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"Identifying opportunities. The COVID-19 crisis is accelerating the use and diffusion of digital tools. Confinement measures are fomenting remote working practices, remote learning and e-services. This is particularly important in rural areas where distances and commuting times tend to be longer. All this could promote the attractiveness of rural areas." (OECD 2020: 4)

Abstract

The development of coworking spaces in rural areas has been the subject of great interest due to the expansion of digital technologies and the rise of new ways of working. They are increasingly seen as drivers of economic and social development. Rural coworking spaces typically host a diversity of professionals from various sectors who seek to reduce their daily commute and reconcile work and quality of life. Most of these spaces are located in converted buildings and provide shared office facilities, business support, and some social interaction that could counterbalance self-isolation experienced at home. The COVID-19 pandemic certainly challenged this model, but it also raised new opportunities given the widespread adoption of remote working. Based on the interviews conducted, it was possible to contribute to a better understanding of the resilience of rural coworking spaces, considering their specificities during the pandemic and their expected future development.

Keywords

COVID-19, coworking space, resilience, remote working, rural development

1. Introduction

Even though it was long viewed as an inherently urban phenomenon, since the lion's share of creative and knowledge workers is concentrated in large and medium-sized cities (Merkel 2015, Moriset 2014), coworking spaces (CWS) are now increasingly widespread in rural communities and small cities. Indeed policy-makers tend to view CWS as a tool to stimulate entrepreneurship and the creative economy outside traditional economic sectors in rural areas (Roberts and Townsend 2016). CWS can provide a “hard and soft infrastructure” (Fuzi 2015) both for newly-arrived creative entrepreneurs and employees, and for people willing to stay in their community instead of commuting or moving to large urban agglomerations.

Etymologically speaking, coworking refers to the physical proximity of workers (Spinuzzi 2012), which would generate social interactions and stimulate creativity. When lockdown measures were adopted in Spring 2020, many workers were confined at home and all public venues closed. CWS seemed to have lost their mere rationale. Out of “full lockdown” periods, they had to deal with social distancing measures that questioned the community interaction model at the core of coworking and resulted in a loss of revenue. At the same time, new opportunities have arisen for rural CWS: the outburst of digital services and remote working (or telework[i]), and the renewed attractiveness of the countryside in terms of quality of life.

Arguably the three-decade-old narrative of rural telework (Clark 2000) was rejuvenated by the COVID-19 crisis. The idea that information technology makes it possible to live and work in a healthier and quiet environment, rather than in busy, congested, and overpriced cities, predates the Internet era. However, actual achievements did not meet past expectations. Grimes (2003) described the “digital economy challenge” faced by rural economies and the “rural penalty” (Malecki 2003) remains indeed quite significant: few job opportunities, remoteness of basic services, dependence on individual car, inadequate telecommunications, and scarcity of social and business contact.

The pandemic may have changed the situation by raising the advantages of rural areas, notably the affordability of single-household buildings with larger indoor space and access to outdoor private areas, while urban dwellers were confined in tiny apartments during the first wave of lockdowns. Remote working, which had been timidly increasing for decades, was pushed up to unprecedented levels by anti-COVID governmental measures (Eurofound 2020). Most observers consider that the current wave of remote working will last to some degree (Baert et al. 2020). It has indeed proved effective on a large scale, and a number of employees “wishes to consolidate the practice of remote working after the end of the lockdown and with more continuity” (Massimo 2020: 47).

Admittedly, these changes could not fully benefit CWS because rural dwellers often live in large houses suitable for remote working. Still, they are at risk of social and business isolation. CWS precisely offer to self-employed and small businesses a more professional working place, with adequate meeting rooms and video conferencing facilities. Such a working environment, well separated from family life, could increase the acceptance of remote working by employers and employees.

This paper explores the hypothesis that the COVID crisis is not only a test for the viability of rural CWS but may well be an opportunity to grow and strengthen their role as local hubs of creativity and social life. For that purpose, the authors conducted 48 semi-structured interviews with CWS managers in France (30), Portugal (11), and Belgium (7). After presenting the interview grid and the main features of the sample, this paper analyses the situation of CWS faced with the pandemic and its immediate consequences and bring insights into their particular features and factors of resilience and success. The last section addresses perspectives and planning policies.

