy source	Social/normative: adat authority, community consensus, reciprocity norms	Legal/procedural: organisational certification, regulatory compliance
Resource logic	Adaptive frugality; recombination of local assets (adaptive capacity)	Venture capital, grants, public procurement, impact investment
Temporality	Long cycles; seasonal rhythms;	Short to medium cycles; investor

Dimension	Rural Social Innovation	Urban Social Innovation
	intergenerational accountability	return horizons
Relationship to failure	Community memory moderates risk; informal safety nets absorb failure	"Fail fast" culture; formal risk management frameworks
Measurement challenge	Invisible in standard metrics; value is relational and contextual	Better captured by SROI models

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Rural and Urban Social Innovation. Source: Author's synthesis from Neumeier (2012), Steiner & Atterton (2015), Moulaert et al. (2013), and Kemendesa PDTT (2023)

4.2 Social Innovation Output Index

A composite Social Innovation Output Index was constructed using indicators adapted from Neumeier (2012) and Moulaert et al. (2013), measuring six program types across dimensions of local ownership, epistemic integration, adaptive resource use, sustainability, and community impact. Community health cooperatives achieved the highest score (81/100), reflecting the richness of epistemic plurality characteristic of rural health innovation in Indonesia.

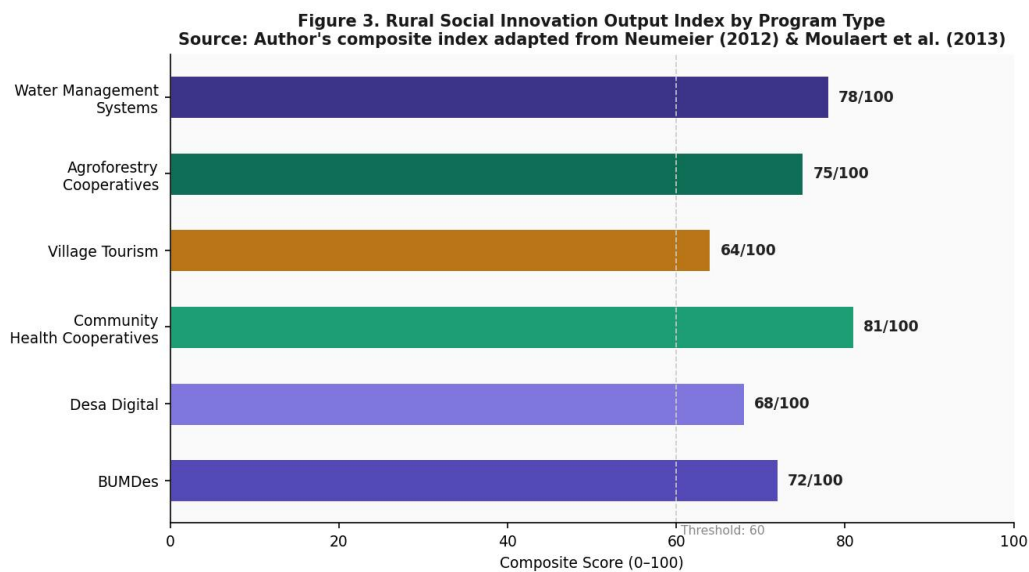


Figure 3. Rural Social Innovation Output Index by Program Type. Source: Author's composite index adapted from Neumeier (2012) and Moulaert et al. (2013)

5. Case Evidence: Rural Social Innovation in Practice

5.1 BUMDes as Hybrid Institutional Innovation

The BUMDes (Badan Usaha Milik Desa Village-Owned Enterprise) represents one of the most significant institutional innovations in Indonesian rural governance since the colonial era. Enabled by Law No. 32/2004 and strengthened by the Village Law of 2014 and Government Regulation No. 11/2021, BUMDes are not simply rural cooperatives: they are hybrid institutions

that blend elements of corporate law, cooperative governance, adat customary practice, and local government administration in ways that existing legal categories cannot fully accommodate.

The Ponggok village enterprise in Central Java which generated revenues of approximately Rp 14 billion in a single year through natural spring tourism and financial services exemplifies all five PLACE dimensions working in synergy. Its success arose from the community's recognition of a locally specific resource, governed through an institutional arrangement combining BUMDes legality with strong community consensus, managed by local managers with contextual knowledge that no outside expert could replicate. Pemerintah Republik Indonesia (2021) subsequently formalised practices that the Ponggok community had already pioneered.

