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Communities Matter

Herslund, Lise Byskov; Tanvig, Hanne Wittorff

Published in:
Journal of Rural and Community Development

Publication date:
2024

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Herslund, L. B., & Tanvig, H. W. (2024). Securing Rural Grocery Stores: Communities Matter. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, *19*(3), 173-191. https://journals.brandonu.ca/jrcd/article/view/2476/657

Journal of Rural and Community Development

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Authors: Lise Byskov Herslund & Hanne Wittorff Tanvig

Citation:
Byskov, L. H., & Tanvig, H. W. (2024). Securing rural grocery stores - communities matter. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, *19*(3), 173–191.

Publisher:
Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:
Dr. Doug Ramsey

ISSN: 1712-8277 © Authors
www.jrcd.ca

Securing Rural Grocery Stores: Communities Matter

Lise Byskov Herslund
University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen, Denmark
lihe@ign.ku.dk

Hanne Wittorff Tanvig
University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen, Denmark
hwt@ign.ku.dk

Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of communities becoming involved in sustaining rural grocery stores in Denmark, and it identifies three kinds of community stores. The paper is mainly based on case studies of eighteen villages where local communities have been involved in saving their local stores. In all cases, the community collected funds to purchase and renovate the store's premises. Two kinds of stores (A and B) largely resemble the original rural store in terms of products and appearance. For category A stores, the community rents out the renovated store cheaply to a private shopkeeper. In contrast, for category B stores, low rent is not enough to attract storekeepers, and the community has had to take on the store's management itself. In both cases, stores have engaged with a supermarket chain. A third category (C) consists of an independent store where community members have taken on all activities themselves voluntarily. The type of store reflects the size of the village, its customer base, and also, very importantly, the capacity of the local community. In larger villages, "only financial capital" is needed (for buildings of A stores), whereas in smaller villages, the community has to manage the store (type B and C), which demands more effort and capacity. Thus, closures of rural grocery stores can only be prevented by capable and engaged communities.

Keywords: saving rural grocery stores, community involvement, local capacities, community stores

Sécuriser les épiceries rurales : les communautés comptent

Lise Byskov Herslund
University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen, Denmark
lihe@ign.ku.dk

Hanne Wittorff Tanvig
University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen, Denmark
hwt@ign.ku.dk

Résumé

Cet article explore le phénomène de l'implication des communautés dans le maintien des épiceries rurales au Danemark et identifie trois types de magasins communautaires. Le document s'appuie principalement sur des études de cas de dix-huit villages où les communautés locales ont participé au sauvetage de leurs magasins locaux. Dans tous les cas, la communauté a collecté des fonds pour acheter et rénover les locaux du magasin. Deux types de magasins (A et B) ressemblent largement au magasin rural d'origine en termes de produits et d'apparence. Pour les magasins de catégorie A, la collectivité loue à moindre coût le magasin rénové à un commerçant privé. En revanche, pour les magasins de catégorie B, les loyers modiques ne suffisent pas à attirer les commerçants, et la communauté a dû assumer elle-même la gestion du magasin. Dans les deux cas, les magasins ont collaboré avec une chaîne de supermarchés. Une troisième catégorie (C) consiste en un magasin indépendant où les membres de la communauté ont assumé eux-mêmes toutes les activités volontairement. Le type de magasin reflète la taille du village, sa clientèle et aussi, ce qui est très important, la capacité de la communauté locale. Dans les villages plus grands, « seul un capital financier » est nécessaire (pour les bâtiments des magasins A), tandis que dans les villages plus petits, la communauté doit gérer le magasin (types B et C), ce qui demande plus d'efforts et de capacités. Ainsi, les fermetures d'épiceries rurales ne peuvent être évitées que par des communautés compétentes et engagées.

Mots-clés : sauver les épiceries rurales, implication communautaire, capacités locales, magasins communautaires

1.0 Introduction

For decades, the disappearance of both public and private services from rural areas has put local cohesion and the attractiveness of such areas under pressure. The ongoing development of grocery store closures has resulted in many rural areas now being "food deserts" (Neumeier & Kokorsch, 2021, p. 248), leading to poor living standards for older adults and less mobile citizens and making them less attractive for newcomers to settle in (Paddison & Calderwood, 2007; Findlay et al., 2001; Shiffling et al., 2015). Having a rural grocery store adds life to a rural area (Gandrup, 2022) and losing it means the loss of a place to meet (Clarke & Banga, 2010; Finegan & Buckley, 2022). In many rural areas, how to deal with the decline of local facilities is now high on the agenda (Ashmore et al., 2017; Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017), and civil engagement initiatives are helping fill the gaps in service provision (Healey, 2015).

