Art and craft work; facilitating livelihoods to sustain rural futures

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This paper explores rural-based artists’ and craft workers strategies to achieve sustainable livelihoods in the rural amid growing awareness of their contribution to local rural development. Drawing on the concept of co-production, it interprets accounts from artists and craft workers from the West of Ireland as well as from a range of key individuals involved in production and promotion of the arts and crafts to illustrate the importance of appropriate support structures for artists and craft workers from both creative development and rural sustainability perspectives. The paper discusses the precarious nature of livelihoods based on arts and craft work in rural contexts, and the vulnerability of the sector to economic trends in terms of the wider implications for rural localities and communities that benefit from their activities and their presence in diverse ways. It examines the impact of policy and institutional strategies which on the one hand indicate development potential both for, and emerging from, the arts and crafts sector in the rural, but on the other provide supports that are constrained by technocratic structures and limited funding. It contends that a significant creative resource for the rural remains underutilized, and argues for more sustained and flexible forms of support based on a concept of arts and craft endeavours as catalysts for creative, innovative and cost-effective forms of rural development and sustainability, co-produced at a range of spatial scales but driven mainly from within the relevant local context.

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