2. Methodology

This paper focuses on CWS located in NUTS level 3 sub-regions (France's *Départements,* Belgium's *arrondissements*, and Portugal's *subregiões*) classified by Eurostat (2018) as predominantly rural. The identification of French CWS was based on regional networks of third places, notably in Nouvelle Aquitaine (https://coop.tierslieux.net), Occitanie (http://www.tierslieuxoccitanie.com), and the *département* of Ardèche (http://latrame07.fr). Third places that did not offer coworking facilities were disregarded. In Belgium, CWS were selected in the Coworking Wallonia Network (https://www.cowallonia.be). 15 spaces matching the rural criteria were contacted by email. Seven of them answered our interview request. In Portugal, rural CWS were identified through desk research and interview requests to managers sent by email. Based on the willingness to answer questions by phone or video conference, our selection process may somehow bias our sampling as fully closed CWS may have remained out of touch from our requests.

Out of the 48 spaces surveyed, 8 are located in municipalities of less than 1,000 inhabitants. The others are located in municipalities of 1,000 to 7,500 (14), 7,500 to 20,000 (12), and more than 20,000 (14) inhabitants.

The interview grid addressed the following points: i) Legal ownership; property characteristics, functions and digital accessibility (ii) situation before and after the pandemic outbreak (n. of users; financial issues, etc.); iii) CWS actions at different stages of the pandemic (restrictions; events, etc.); (iv) governments COVID-19 related support measures; and v) future prospects for CWS and the local community.

3. Description of the sample

Geography and local dynamics

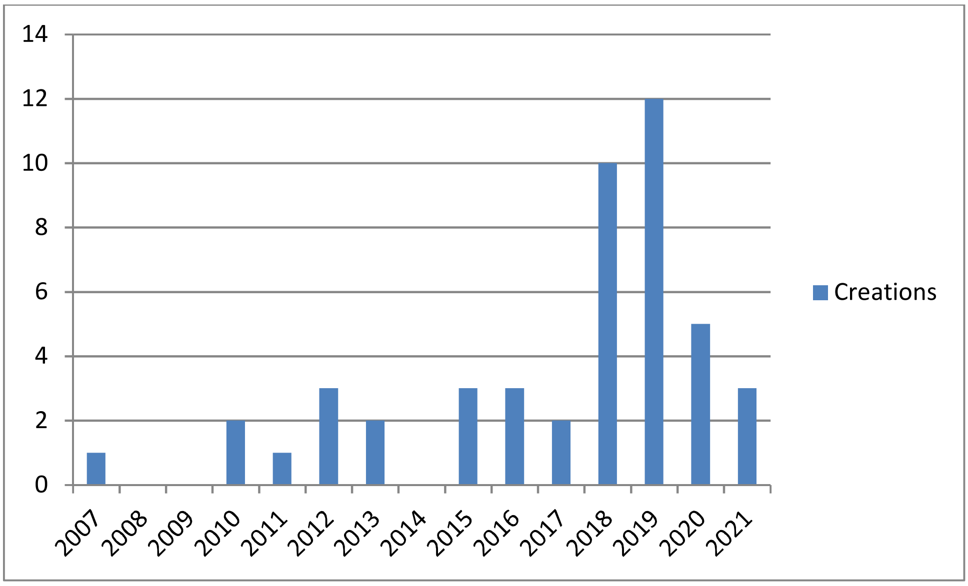
Natural beauty, nice weather, rich cultural heritage, and low costs of real estate may be attractive for knowledge workers and various kinds of "digital nomads" (Orel 2019). Portugal and the French regions surveyed, notably Ardèche and the South-West, are endowed with such positive stereotypes. In Belgium, the overall density contributes to a sustained urbanisation of the countryside, especially in the vicinity of motorway infrastructures. Creative workers are attracted by rural areas because of their lower housing prices, the availability of large houses and easy access to major urban centres.

The distance to large cities (Lyon and Toulouse in France, Liège and Brussels in Belgium, Lisbon and Porto in Portugal) appears to be an important factor in the development of these spaces. In seven cases, the travel time to the closest major city is short enough to allow daily commuting from the rural locality. Some municipalities of our sample (13) witnessed a demographic growth, while two-thirds of them show a declining (23) or stagnant (12) demography. In France and Portugal, this is the inheritance of a century-long process of rural devitalisation and ageing.

