

SUMMARY

Until recently entrepreneurship was considered an alien concept for the countryside in much of Europe. Ambitious and adventurous people who might become entrepreneurs left their small towns or villages to work in large cities.

This traditional thinking has been dramatically reversed over the last fifteen years, as many ex-urbanites, as well as farmers and non-farm locals, have begun a wide range of new business start-ups that can be labeled as rural entrepreneurship. Farm diversification, niche market development, and rural or green tourism are all involved in the rise of rural entrepreneurship.

This report discusses the background to the emergence of rural entrepreneurship in Europe, and goes on to discuss a range of features, factors for success, difficulties, and future challenges for rural entrepreneurs and their supporters. Case studies of five new businesses are given, three from the UK, one from Spain, and another from Switzerland.

Each case is systematically described in the following sequence: the site, history, and regional setting of the business; public policy and assistance available; the business, its entrepreneurial elements and overall development; the human and personal factors involved; markets and marketing; public sector involvement; competition and key linkages; future prospects, impacts on the local region, and implications for Japan.

Case 1: An organic vegetable farm in Dorset, England

A young couple, well educated and exposed to metropolitan lifestyles as well as rural settings, purchased land from a sympathetic local farmer and began vegetable production in 1986. They eventually specialized in organic vegetables. When they began, organic farming was rather an oddity in the region. Now, this family enterprise plays a vital role in the local community in the pursuit of an environmentally and socially sustainable agriculture that is economically successful.

Case 2: A small hotel development on a farm in northern Spain

An old stone-built farm estate house in a remote non-tourism location was purchased and converted to a hotel that effectively markets its remoteness, house style and decoration, and good food and wine. The new owners, two professional people from Madrid, had searched Spain for a suitable property to start a food, wine, hospitality and farming business. They purchased the estate in 1993. Since its opening in 1995, this small hotel

and associated farm has boosted business consciousness and confidence among local people.

Case 3: A cycle hire company utilizing abandoned heritage assets in Cornwall, England

In the early 1980s the Cornwall County Council decided to reuse a former rail route that ceased operation in 1971 as a public walking / cycling trail. At that time, the Council did not have a concrete plan to make the trail attractive. An incoming couple began a cycle hire company on the trail as a part-time venture in 1983: it has become a model cycle hire operation not only in Cornwall but known widely in England and beyond. The enterprise has since diversified into a range of cycle related businesses.

Case 4: A community-led ecological hotel development in Switzerland

A group of villagers in the southeastern Swiss Alps formed a co-operative for a new hotel business to create jobs and sustain the local economy. The village was far from main tourism areas. They obtained professional support, as well as financial support from outside by innovative means. Since the opening of the hotel in 1983, the radical idea, an ecologically sound and community friendly hotel, has proved to be successful and won several prizes and media attention. The 70-bed hotel currently employs nearly thirty people and utilizes local products, including up to 80 percent of the food served in the hotel.

Case 5: Water mill restoration to realize new rural tourism in Dorset, England

Water mills used to produce wheat flour for human consumption and to crush oats and barley for animal feeds. In the midst of agricultural modernization, many water mills were abandoned or destroyed. An older farming couple turned a forgotten asset into a new center for rural tourism: a working water mill, a rural life museum, a caravan park, a tearoom, and more. The success of this family initiative has convinced the local community as well as rural development professionals that age, education, and experience need not matter for an innovative rural venture.

These five cases illustrate the diverse ways that rural entrepreneurs have overcome or even utilized the weaknesses and disadvantages of their settings and existing resources to create new revenue earning centers not only for their businesses but also for their local region. Central themes are the re-assessment of natural and cultural resources, and market relevance. Human and personal elements, linkages with the local community as well as wider networks, and thoughtful business and marketing strategies are also shown to be important factors for successful rural entrepreneurship.