Danish rural communities are known for their strong civic engagement in maintaining rural living conditions, especially around leisure and social and cultural life (Iversen et al., 2023). Rural communities have also embarked on saving public services, particularly schools (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2018), and many communities are organizing themselves into local councils to strengthen their positions in local politics (Thuesen et al., 2023).

In recent years, some rural communities have also entered the private service and business sector by taking part in preventing the closure of local grocery stores, which have become even more relevant or pressing during the ongoing energy crisis and high inflation, where small shops in rural areas have been particularly hit hard (Søndergaard & Funch, 2022). In Denmark, more than 120 rural grocery shops have only survived in recent years because local communities have become directly involved in their continued existence by becoming owners and sometimes also managers, with the assistance of a Danish supermarket wholesaler (Store Playbook, 2021). The latter receives great publicity by promising the community that they can revive the rural store if the community can raise the funds. In addition, a larger number of rural grocery stores are now being run independently by local communities.

However, not since the heyday of the early cooperative movement, when local communities ran their own dairies, grocery stores and other rural infrastructure (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2000), have Danish rural communities been the promoters, owners, and managers of businesses. In a welfare state like the Danish, with its liberal business approach, running a business is not considered a matter for civil society. However, the trend for rural communities to embark on business activities can be seen as a necessity. It may also be exciting to some, but it is also a challenge to rural communities that lack experience in this field.

This article explores the phenomenon of communities becoming involved in sustaining rural grocery stores. It describes the kind and degree of involvement, the different types of stores that result from it, the local capacities used, and the kinds of communities and rural areas that are engaging in it. The empirical parts of the article are mainly based on case studies of eighteen villages where local communities have been involved in reorganizing the local grocery store and have saved it from closure.

2.0 Theoretical Framework and Terms

Most of the literature on rural stores is somewhat old, as it documents their struggles and their reduction in numbers, which was a hot topic twenty to thirty years ago (e.g., Kirby, 1987; Jussila et al., 1992; Vias, 2004). Decades of store closures have left most rural areas without retail stores, and what grocery stores

are left are in a bad condition. In 1990, Welford found that the remaining rural grocery stores could only survive if they practiced self-exploitation by accepting lower wages or poor working conditions. Broadbridge & Calderwood (2002, p. 394 xx) called the rural grocery store a "nostalgia business," as competition from chain stores had resulted in few independent grocery stores being left in Britain. Küpper &Eberhardt (2013) pointed out that competition had put the remaining grocery stores in rural Germany in such a precarious situation that the goods they offered were too basic and uninteresting for them to serve as anything more than supplementary shops. Schiffling et al. (2015) found that shops on small Scottish islands had difficulty competing with online retailers who offered superior product availability and variety. Along the same lines, Sadílek et al. (2023) found that grocery stores in rural parts of Czechia had no chance of competing against larger urban supermarkets, with their more varied assortments and longer opening hours.

Several studies offer a perspective on how rural grocery stores may improve their chances and consider a business concept that is not solely market-focused. It has been reported that the only chance of survival lies in stores being more grounded in their rural communities, with community functions and services tailored to the rural community and the provision of vital services, especially for older adults and those who are immobile (Shiffling et al., 2015; Sadílek et al., 2023; Broadbridge & Calderwood, 2002). Küpper & Eberhardt (2013) go further and suggest not only knowing and serving the community, but also obtaining their support. They talk about actual "civic initiatives" to halt the trend (Küpper & Eberhardt, 2013, p. 92).

2.1 *The Rural Grocery Store With Community Involvement*

Community involvement in saving rural stores might be ongoing in practice, but it is not well covered in accessible research literature. One reason for this might be the ambiguity regarding what to call the phenomenon: the village shop, the rural shop, and the rural grocery store were names for the "traditional" rural store, so just adding "community" only responds to results from the UK, where grocery stores with community involvement are called "community shops" or "community retail enterprises" (Calderwood & Davies, 2012; Perry & Alcock, 2010; Plunkett Foundation, 2021). In the US, there are community shops though they seem to exist in urban areas, having been set up to keep healthy food options in deprived urban neighborhoods (John et al., 2022). The term "community shops" found in the research literature also means traditional rural shops just selling local produce, urban shops selling rural produce (Silva et al., 2021) or thrift shops, etc.; shops where the community takes part in the actual business side of running a grocery store in rural areas seem limited.