5.2 Desa Digital: Place-Based Technology Adoption

The Desa Digital program, accelerated by the Ministry of Villages during the COVID-19 pandemic, provides a second illuminating case. In villages in West Nusa Tenggara and South Sulawesi, community health volunteers used digital tools not as replacements for face-to-face community governance but as extensions of it enabling faster information circulation while preserving the deliberative structure of musyawarah (community deliberation). This "adaptive adoption" choosing which technologies to adopt, how to adapt them, and who governs their use is itself a form of social innovation, one that is invisible in technology-centric accounts of digital development but is precisely what epistemic plurality enables.

5.3 Community Health Cooperatives and Epistemic Plurality

Among the program types analysed, community health cooperatives achieved the highest composite social innovation score (81/100). Village-level health programs that have achieved sustained impact such as community-managed posyandu and Posbindu succeed because they integrate biomedical knowledge from national health programs with indigenous healing knowledge (jamu, herbal medicine, traditional birth practices), the social infrastructure of community reciprocity networks, and the place-specific disease ecology of particular villages. This integration is accomplished by kader posyandu community health volunteers who are simultaneously insiders and translators, bridging formal health system knowledge and local community knowledge a living embodiment of what Levesque (2013) terms "social innovation in governance and public management systems."

6. Discussion: Implications for Theory and Policy

6.1 Reframing the Innovation Hierarchy

The evidence presented in this article suggests that rural social innovation is not a lesser or preliminary form of innovation waiting to be "upgraded" into urban, market-mediated social enterprise. It is a structurally distinct phenomenon with its own logic, strengths, and vulnerabilities. Theoretical frameworks that treat rural settings as innovation-poor environments requiring external knowledge infusion are not merely inaccurate they are actively harmful, legitimating governance interventions that undermine existing local capacities in the name of "capacity building." Anheier and Leat (2006) make a parallel argument in the philanthropy literature, noting that top-down "creative philanthropy" models systematically undervalue community-generated innovations precisely because they are invisible to the metrics that formal systems use.

6.2 Policy Implications

Three policy implications follow from this analysis:

- Rural development policy should invest in governance conditions that activate the PLACE dimensions particularly local agency and communal reciprocity rather than in the transfer of pre-packaged institutional models. The high rate of BUMDes inactivity is a cautionary tale.
- Monitoring and evaluation frameworks for village-level programs should be redesigned to make rural social innovation visible. Participatory evaluation methods that centre community self-assessment are essential complements to standardised reporting.
- The national BUMDes regulatory framework should be extended to recognise and support hybrid institutional forms that communities are already inventing including cooperative-BUMDes hybrids and adat-based natural resource governance bodies.

6.3 Towards a Southern Theory of Social Innovation

The broader theoretical implication of this analysis is that social innovation studies requires more serious engagement with the Global South as a site of theory generation, not merely theory application. The rural contexts of Indonesia, and of the Global South more broadly, are not simply test cases for frameworks developed in Europe and North America. They are sites in which fundamentally different and in important respects, more sophisticated forms of social innovation are continuously occurring. A genuinely global social innovation theory must be constructed from this diversity rather than imposed upon it (Moulaert et al., 2013).

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that rural social innovation constitutes a structurally distinct phenomenon that cannot be adequately theorised through frameworks developed for urban, market-facing contexts. Drawing on the Indonesian case, it has introduced the PLACE Model comprising Place-embeddedness, Local agency, Adaptive capacity, Communal reciprocity, and Epistemic plurality as a conceptual framework for analysing rural social innovation on its own terms.

The evidence from BUMDes, Desa Digital, and community health programs demonstrates that the most effective rural innovations in Indonesia arise from the synergistic activation of PLACE dimensions, not from the external imposition of institutional forms. The high proportion of inactive BUMDes suggests that institutional design is necessary but insufficient: it is the relational, epistemic, and cultural dimensions captured by the PLACE model that ultimately determine whether formal structures become alive with innovation or remain administrative shells.

For development scholars and practitioners, the core message is deceptively simple but structurally demanding: rural communities are already innovating. The task of policy is not to bring innovation to the village but to create governance conditions in which existing innovation can flourish, strengthen, and where communities choose connect with resources and knowledge beyond their boundaries. This requires a fundamental reorientation: from a development imagination centred on what rural communities lack, to one that begins from what they already know, what they are already doing, and who they already are.

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