In declining rural communities, the presence of CWS is a matter of local economic development and revitalisation policies. In municipalities with strong demographic and economic dynamics, it is rather an issue of mixed-use planning and development. Small towns located close to a major city fear of becoming dormitory cities, endowed with few local jobs, and the majority of the labour force submitted to a long commute.

Most rural CWS surveyed were created in 2018 and 2019 after a period of slow development (Figure 1). This somehow follows the trend already observed in large cities. Peghaire (2019) reports that in 2019, 62 per cent of all French CWS were less than 3 years old, and 21 per cent were less than one year old. Two third of the CWS surveyed opened between 2018 and March 2021. The implementation of subsidy programs aimed at the creation of third places in peripheral areas may have fuelled this recent growth in the three countries.

Figure 1. Years of creation of the 48 CWS surveyed (based on interviews and CWS' websites)



A subsidised sector

According to *Deskmag*, only 43 per cent of CWS generate a direct profit (Foertsch 2019). Ten interviewees spontaneously said that "rural CWS are not profitable" because the community of potential users is small, and they have to charge low rental fees. In France, for example, CWS in main cities claim 210 euros per month for unlimited access to the open space (add 100 euros in Paris) (Peghaire 2019). In rural CWS surveyed, the usual figures are around 100-120 euros/month (example: https://www.laquincaillerie.tl/le-tiers-lieu/le-coworking/les-tarifs-2020).

Out of 48 spaces surveyed, 21 spaces are managed under the umbrella of non-profit organisations, 13 are run by private companies, 14 are directly managed by local municipalities. Rural CWS usually have to apply for public funding or find complementary sources of revenue. Public funding of CWS, in money or in kind, is the tangible expression of planning, revitalisation, and economic development policies at different levels of government. It is "multi-scale" by nature, as subsidies may be granted by the *municipalities* (France and Portugal), the *communautés de communes* (France), the region (Belgium), the state, the European Union (for example, through the LEADER program) or any combination of these. Some private spaces do not get any public subsidy – one person criticised "CWS managers who spend most of their time at "subsidy hunting."

Direct subsidies set aside, rural CWS subsist thanks to low or non-existing real estate costs. Property globally makes up to 40 per cent of total CWS costs and "the neutralisation of real estate cost is critical to the business model of rural CWS" (Levy-Waitz 2018: 101). The majority of the CWS surveyed are housed for free or pay a modest rental fee. Some 12 spaces are owned and managed by the municipality; seven are provided by local authorities to non-profit organisations for free or a symbolic rental fee.

Rural CWS are often located in converted buildings, a testimony of rural areas' long demographic and economic decline. Among the 48 CWS surveyed, nine former factories (mainly textile mills), six closed administrative buildings (post, bank, gendarmerie, public baths), five shops, four former schools, one church, one convent were identified. In some way, rural communities mimic, at a smaller scale, urban revitalisation policies developed in large cities' former industrial neighbourhoods in the view of accelerating the transition toward a knowledge economy.

Functions: hybrid, creative spaces

CWS belong to the wider category of "third place" that can host a large spectrum of activities (Oldenburg, 1989), as makerspaces or fablabs, digital public access points, small exhibition and art performance venues, cafés and restaurants.

In rural areas, CWS diversification is forcibly necessary by the low density of knowledge workers and firms in the digital industries. This allows to densify occupancy, increase the number of events, and raise revenues. Only 18 out of 48 spaces surveyed are “pure play” coworking facilities. Besides this, 10 CWS include a fablab, 10 are community technology centres, four act as incubator and business centre. Besides,14 of these spaces host various cultural activities: circus arts school, theatre, artist residence, art exhibitions, video studio, live music performances.

This large spectrum of services meets the expectations of local authorities, which see third places as much needed hubs of economic and social development. This explains the involvement of some rural municipalities in the development and support of CWS. Community technology centres (CTC) and fablabs are dedicated to the digital empowerment of citizens and firms through training sessions and mentoring. These services, proposed to local authorities and companies, are in themselves a business opportunity for CWS managers and their tenants.