In the UK, the so-called community shops have been followed for twenty years by a foundation for the promotion of community enterprises—the Plunkett Foundation (2021). The Plunkett Foundation defines community shops as a business owned as well as controlled by many people from within the community and for the community's benefit. Perry & Alcock (2010) identify two ways in which local communities have been involved in saving a grocery store in rural Britain, including financial support and running the shop.

Whether community involvement in rural grocery stores is a permanent or transitional phenomenon is debated in UK research. Calderwood & Davies (2013) found that community involvement goes through different phases, starting with the private rural shop being in trouble and changing into a shop that is entirely dependent on volunteers and has short opening hours. Then, when those involved get the hang of it, they start to pay and professionalize, ending up

as private or professional shops again. Alternatively, the shop in trouble can change directly to a more professional shop or stay reliant on volunteers for longer, but with the subsequent phases as the goal. The key challenge for "community shops" is finding the balance between economic and social concerns (Calderwood & Davies, 2013). In the paid and more professional phase, the shop can lose its connection to the local community. For the volunteers, it can be difficult to maintain a common sense of purpose when volunteering in a shop with paid staff. For the community it is, just like any other shop, subject to comparisons in price, rather than whether it adds to the local community. Therefore, in these phases, the shops operate more like conventional retailers at the cost of weaker ties to the local community and customers. A challenge in the earlier phases where there are only volunteers is that the latter might also stand in the way of change, as they want things to stay the same, though "volunteering fatigue" can also be a problem (Calderwood & Davies, 2013, p. 345).

Setting up community shops in Britain peaked in 2009 at 41 new shops a year, according to the Plunkett Foundation (2021). Today, 346 community shops are members, and there are also shops that have closed. The Plunkett Foundation offers support and advice to member community shops. They emphasize the social function of such shops as key. Their members' shops often have cafes or various local activities connected to the shop, like art classes, walking, lunching or knitting groups. In some cases, a general practitioner, the police or a councilor uses a room on the shop's premises. A main challenge for UK shops is that it can be difficult for them to raise funds and borrow money. Moreover, most of the shops rent their premises (74%) (Plunkett Foundation, 2021).

2.2 Place and Capacity Matter

So, can all rural communities save their rural stores? The literature on the conditions for community initiatives to fill gaps in service points to a high level of local capacity as a key to success. It is particularly the intellectual, human, social and political capital of the community combined that is essential in creating and sustaining community-based initiatives (Healey et al., 2017; Thuesen & Rasmussen, 2015; Healey, 2015).

In business studies, rural businesses are often characterized by a stronger interrelatedness with their communities. To be entrepreneurial in rural areas requires a combination of good business practices with community knowledge (Johnstone & Lionais, 2004). However, only in the limited literature on "community enterprises" is the community considered a main actor rather than a contextual element. A *community enterprise* is a business in which the community acts both entrepreneurially and cooperatively to form a business (Buratti et al., 2022; Valchovska & Watts, 2016; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). In particular, it is social capital within the community that is most frequently identified as vital for them to be able to act collectively (Buratti et al., 2022).

Turning towards community stores, the British Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs identifies areas suitable for a community shop asareas with specific demographic characteristics, particularly high levels of people who are well-educated, professional aged between 45-64, commuters and high earners (Plunkett Foundation, 2021). Calderwood and Davies (2013) concluded that communities that can draw upon local financial capital as well as social capital in the form of management expertise are better off. On top of this, input from outside the local area will also be needed for the shops to survive, such as counselling and knowledge sharing (Calderwood & Davies, 2013).

Such ideas, which point to strong local capacities as well as external networks, correspond to the neo-endogenous approach to rural development (Ray, 2006), which has inspired many rural researchers. In this approach, local capacities should not work in isolation (endogenously) but also be able to draw upon and integrate resources from the outside society (Georgios et al., 2021; Shucksmith, 2010). However, such capacities are often unequally distributed (Bock, 2016). Inspired by these ideas, Tanvig &Herslund (2020) have categorized rural communities according to their "local capacities". There are: (1) "Red Communities" with scattered activities and limited capacity for collective action; (2) "Yellow Communities" with strong local capital and capacities like trust, knowledge-sharing and mobilization around leisure and social and cultural activities; and (3) "Green Communities" that, on top of mobilization around social activities, also run activities in the fields of business or larger collective projects and draw in knowledge and powerful individuals from outside.

In the following, we explored grocery stores in rural areas that have been saved by community involvement. We investigated how the communities were involved, what kind of stores this involvement resulted in and discussed what capacities had been used or were lacking.

