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Communities Against Climate Change: Exploring Resilience in Rural Scotland

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What does do empowered communities look like? And what does it mean to develop community resilience in the face of local and global challenges, especially climate change? Rosanna Harvey-Crawford travelled to rural Scotland to explore the community projects making this concept a reality and to speak to those driving them.

As the global population becomes increasingly urban, what will happen to those who choose to stay in rural areas? In the context of rural Scotland, communities are often overlooked and underfunded. Can rural community life be sustained in the face of challenges such as the closure of local services, unemployment, and a lack of affordable housing, along with continued depopulation to urban areas? In June 2019, I travelled to the Isle of Lewis to conduct fieldwork on resilience in community trusts and to find answers to these questions. Through my research I hoped to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing these communities and how they are responding to them.

Strength in numbers: empowering communities

A community trust is an organisation of local residents who have come together around a specific project. Examples include the purchase of land or disused public buildings by a community, the creation of a community growing space, or the set-up of a renewable energy project (often wind turbines). The trusts have a common aim of working towards the sustainable development of the community. Projects like these have been enabled by the Scottish Government's Community Empowerment Act of 2015, but critically also by the Land Reform Act of 2003, which introduced the Community Right to Buy. It is written into the Act's legislation that community-bought land must be managed sustainably. There has been a large uptake of buyouts across the Highlands and Islands (the northernmost region of Scotland), often coupled with renewable energy projects as this provides an income stream. Community-led climate action is also funded through the Climate Challenge Fund, founded in 2008, which provides funding for shorter-term projects like growing spaces or energy-saving initiatives.

Both the Community Empowerment and Land Reform Acts were brought in by the Scottish Government to address the unusually high concentration of land ownership that exists in Scotland. It is estimated that around 432 individuals own 50 per cent of private land in rural Scotland – in other words, half of an important resource is owned by 0.008 per cent of the population. Moreover, many of these landowners have been labelled as "absentee" landlords, with few connections to the communities who live on the land they own.

It is estimated that around 432 individuals [0.008 per cent of the population] own 50 per cent of private land in rural Scotland.

While the Scottish National Party (SNP) has shown a commitment to empowering communities and redressing the balance of land ownership in Scotland, the UK remains one of the most centralised countries in Europe, and of any advanced democracy. All the while local authorities across the country continue to endure slashed budgets and enjoy few decision-making powers. On the ground, this has brought about the closure of many local services, particularly in rural communities. Although the Highlands and Islands are often characterised as a tourist destination, romanticised for its "remoteness" and "wildness", this characterisation erases the communities that live there, and their struggles (and victories) in tackling depopulation, dwindling local services, and a challenging climate.

What does it mean to be "resilient"?

This context provides an interesting setting in which to explore the development of community resilience in community trusts. Resilience has increasingly become a policy buzzword, even more so in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although resilience has been long utilised in biology and ecology, it has been applied to social systems (notably by Holling in the early 1970s), looking at a system's ability to absorb change and disturbance. The social ecological vein of the literature consequently continued to explore "bounce back" and adaptive capacity. Community resilience is similarly challenging to define, however through roundtable discussions and empirical research, Magis has established the following definition:

"Community resilience is the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise. Members of resilient communities intentionally develop personal and collective capacity that they engage to respond to and influence change, to sustain and renew the community, and to develop new trajectories for the communities' future."

For communities to develop capacity, their resources must have some financial element to reduce vulnerability to economic shocks, as in most rural regions the most common sources of risk are economic risk or policy risk. Revell and Dinnie conceptualise community resilience as the local economy being connected with, and stewarding, the local environment, emphasising a need for the community to be connected to nature. Skeratt has highlighted that building resilience should be seen as a process or an ability, not an outcome, and this process has been discussed in relation to the transformation or transition of communities to low-carbon lifestyles in response to climate change. Finally, to develop community resilience, social capital (buy-in and participation) is essential, a feature Magis describes as "collective effort to accomplish specific community objectives." With these conceptual elements in mind, we can assess the balance of social, economic, and ecological community resilience in the trusts as well as their ability to respond to and influence change.