4. Rural CWS facing the pandemic

Lockdown closures

The three countries had to face three COVID-19 waves following similar timings, and more or less similar responses in terms of lockdown and restrictions. In the middle of March 2020, the governments of Belgium, Portugal, and France imposed a severe lockdown, with all public venues closed, and mandatory remote working. The lockdowns were gradually relaxed at the end of April. The second wave, in October-November, led to a new lockdown in France and Belgium, though less severe, and some restrictions in Portugal (schools and shops remained open). From January to March 2021, the three countries adopted new lockdown measures and/or maintained the existing ones.

The lockdowns of spring and fall 2020 were very different. The first lockdown was very strict. Out of the 48 spaces surveyed, two-thirds had to close at some moment of the lockdown, and 20 were fully closed (Table 1). Seven spaces were not closed since they were not yet open at the time of the pandemic outbreak. Like other places open to the public, spaces acting as community technology centres had to close. A number of CWS remained open to their regular subscribers, such as self-employed persons, micro-firms and non-profit enterprises who could not operate from home. Arguably, these private enterprises which do not receive any general public could not be closed by the law. In the first times of the pandemic, confusion was often the rule, and some CWS had to operate in a legal loophole.

We are legally open, but we have to deal with governmental rules, and avoid to communicate the attendance on social networks, which makes it difficult to attract new users.

The second lockdown was much less severe, and the vast majority of CWS surveyed remained open, following the respective governments' guidelines and measures. Only one space had not opened again since the first lockdown.

Table 1. CWS responses to lockdown measures in 2020

	First lockdown		**Second lockdown**	
Never close anyway	6		29	
Some closure at some time	32		8	
including:				
full closure		20		2
remained open to regular users		6		6
re-opened with anti-COVID-19 measures		4		
Postponed the opening	4			
Unknown, does not apply	3		11	
Created after 1st lockdown	3			
Total	**48**		**48**	

A sustained flow of events that favour business and social interactions is usually cited as one of the important sources of CWS' added value. Even if some spaces remained open, collective events that involve physical presence were nearly all cancelled. Community managers tried to "keep the contact" with the community by virtual means such as Messenger or video conference: "virtual meeting", "webinars", "workshops", "aperitifs." In some cases, community management efforts on social networks were hampered by the borderline legal status of CWS, often referred to by some interviewees as "we can open, but we are not supposed to welcome public".

Financial problems and government aid

Out of 34 usable responses, only 10 people mention any kind of COVID-19-related financial loss – one space acknowledges a growth of revenue (Table 2). Five out of 10 financial problems occurred in private CWS. Loss of revenue is related to the decline in paid attendance: 18 spaces acknowledge some loss in the number of users. Three mentioned the fall of revenue from meeting room rental and one from the cancellation of public events: managers were organising weekly concerts in the garden, with the selling of drink and meals. One non-profit organisation had to find private grants.

Most spaces did not have financial loss because rental fees make a very small or non-existing share of their operating budget. They are public (11 occurrences) or strongly subsidised (6). Some non-profit associations do not pay any staff. In some way, it could be said that the much "socialised" or self-organised business model of rural CWS make them more resilient to the crisis than urban, business-oriented ones. Diversification of activities also played a role in the resilience of these spaces. Like other businesses, CWS are eligible to COVID-19 specific government aids, such as the unemployment benefit or the solidarity fund (France). Eight out of 12 which received these aids are private companies. Some spaces did not receive any aid, but tenants or users did, which is an indirect aid to CWS. In the majority of cases, the public nature of the space, and the importance of subsidy, explain that no aid was mentioned.

Table 2. Financial issues in COVID-19 times

Financial problem		**COVID-19 specific aid**	
Some financial loss	10	No aid	26
No problem	23	Some aid	12
Including:		Including:	
relies on subsidy	6	subsidy extension	5
public space	11	unemployment benefit	4
Financial benefit	1	solidarity fund	2
No data	14	No data	10
Total	**48**	**Total**	**48**

5. Resilience of rural CWS during the pandemic

Obviously, rural CWS were not immune to the COVID-19 crisis. One mentioned "a lost year". Another said "we are now starting from scratch, we have to rebuild the collective and events." Ten managers acknowledged that the pandemic has slowed down their development. One said "COVID has hampered our communication effort." But a strong resilience is the dominant feeling. This resilience cannot be solely attributed to the umbrella of public subsidy and aids, or public ownership. Many rural CWS surveyed grasped opportunities from the specific conditions created by COVID-19, notably in France and Portugal.