3.0 Methods and Data

The study was based on various data: interviews, desktop studies of registers, village and grocery store homepages and Facebook groups, local media, and local statistical data.

The supermarket wholesaler provided us with data on a total of 113 stores in their supermarket chain where the community has been involved. The data was from 2021 and included information on the kind of community involvement, such as ownership, whether communities were involved in management, data on turnover and gross revenues, and year of establishment.

Apart from those affiliated with the wholesaler, we knew of several independent community-driven stores we had come across from personal networks, other rural research projects and local media. We also bumped into more of these when visiting villages, which we then continuously added to our list. We then mapped the shops by hand and put a dot on a map for all the stores on the wholesaler's list, as well as the independent stores we knew of and later came across throughout the project. From this, we could clearly see that most of the community stores were concentrated particularly in villages in the western and northern parts of Jutland (a peripheral part of Denmark), whereas the independent community stores were in villages with in-migration and often also in areas of natural beauty.

It was then decided to select stores in four different parts of the country (Western and Eastern Jutland, Funen and Lolland-Falster). We chose two municipalities in each of these four parts of the country and visited all the community stores located there. This resulted in eighteen visits to stores in eighteen villages: seven in Western Jutland, three in Eastern Jutland, four on the large islands of Lolland and Falster, and finally, four in the large island of Funen.

Before the visits, we retrieved demographic data (population size, structure, migration) for the respective villages from Statistics Denmark's online platform for the last five years (Statistics Denmark, 2022). We found that the villages had between 150 and 1300 inhabitants (mostly 250 to 550). Most villages had suffered from depopulation, especially due to general decline, but some, very often those with natural beauty, had experienced in-migration.

Before paying visits, we also explored the local communities' organization, mobilization and activities from village homepages and the media. Our intention was to acquire a background understanding of the local community, the challenges and the capacities beforehand.

Two interviews were conducted in each of the eighteen villages: one with the chairman of the management committee of the community grocery store and one with the shopkeeper or daily manager (in total, 36 interviews). The questions for the shopkeeper related to the store, the kind of community involvement and the daily running of the store, cooperation with the wholesaler, cooperation with the local volunteers and the community, challenges etc. The questions for the chairman of the local community were similar, but they also included questions on the history and establishment of the store, the local community, and their capacity. In many interviews, other management committee members were present, and in several interviews with the shopkeeper, other staff and volunteers were also present. Moreover, we met chairmen of other local community organizations and talked to customers in the shops more informally.

We also held two workshops arranged as focus-group discussions to dig more deeply into specific topics that had arisen during our visits and acquire a more multifaceted understanding of the field. One workshop was held for village representatives within a large municipality with a sparse distribution of rural stores and only one community store to improve our understanding of the local forces and why this was not a common issue there. Another workshop (online) was held where all the local respondents, along with interested researchers and officials in the field, were invited to validate our findings and discuss the challenges.

Our village visits showed that, most often, young people did not take part in maintaining the local store, neither as customers nor as volunteers, and therefore, we held interviews with young people to learn more as to why this was the case. Two group interviews with young people from rural backgrounds living in cities (20–25 years old) and one with young families that had moved back to a rural area recently were held to improve our understanding of how they perceived the rural grocery store, what kind of store they would prefer, and what would make them become involved.

All the interviews and focus-group discussions were summarized in detail. Their analysis was done by hand. We started by comparing the questions, then coded specific points on challenges, solutions, and surprising answers and looked for them across other interviews.

Finally, inspired by the many media stories on troubled rural shops during the energy crisis and inflation, we asked the wholesaler to put together a list of the gross revenues earned by their stores during 2020–2022 to compare stores with community involvement to stores without it. Furthermore, we conducted telephone interviews with three of our stores in each category (see results) on how they came through the crisis, their challenges, activities, etc.

Our research design followed the ethical and human subject guidelines of Copenhagen University and has received institutional approval. Throughout the study, we also shared our findings with our respondents in order to validate our findings and continuously obtain their consent.

4.0 Results

In the wholesaler's records, we found two ways in which residents were involved in supporting the survival of the grocery store: (A) citizens bought and renovated the

building and the physical premises and rented them out to an independent shopkeeper (at a low cost); and (B) citizens bought the physical premises and inventory but also ran the shop themselves. For this they set up a management board that employed a daily leader and possibly staff. The independent shops run by communities on their own (without a chain) are called category C (see Table 1).

In our interviews, most of the shops were in the B category; eight were in category B, five in category A, and five in category C.