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Struggles over wind

An all-important question for community trusts is one of revenue, which they need to be able employ staff, run projects or maintain any community assets. Therefore, developing capacity in the trusts is closely related to the local economy and economic resilience.

Over the course of two windy weeks on the Isle of Lewis, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with volunteers and staff members at different trusts, who were running a variety of projects. I visited four different trusts, two large trusts (3000 people) and two smaller ones (a few hundred people), where I spoke to volunteers and staff members who were running a variety of projects. Three of the trusts I visited (the two large trusts and one small one), had erected their own wind turbines, and one of the smaller trusts had brought the local school into community ownership following its closure.

While wind turbines have been a popular option for communities to generate revenue (as well as contributing to cleaner energy in the UK as the energy is fed onto the National Grid), speaking to the trust staff made it clear that the process had been highly challenging. Securing loans, processing paperwork, and mediating with landowners were tasks mostly done on a voluntary basis and ended up taking a number of years. One staff member, Sam, described the project as “a black hole…it sucks all your time and resources into it”.

Interestingly, two of the community wind projects had been catalysed by large energy companies (such as the multinational company, Amec) attempting to secure land for large scale commercial wind farms, which the communities were emphatically against. One board member, Martha, explained “the fact that you don’t own the land, you care take the land, and you should pass it on to your children and your grandchildren…there were very deep emotions that came out, it was quite interesting”. Martha was referring to the traditional Scottish land tenure system of crofting, in which smallholders rent their unit of agricultural land from a landowner and share common grazing land. The general consensus at the trusts was that if there was going to be a wind farm, the community should “get the money”.

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At the other large trust, the decision had been taken to build a wind farm to prevent further “scrabbling around” for money to fund small projects. However, once their plans were underway, there was a struggle over the lease of the land, which had been promised to Amec. Once again, the community were against a commercial wind farm but supported a community development – in the end, the trust prevailed and the community wind farm was built. The whole journey from idea to construction had taken almost 10 years. The support from the communities speaks to the level of buy-in these projects had generated, and needed. It also highlights an attitude towards green infrastructure that speaks to the importance of place and connection to the land. Questions of ownership and the importance of profit accruing to the community as opposed to elsewhere were vital. Most importantly, these events showed that when necessary, these communities could come together and, as Magis put it, “respond to and influence change”.

Although essential, securing a sustainable (in all senses of the word) income stream was a long and difficult process. In order to begin developing economic resilience and improving the local economy, community buy-in was clearly the necessary catalyst for action at the trusts.

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Confronting challenges

For each of the community trusts, economic development of the trust area was a cornerstone of their aims and closely tied to developing social resilience. Revenue generated from the wind turbines allowed the trusts to give out grants to community members wishing to start small businesses or projects. A familiar theme that ran through the interviews highlighted that communities had been “totally stripped of services”, from schools and post offices to shops and general meeting places. Unemployment, depopulation, and loneliness (especially amongst the elderly) were key problems. Although there were variations between the different trusts’ visions, they had a common thread of “sustaining the community”, developing the area sustainably and creating a “thriving and well-connected community”.

> *Investing in the community, creating jobs, and making it an appealing place to live was considered extremely important in order to address depopulation.*

Providing community hubs, bus services for residents and events were some of the most popular endeavours, alongside developing more infrastructure for tourists to bring money into the community. Investing in the community, creating jobs, and making it an appealing place to live was considered extremely important in order to address depopulation. Sean, a trust manager, summed it up as “keeping our young people here and attracting young families to move here too”.

There was also a more intangible feeling that a sense of community was being lost. Certain interviewees felt that the loss of traditional crofting culture was to blame. Crofting was described by a staff member, Sam, as the "glue which keeps everybody together", but that a reduction in communal activities, like attending church and crofting, and the busyness of modern life meant people were more interested in their "own agendas" than what was going on in the community. Similarly, Sean, attributed the loss of communal crofting activities like sheep shearing and peat cutting to the current lack of social cohesion on the island. In addition to addressing the loss of certain social-cultural activities was a desire to preserve the local language, Gaelic. In this way, it is possible to see a connection to the ecological activities the trusts were running: growing projects, repairing paths and dry-stone walls, planting native woodland. These activities were tied up with preserving the local area and collective identity, challenging the changing nature of the community.

