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Changing community perceptions of sustainable rural development in Scotland

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Abstract

The growing popularity of community land trusts as a mechanism for greater community participation in the control of local improvement is a particularly significant aspect of sustainable rural development in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Combining purposive selective interviews with members of a local Land Trust, observations at public meetings, and a review of recent literature on the development of the region, a case study of the Galson Estate Trust, Isle of Lewis, Scotland, is presented. Community ownership of land is seen as being instrumental in the shift in perceptions from short-term, marginal, externally-dependent activities towards solutions that are long-term (as indicated by schemes for renewable energy generation and environmental enhancement), core identity (seen as greater community confidence and enhanced local democracy) and locally driven developmental priorities (supported by revenue income streams). The process of local empowerment accompanying this shift in perceptions is regarded as having substantial benefits for social capital and skills acquisition at the community level. Early results from Trust activities indicate that ownership of the land, together with the capacity-building process of community participation in its management, has encouraged growth in a sense of local empowerment, together with providing employment, confidence, and other social improvements.

Keywords: Community, land, rural, sustainability, localism, crofting, energy

1.0 Introduction

A major issue in the pursuit of sustainable development for rural communities has been the need to secure a measure of resilience to unwanted change, which is often externally driven. This resilience has been sought through utilising the human and natural resources of the area in a manner that sensitively exploits the ability of these resources to adapt to and benefit from change. This study looks at a case study of one such rural community and the conclusions that can be drawn from its responses to change.

Historically, the communities of the Crofting Counties of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland have been closely associated with extensive agriculture (low input/low output) and a complementary high level of nature-conservation-value land use (Rennie, 1991; Scottish Crofters Union/Royal Society for the Protection of Birds [SCU/RSPB], 1992). Over the past two centuries an evolutionary trend

can be traced in community perspectives relating both to attitudes towards the conservation of the natural environment (Smout, 1990) and in the understanding of the meaning(s) of sustainable development (Rennie, 2008) with relationship to these rural communities. Broadly speaking, regional attitudes have moved from a post WW II 'food security' perspective, with agricultural self-sufficiency being a key criterion of a sustainable rural society, to a perspective that encompasses broader definitions of the countryside in terms land-use diversity, 'sustainability' and 'development' (Nicol, 1998).

Concepts of sustainable development in the crofting communities of Scotland have followed this broad trend in society as a whole, moving from subsistence agriculture as the key indicator, to a basket of factors including economic goals (Copus & Crabtree, 1996), social measures (Parman, 1990), and through environmental lenses, as ways of trying to understand the human interaction with the natural environment (Beaufoy et al, 1994). A number of in-depth studies (Dòthchas, 2001) have attempted to evaluate specific crofting communities to determine appropriate strategic approaches for sustainable development in areas that are economically fragile but internationally recognised for the quality of their natural environment. These studies have supported the consideration of sustainable *community* development as an essential component of sustainability, as proposed by Bridger & Luloff (1999), and increasingly there has been a shift towards encouraging participation and decision-making of sustainable development issues at the local level of the community (rather than simply responsible national agencies). It has been noted that "... definitions of sustainable community development stress the importance of striking a balance between environmental concerns and development objectives while simultaneously enhancing local social relationships" (Bridger & Luloff, 1999, p. 381).

One of the early actions of the re-formed Scottish Parliament was to address the issue of land reform, particularly with regards to the crofting areas of the Highlands and Islands, which have a historical legacy of contested and highly emotive land ownership issues (Wightman, 2013). Both before and subsequent to the Land Reform Act of 2003, there has been an extensive contemporary dialogue on land reform in Scotland (Rennie, 1995) placing this regional debate in a national (Hoffman, 2013; Land Reform Review Group [LRRG], 2014) and an international context (Bryden & Geisler, 2007). In part, the debate has been centred on the political justification and process for enabling greater community responsibility in the ownership of land, and in part on the mechanisms for funding the purchase of private land by communities, and the ongoing management of this land for the common good. Although there were already three crofting estates under different forms of community ownership (Glendale Estate, established in 1908; Stornoway Trust Estate, in 1923; and the Assynt Trust in 1992), (MacAskill, 1999) the 2003 Land reform Act has enabled a dramatic growth in the ownership and management of crofting estates by the resident communities. Using both locally generated and external funds, over 50 communities throughout the Highlands and Islands have now acquired the title to the land on which their own communities reside, with a corresponding change in emphasis for management practices and development agendas (Hunter & MacLean, 2012).