Table 1. *Different Ways in Which Local Communities are Involved*

	A-store	**B-store**	**C-store**
Local involvement	Community owns the building. The store itself is owned and run by an independent shopkeeper /tenant.	Community owns the building, is managerially responsible and engages a daily shopkeeper.	Community owns and runs store.

Both A and B shops are influenced by their relationship with a supermarket chain in terms of their physical appearance, formal arrangements, product range, long opening hours, prices, and marketing. Moreover, several of them buy services from the wholesaler, like handling the bookkeeping, and the community consulted the chain when looking for a shopkeeper. The locals usually set up a Limited Liability Company (Ltd) for the property and, in most of the B category cases, another for the operation of the shop as well. In the C category, the appearance, product range and everything else relating to the management, including opening hours (e.g., open in the morning and then in the late afternoon, when people are home from work), were decided n by the local community, which has usually set up an association dedicated to the project. In the C stores operations were carried out on a voluntary, unpaid basis. A third of the shops were relatively new (0–2 years old). However, surprisingly, more than a third of shops had been running for more than ten years. All C-shops, two A-shops and one B-shop were more than ten years old (see Table 2).

4.1 Local Shares: The Initial Community Involvement?

The financial basis for entering into cooperation with a wholesaler is raising money, often done by selling shares among the local community and businesses. Our study found that, especially in communities with A-shops, the local initiators were often local businessmen who preferred relatively large shares from fewer people to make it more efficient. Once they had found a shopkeeper (with the help of the wholesaler), they withdrew from involvement in the shop except for renting out of the premises. A local businessman who belonged to the initiating committee of an A-shop said, "It is important that we have a local store, but we do not want to be part of the daily running of it because that is something we know nothing about" (personal communication, January 12, 2022).

In the B-shops, the local initiators needed all the funds they could get, and therefore, all contributions were welcomed, and shares could be large or small. In most cases the B-shops initially planned to be A-shops. After buying and renovating the shop premises, they tried to find a private shopkeeper but failed and ended up having to take on the management of the shop as well. In the C-shops, collections and shares were also spread among a larger number of inhabitants. In the A- and B-shops, the local initiators often worked together in

other local activities, but in the C-shops, the initiating locals were also involved in other, larger, more business-like projects like community wind turbines, a folk high school, a local hostel, a culture house and a music venue. In most cases funds from these activities were also put into the store project (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Store Characteristics*

	Store A	**Store B**	**Store C**
Level of independence	Chain	Chain	Independent
Organization	Ltd (business)	Ltd (business)	Association (non-profit)
Location and demography	> 400 inhabitants (some depopulation)	Up to 400 inhabitants (depopulation)	Below 300 (influx of newcomers/tourists)
Turnover (gross revenue)	> 10 mil. DKK*	Around 5 mil. DKK*	½ - 3 mil. DKK*
Community activities	Sponsors	Sponsors	Sponsors and initiators
Shares and ownership	Narrow set of shareholders	Broad set of shareholders	Broad set of shareholders
Volunteering motives	social/loyalty reasons	economic, social and loyalty	economic, social, loyalty and community
Customers/volunteering	Mature ages	Mature ages	Mature/younger ages
Assortment	Ordinary groceries	Ordinary groceries	Ordinary groceries, local produce and extraordinary products
Kind of meeting place	Spontaneous	Spontaneous	Spontaneous and facilitated

*Danish Krone

4.2 Assortment and Functions of the Store and how They Vary

Besides selling traditional groceries as decided by the chain, most often, the A- and B-shops also had an extra assortment, like pharmacy sales, Lotto, the delivery of packages and some bread or meat from local producers. In the C-category, the assortment of traditional groceries was more limited. Shops in this category bought some goods from different wholesalers or other shops in the area and sold much local produce of all kinds, like food, wine, health products, etc. The C-shops found it difficult to obtain a pharmacy license or be agencies for Lotto or package conveyors because they had shorter opening hours and were

not part of a chain that could provide financial guarantees. The C-shops, however, all functioned as showrooms for local artisans, who sold their produce in the shops on commission.