The rush to the countryside of Parisian people at the beginning of the crisis was a much France specific phenomenon, especially since the concentration of service jobs suitable for remote working in a mega-city is rather unique. The analysis of mobile telephone data revealed that in the aftermath of the first lockdown (15 March 2020), about 1.5 million people had left Paris, and other major cities to a lesser extent, to take refuge in families or secondary residences (Untersinger 2020). Some extreme measures adopted in France during the first lockdown, for instance, prohibiting displacement farther away from 1km of the residence and the closure of several green public spaces, probably played a role in the loss of liveability of larger cities.

In Portugal, many Lisbon residents fled to their vacation homes and some digital nomads preferred to extend their stay instead of returning to their country of origin. In Belgium, one could not observe a rush to the countryside because residential migrations towards rural areas are rooted in long-term dynamics that COVID-19 did not alter. In addition, the rush to secondary residences might have been somehow penalised by the regional or national divide: many holiday homes are owned by Dutch-speaking persons who could not legally travel to these places. In several cases, CWS remained open while it was not clearly legal, avoiding media buzz.

The "house factor" proved important. Rural houses are on average larger than apartments in Paris, Brussels or Lisbon, and more suitable to remote working. In pandemic time the demand for social contact in CWS was counterbalanced by the fear of getting contaminated. Six managers said that people preferred to stay working at home. By contrast, nine managers mentioned some kind of "home-working fatigue" as a favourable factor for CWS. This fatigue derives from a combination of issues, such as noise, social isolation, the feeling of routine, and the lack of adequate bandwidth.

After the first lockdown, Summer 2020 was associated with the return to a misleading "new normal" in the three countries (opening of accommodations, restaurants and cafés…). Still restrictions on international travels led residents to opt for domestic destinations. In France, large cities were ignored, but 2020 proved a record-high year for rural tourism (Sagot 2020). CWS benefited from this phenomenon. Seven managers witnessed a rise in the attendance of non-regular users during holidays, mainly people who sought to escape the issue of working at home (especially those with children).

The digital divide: a driver for rural CWS?

Even though it has long been considered as a serious planning issue (Salemink *et al.* 2017), uneven access to fast internet connection in rural areas was brutally exposed during the pandemic given the vital need of fast remote connection for everyday life, notably for video conferencing heavily used at work and school (Merrefield 2020).

The old idea that a good connection available in a telecenter – today a CWS – may benefit to rural individuals and businesses was somehow rejuvenated during the pandemic. Main towns in French, Walloon, and Portuguese rural regions are now well-connected, often with fiber optics, but a number of small villages et isolated settlements only benefit from ADSL technology or even no broadband at all (European commission 2020). Our interviews revealed at least five cases where broadband access was a motivation to visit the CWS, notably by owners of secondary residences with no internet connection. Conversely, the presence of a CWS was an argument used by managers, relayed by local and regional authorities, for lobbying amongst communication companies to get a better internet connection. Once again, the presence of a CWS may be seen as a driver for connection and revitalisation by some municipalities, which explains their involvement in supporting part of their costs.

6. Perspectives and vision

The majority of managers interviewed (19 out of 31 usable answers) have a positive vision of the future, against three who foresee negative perspectives, and seven who put emphasis on uncertainty.

> *Third places will grow everywhere.*

> *Much optimistic, we will have a blast!*

Such an optimistic vision is revealed by the expression of short-term and middle-term projects. Many managers acknowledge that the role of CWS in the local economy will rise and they prepare the future. At least six of them plan to enlarge the existing space. In Portugal, two interviewees project to create new spaces in the nearby mountain villages. In Belgium, one expects to develop as an international cultural hub. Some are planning marketing communication plans to get new users, and others seek for diversification.

Drivers of optimism

Many managers foresee that the post-COVID-19 economic and social context will be favourable for their activity. In some way, they regard the future as the continuation of the positive conditions created by the pandemic without the negative effects (lockdowns and economic downturn).