Motivations – social, or ecological?

Alastair, who ran a growing project at one of the small trusts, expressed pride that the project had become "a proper community affair", especially when "the community centred ethos of the island is falling away a bit". However, he emphasised the interest was in growing the produce and the opportunity for interaction, as opposed to the "carbon side of things" that the project funder (Climate Challenge Fund) was pushing. A condition of the funding was encouraging "carbon literacy" in the community, in which Alastair said there was very little interest. Like the wind turbines, environmental objectives are centred on making the community a better place to live, as opposed to being connected to climate change.

> *By fostering communal activities, the trusts were responding to contemporary challenges by drawing on a tradition of communal care for the environment.*

It's relatively common to hear people complaining there's no sense of community in modern life. However, on Lewis, this concern was tied up in the loss of a certain way of life, compounded by increasing loneliness and the withdrawal of local services. Crofting is inherently dependent on and connected to the local environment. By fostering communal activities like food growing, beach clean ups and tree planting alongside improved local services, the trusts were responding to contemporary challenges by drawing on a tradition of communal care for the environment. In this way, they had begun the work to "sustain and renew the community", also central to Magis's definition of community resilience.

Responsibilisation or resilience?

When I first approached my analysis, I felt conflicted about the lengths these trusts were having to go to in order to provide services that would usually fall within the remit of a local authority. As well as bus services, two of the trusts were planning to build care facilities for the elderly as there was a shortage on the island. Howell has termed this process "responsibilisation", whereby communities step into the shoes of the local authority, often under the guise of "community empowerment". The narrative of community empowerment also erases the immense amount of work, done almost entirely voluntarily by a few individuals, to secure a land buyout or a community wind development. However, this point of view was challenged by staff members at different trusts. Sean reflected that "up until 1975, we had a very remote county council then, we didn't have bin collections or anything like that. So, this community would take care of itself and there's a long tradition of that." Meanwhile, Mark, a project officer at a small trust felt that "you're empowering the local community to look after itself. Very often you find you find that cash-strapped councils, cash-strapped government…these bodies can't do it all!

In many senses, the communities were developing resilience, according to the criteria set out by Magis. However, it is important to remember Skerratt's warning to see resilience as a process and not an outcome. Revenue from the turbines and planned tourist infrastructure would be fed into the community to address the issues of unemployment and depopulation, attracting families and encouraging young people to stay instead of moving to the city. In spite of concerns about a sense of community being lost, when they were confronted with a challenge (be it an unpopular commercial wind development or closure of local services), the communities were able to come together and instigate change. Steps were being taken to address isolation and improve social cohesion. The *process* of resilience had undoubtedly begun.

> *Facing up to the threat and uncertainty of climate change means acknowledging we will all have to take steps to become more sustainable and resilient.*

The importance of place

These encounters re-emphasised the importance of place when thinking about resilience and sustainability. Having grown up in rural southern Scotland, I thought I was well-versed in the challenges rural Scottish communities faced, but my fieldwork on Lewis showed the importance of listening to different local perspectives. Facing up to the threat and uncertainty of climate change means acknowledging we will all have to take steps to become more sustainable and resilient. However, it is important to consider how to motivate and empower communities to take these steps. Clearly, on Lewis, the passion for preserving a local place, its culture, and its community, was the driving force behind their work and the reason they were developing resilience, as opposed to the (for the time being) existential threat of climate change. Understanding these different motivations and the importance of place is vital to encourage collective action on climate change. To an outsider, a wind turbine may stand for climate change mitigation (or an eyesore), but locally it signifies an effort of community resilience.

Names have been changed.

Rosanna has worked as a researcher and project coordinator at the University of Edinburgh for the past two years. She will shortly be taking up a post at Keep Scotland Beautiful. Rosanna co-runs an online collective, Embra Collective, and is broadly interested in political ecology, climate justice and sustainable food systems. Find her on Twitter @RoseHCrawford.

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