In all the communities, the main motivation the local inhabitants and initiators had for saving and supporting the store was to keep it as a meeting place. They feared losing the spontaneous meeting place that a grocery store offers. A few A- and B-shops offered a seat with a coffee machine at the entrance, but it was felt that café-like set-ups were too much work. A few A-shops sold ready-made food like bread and sandwiches, mainly for takeaway. One B-shop had a table in the middle of the shop but had taken it away again since the management committee chairman thought that it attracted the wrong type of customer (e.g., alcoholics). Two A-shops have opened a gaming arcade to attract new customers and increase sales. In the C-shops, the function of a meeting place played a bigger role and was apparent in the shop in many ways. Usually, it took the form of a table and chairs, coffee, access to toys, newspapers and books, as well as seating facilities outside. Volunteers, other locals, and tourists used the facilities. The chairman of a C-shop said," Attracting and catering for summer guests make it possible for us to keep the store and meeting place open all year round, but we didn't do it for them but for us as a community" (personal communication, July 22, 2024).

These meeting places also served as places for holding local meetings and events, etc. All three store categories sponsored or took part in local events, though the C-shops initiated activities like 'Friday jazz', Halloween celebrations, etc. (see Table 2).

4.3 Volunteering in Different Ways

Voluntary work is not recorded by the wholesaler. However, in our study, we found volunteering in all the stores we visited. The A-stores can be managed without volunteers, several shopkeepers told us, but volunteering is important in securing and strengthening local loyalty to the shop. Several locals, especially pensioners, who wanted to support the new shopkeeper made themselves useful, met others, and showed up to unpack products and put them on shelves. In category B, volunteers are described as essential for the store's existence and even survival. They bring out goods, clean, stand at the check-out, unpack, and put products on shelves, etc. In more of the older shops, they often started as a larger group of volunteers (around fifteen people), but in many cases the number has declined as people have grown older. The management committees had not succeeded in persuading enough new volunteers to join, and they also struggled to find people to join the management committees, so there was often an overlap between the volunteers and members of the management committee. Volunteers in several of the category B shops also talked about burn-out and being overworked, as they had experienced having to manage the shop at times without a daily manager. "I have tried to retire for years, but we keep on being short of volunteers and even daily managers, so what are we to do?" a 75-year-old volunteer in a B-shop said (personal communication, May 29, 2022).

In category C shops, the shopkeeping task was shared among a larger and more varied (in age, gender, years living in the area, etc.) group of volunteers (20–30 people). People worked one shift a month or a week. Several volunteers also took part in various working groups, like a product group (finding new products), an interior decorating group, a baking group, an event group, etc. Thus, the management were also divided among a larger group of locals. It seemed easier to find volunteers in the C-villages because, according to their initiators (who were often still going strong), it was more fun. A thirty-year-old woman in a

village with a C-shop said, "I volunteer in the store because I can meet other people, and the shop also arrange activities where I can bring my children" (personal communication, May 29, 2022).

4.4 Getting Young People Involved

Thus, daily community involvement in A- and B-stores was carried out by a group of often elderly people who assisted in the shop. In category C shops, with a larger number of residents taking part, it was often a broader representation of locals who were involved. One challenge mentioned in several of the communities (especially the B-villages) was the difficulty of attracting younger customers, keeping their loyalty and engaging them as volunteers. Listening to the young people in our group interviews, they shopped where they could find exactly the products they liked. These might be convenience products, specialty products or locally produced products. When they heard the word *købmand* [little grocery store], they thought of boring, outdated, very conventional and overpriced products.

One young newcomer to one village said, "Perhaps the rural shop should take a different form in the future, like with an app or key to open the shop at any time to make it more flexible" (personal communication, February 15, 2023). What the young respondents missed were more meeting places and activities rather than just access to traditional groceries, so ,"If the shop can give us that, we will come," another newcomer said (personal communication, February 15, 2023).

4.5 Finding and Retaining a Shopkeeper

From media and shop Facebook pages, we early became aware of the difficulties in attracting and keeping a competent shopkeeper or daily manager, and our visits revealed that many local communities had to step in and take on a larger task than expected. We heard that professionally educated shopkeepers, usually men, wanted to become independent shopkeepers, but rather in larger shops with growth prospects, often in urban areas. When the B-stores could not find a shopkeeper, they looked for a daily manager, which was also difficult. The daily managers in the B-shops whom we met were, in most cases, women, who had applied for the job because it was difficult to find other jobs locally (very often in a male-dominated labor market). Most had some experience working in stores, but not necessarily grocery stores, and not as managers. Several of them were unprepared for how big a job it was to keep the store going—it was more than a nine-to-five job, and several were affected by stress and burn-out. Obviously, such experiences were not present in the C-stores, as the tasks were more spread out among community members.