> *We could be able to cope with the pandemic. So it could only be better once measures are lifted and communication/recruitment starts again.*

The generalisation of remote working is regarded as the main driver of success in the near future. One expected effect is the rise of CWS attendance by salaried workers who can not or do not want to work permanently at home, and are reluctant to resume long commuting to their regular office.

> *We are well located one hour drive from Lyon. More and more employees want to telework.*

> *We will emerge from COVID stronger. We have good feedback from salaried users who have negotiated remote working work arrangements with their employers.*

The increased political and media attention for remote working and digital technology may provide rural CWS with additional support from public authorities and private partners. Their development will benefit from a better understanding of the coworking concept and its advantages from local policy-makers.

We will make more use of the telework topic in our internal and external communication.

The buzz on telework might help us to persuade the "communauté de communes" to support the enlargement of the space.

It could be a marketing argument to involve a partner in our extension project…

Some public authorities are already seizing this opportunity. On 29 April 2020, the Portuguese Government confirmed that it will support the creation of a network of coworking spaces managed by municipalities in the country inland to boost these territories, increase attractiveness of remote areas for both people and companies, reduce travel needs, and improve the quality of life.
In a more general way, the increased importance of information technology should reinforce the role of rural CWS. In the middle-term, micro-firms and self-employed people in digital industries should flourish again, positively affecting CWS attendance. In the same vein, the need for IT services targeting a general public – i.e. training sessions – should stay at a high level, raising the interest of CWS as community technology centres

The need for digital mediation will increase.

Conclusion

When compared with the situation in large urban agglomerations, the development of CWS in rural areas has been more recent and progressive. It is occurring in diverse conditions in terms of municipality size and development process, and presents quite similar patterns in the three countries studied. Given their acknowledged role in local socio-economic development, CWS are often subsidised by local and regional authorities, either directly or indirectly, notably by providing low-cost buildings/spaces. Rural CWS host a diversity of professionals, businesses and activities that foster employment, attract or retain a skilled workforce that contribute to the diversification and dynamization of local contexts.

The availability of public support, largely explains the remarkable resilience of rural CWS during the COVID-19 period. With low running costs, in terms of salaries, real estate or maintenance, they managed to maintain some of their core activities thanks to the sharing of space and staff between different functions. Arguably, one of the main difficulties was related to the reduction of the activities of coworkers themselves rather than to restrictions related to COVID-19, especially after the first lockdown.

Most CWS managers interviewed appear optimistic about the future after the pandemic. As some say in the interviews, if their activity could be maintained all along the crisis, it can only thrive once the threat is over. Furthermore, the number of digital nomads is expected to grow in the coming years. Remote work is also predictable to remain at a fairly high level, as several workers experienced the benefits of working away from large urban areas during the COVID-19 period, and many companies are rethinking work arrangements to cut real estate costs.

When communication, training activities, and social/business events will resume, this should give a boost to CWS' attendance. Even when they have sufficient space and adequate IT facilities at home, which is not always the case, some remote workers may decide to work in CWS some days a week to break social isolation and keep a separation between personal life and work. The community dimension of CWS is expected to play a crucial role at this regard, both internally as a place for socialising and externally as a public life magnet in a largely residential rural environment.

Might these potential drivers of success lead to a long-term and significant rural revival? This is debatable. COVID-19 has amplified an old media and political narrative of "back to the countryside." There are plentiful of anecdotes of newcomer "creative" entrepreneurs, but the real magnitude of the phenomenon is unknown – it is probably small. Several interviewees mention a real estate boom that is driven by the arrival of former urban dwellers. "Every house in the area is sold easily now". But the reported cases of increased attractivity – notably in France and Portugal – rely on local idiosyncrasies and must not be generalised to all rural areas. The digital divide between large cities and rural areas is likely to remain structural and significant in the near future (Cowie, Townsend, and Salemink, 2020).
Therefore, rural CWS should not try to mimic urban CWS but tend to develop their own model, based on their intrinsic qualities, i.e. their hybrid character and role as a hub of economic and social innovation, which legitimates their support by local authorities and communities.

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[i] In this article, the words are used in interchangeable way.