4.6 Support and Advice

From both the examples in category A and category B, we heard stories that the chain membership could be restrictive, while for several stores, it was difficult to meet the requirements for long opening hours and the sale of certain products and quantities. Some proudly stated that they had stood up to the chain's representatives and sold goods at a lower price than the chain list prices or refused to receive certain products on offer which they knew would not be sold. "You have to have respect for yourself," one shopkeeper said (personal communication, January 10, 2022. A B-shop management committee chairman said, "We are not on the same wavelength… We have a village-community approach to our concept, whereas the chain has a business approach" (personal communication, April 29, 2022. Despite the chain bond, the B-shops especially felt isolated, as they found that the chain could not help with their challenges,

like keeping staff and adapting to community needs. They would like to hear how others had faced similar struggles and got inspiration from outside, which was not one of the chain's functions. Also, in the C category, the locals involved said that they often felt very alone, not knowing where to seek information and support if needed. Some had contacted other C-stores they had heard about or read about in the newspaper to get inspiration and hear how they tackled different matters, such as negotiating with pharmacies, package companies, etc. A few community groups had tried to contact the public business advisory services, who had said that they had no experience with community projects like these and did not give them advice.

4.7 Handling Crises

During the recent crisis (inflation and rising energy prices), one could fear for the survival of the small stores. During Covid, most of those stores in our study saw a rise in utilization, but also in gross revenue as more people working from home shopped locally. The energy crisis might cause more harm because of higher fixed expenses for energy and the high prices of goods. From examining the data on gross revenues in the wholesaler's list of shops, we found that the stores with communities as co-owners—typically the smallest and most vulnerable at first sight—did just as well as the remaining stores; stores without communities as co-owners that usually are much bigger.

One daily manager said, "I have worried day and night, but I have not felt so alone with it because I have easier access to support from the community" (personal communication, January 16, 23). Local inhabitants are described as very aware and concerned. Several communities have been ready to start a collection of funds locally to cover the higher energy bills and have assisted the manager in finding new solutions and ways to save energy. One management committee chairman said, "I think our stronger connection to the community has meant that people have not done all their shopping in bigger supermarkets but still shopped some of the time with us" (personal communication, January 15, 2023).

4.8 Place and Volumes

Gross revenue and turnover vary across the categories. A-shops have the biggest turnover, at more than 10 million DKK. B-shops lie in between (around 5 million DKK), and C-shops have the smallest (1/2-3 million DKK). Unfortunately, we do not have the net figures, but it is clear from our interviews that the B-shops are struggling. The C-shops, usually having less turnover but also fewer expenses, report a rise or stable profits, as do most A-shops. The C-shops have low costs due to the absence of paid, permanent staff, whereas the B-shops struggle to engage enough volunteers and cover their fixed staffing expenses. Two of our B-shops were threatened with immediate closure when we visited them.

The A-shops are situated in villages with over 400 inhabitants, often by main roads, with the potential of more daily walk-in customers than are present in the village itself. B-shops are found in villages with fewer than 400 inhabitants, and C-shops in villages with fewer than 300 inhabitants. Both the A- and B-shops are in villages inhabited by many locals, whereas the C-shop villages have more newcomers. The C-shops are also often situated in areas of natural beauty that attract newcomers and tourists. A, B and C stores are all situated in active communities characterized by many leisure and social arrangements. Some villages (the C-shop villages) are also engaged in other business-like community-initiated projects like wind turbines, folk high schools, hostels, music venues, etc.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Over a long period, village communities have been emptied of functions and services, including the local supply of groceries (Ashmore et al., 2017; Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). Over the years, many rural communities have done a lot to keep social and cultural life going, but nowadays, communities also need to enter the market arena and the sphere of business. As this study shows, however, market forces leading to centralization and closures of rural grocery stores can be counteracted only by very capable and strongly engaged local communities. From eighteen village visits, analysis of a large quantity of data, workshops with communities and knowledge persons in the field, and group interviews with rural youth and young families, we have gained insights into the background and well-being of several reorganized grocery stores in different parts of rural Denmark, all saved from closure by village communities taking part in their further operation.

We identified three types of community store:

1. Citizens have bought and renovated the store buildings and are renting them out to an independent shopkeeper in close collaboration with a supermarket chain.
2. Citizens have again bought the physical premises, but also run the shop themselves, still in collaboration with a supermarket chain.
3. An independent shop run by communities on their own organized as an association in contrast to the others, where the villagers have organized themselves as limited companies.

The A and B stores very much resemble the traditional rural store in products and appearance due to their collaboration with supermarket chains, whereas the C stores have a more varied range of products and activities and are also intended as a meeting places.

In the wholesalers' records most (2/3 of their stores with community involvement) are A-shops, whereas we see mostly B-shops. This might be explained by our choice of examples, as all our stores were visited in selected municipalities with many small villages. Usually, the A-shops can be found in larger villages, whereas the B and C concepts are all that is possible for smaller villages.

5.1 Comparison with UK Stores

There is very limited published research on community involvement in rural stores. Only in the UK have we found such studies (Plunkett Foundation, 2021, Calderwood & Davies, 2012, 2013). When comparing the Danish and the UK stores (at least shops being members of the Plunkett Foundation), we found a major difference that indicates the influence of national contexts behind the respective concepts for a local store. An initial comparison with the UK's shops revealed that only 5% of UK shops are tenanted shops with a private shopkeeper, whereas this is the most common in Denmark (i.e., the A-shop). The remaining UK shops are more like the Danish C-shops in being independent, having a broader base of local shareholders, emphasizing the social functions, and mainly located in southern England, with newcomers and resourceful citizens). However, like the Danish B-shops, the English shops often employ staff more than Danish C-shops would. A main challenge in the UK was that most shops rented the shop premises, leaving them vulnerable, whereas all the Danish shops were started by community ownership of the buildings.

In the Danish countryside, each type of community store has its challenges: attracting the right shopkeeper or tenant (A-shops), attracting and retaining the daily manager, as well as volunteers, and securing the general management and funding (B-shops), and attracting the younger generations as loyal customers or volunteers (A and B-shops). Common to all three types of stores are the limited possibilities for advice on how to run a community store.

In Denmark, there is no mediator like the Plunkett Foundation, which is based on charity and social engagement in a field of business. The UK stores have a place to go for advice for their activity as community stores. In the Danish case, the main source of advice is the supermarket chain. One might say that the relationships with the Danish wholesaler has made it possible for many traditional communities to maintain the local grocery store. However, it is also clear that this demands a certain size or location of the community, including to attract a shopkeeper (as tenant) or a daily manager who will stay put.

5.2 Local Capacities

In small communities far from the main roads, the need for access to a local grocery store may be the greatest, but it is out of reach for many local communities. This is unless the community is particularly skilled and able to manage on its own, which might not be the usual picture in many rural areas. It can seem like a paradox that the smaller your local community is, the more capacities you need to have. All communities involved in saving the rural store in this study are and need to be active and able to mobilize around a common cause. They are all at least "Yellow Communities" according to the categorization of local capacities by Tanvig & Herslund (2020) mentioned earlier in the paper, which were characterized by trust, knowledge-sharing and the ability to mobilize collective action.

In all the villages, the community collected funds to buy the store premises and renovate them to attract a private shopkeeper who could rent them more cheaply and thus keep a traditional rural store going. However, in many of these villages, cheap rents were not enough to attract a private shopkeeper, and the local community had to go into the actual running of the store. Thus, in larger villages, communities must "only" engage with "financial capital" (the buildings), whereas in smaller villages they must also take on the running of the shop, which demands more of both social and human capital. All communities were able to mobilize around the common cause of saving their rural store and thus had a good deal of social capital. In the A- and B-shops, the local initiators often also worked together on other local projects, however, in the C-shops the initiating locals also were involved in other larger projects that they related more "strategically" to the "grocery store project." Some of these projects provided some of the initial financial capital, but more importantly they provided social capital in the form of already knit networks among residents (entrepreneurial people, artists, and younger families) working together in larger business-like projects forming a more "greenish capacity" according to the typology by Tanvig & Herslund (2020). This included counted communities that, on top of mobilization around social activities, also could initiate activities in the field of business or in larger collective projects.

5.3 Recommendations and Further Research

What all communities identify as a key challenge is the lack of knowledge and networks around running a community grocery store. In the idea of neo-endogenous rural development (Ray, 2006), local capacities should not work in isolation (endogenously) but also be able to draw on and integrate resources from

the outside society (Georgios et al., 2021; Shucksmith, 2010). In the Tanvig and Herslund typology, "green" communities entering the market sphere are able to draw in knowledge and powerful individuals from outside, particularly because they have many skilled newcomers from outside who are involved at least in the store's rejuvenation. A recommendation for practice as well as a theme for new research could be to establish a network and a supporting scheme for the exchange of knowledge, advice and capacity building among and targeted at rural communities that want to secure their grocery delivery and other service and economic activities.

More attention must be paid to the capacities of local communities and how to strengthen them to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of welfare services as well as markets.

However, one can also ask whether such research should be about physical grocery stores alone. When we have emphasized the stores, this is due to their function as a meeting place that seems important to community life, as well as to the younger generations in rural areas.

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