Where previously many landed estates in the Highlands and Islands were viewed primarily as providing sport (shooting and fishing) for external guests, or for simply collecting croft rents, the new community-owned estates have based their business plans on perceived benefits and improvements for the local, resident community. The combined membership of the organisation founded by these Land Trusts, Community Land Scotland, now owns and currently manages

around 500,000 acres (Community Land Scotland [CLS], 2014). In the Outer Hebrides it is calculated that around 50% of all land is community owned and 75% of the population now live on community owned land. The main significance in legal terms is that the land-owning rights are transferred from a private owner to a non-profit-distributing company, owned by the community and managed by the democratic election by the members of that community. Land reform, as currently practiced in Scotland, is an attempt to create a more equal distribution of land ownership, and in effect “implies changes in the balance of power between the individual property owners, communities, and the state” (Bryden & Hart, 2000, p.3). Under the 1976 crofting Reform Act, crofters were enabled to purchase their land, but the long-established right of security of tenure has meant that the vast majority of crofters have chosen to remain tenants, paying an annual rent to a landowner. The popularity of community landownership initiatives, in contrast to the general lack of popularity of the crofters’ pre-existing right to purchase their individual croft, can be seen as a confirmation of a belief in the collective power to influence effective local development, without introducing new limitations to the individual’s management of their croftland.

In a study of the relationship between community resilience and community land ownership in Scotland (Skerratt, 2011), it was found that “The Scottish Government is committed to establishing resilient communities.... Evidence from the research shows that community land trusts are delivering that brief”. The report further identifies five areas of significant change in the perspectives and capacities of communities such as the Galson Estate Trust that are coeval with the establishment of community ownership. These are:

- 1) A shift from short-term to long-term responsibilities in the management of the estate (exemplified by the commitment to energy generation and environmental enhancement initiatives);
- 2) The shift from a dependence on funding from external agencies towards a business model that creates revenue streams and seeks partnerships (using the land as collateral);
- 3) A growing sense of community identity, concomitant with community democracy being able to exercise greater control over local social and economic issues (e.g., in the Galson case, this includes discussion of the possible release of land for social housing and also securing the contract management of local waste disposal on behalf of the Local Government).
- 4) The identification of revenue streams and local re-investment as a conscious step towards sustainability, a measure of independence, and a greater reliance on their own assets for development, contributing to a sense of reduction in geographical marginalisation from decision-making (a more localised approach to development).
- 5) The employment of staff rather than a continued reliance on volunteerism (the Galson Trust currently employs seven staff in various areas of development where no employment existed under previous private owners) and in the cultivation of appropriate skills, both on the (voluntary) Board and for those employed within the community (e.g. energy generation management, increased domestic energy efficiency, local waste handling).

In the early part of the 20th century, the whole of Lewis and Harris, the largest island in the Outer Hebrides, was owned by Lord Leverhume, and when he left

the region in 1924 he sold the whole island in a number of smaller parcels which became separate estates. Most of these estates are crofting areas (a type of tenant subsistence agriculture) in which the crofters' security of tenure is well established and legally guaranteed. In practice, this means that landowners have limited management rights, but are able to collect the annual croft rents. The area now known as Galson Estate Trust, was sold by Lord Leverhulme in 1924 for just £500—less than £1 for every hundred acres acquired. During the decade following WW I, there were numerous incidents of civil disruption and land agitation in the Highlands and Islands (Leneman, 1989) as returning war veterans and impoverished communities sought to realise government promises of access to land for agriculture and house-building. There were numerous land-raids and civil disruptions in Lewis, and there were several land re-settlement villages in the study-area of the Galson Estate. The Galson Estate subsequently passed into the hands of three families who were descendants of the new owner, and who lived on the isle of Lewis but not on the estate.

Following the 2003 Land Reform Act of the Scottish Government, which specifically enabled crofting communities to initiate legal proceedings to purchase the land on which they were tenants, a number of estates in the Highlands and Islands took initial steps to acquire the land, including the villages of the Galson Estate. Initially, the Galson Estate buy-out began as a so-called 'hostile' buy-out (the owners had not intended to sell) but in the course of subsequent negotiations, this became an amicable settlement. In 2004, this community organised a vote of the electorate over 16-years-of-age on the land-area covered by the estate, in which there was a 72% turnout and an 85% majority vote in favour of a buy-out. A Trust—a company limited by guarantee, with charitable status—(officially known as Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn) was then set-up, and a working group was formed to steer the negotiations to secure community ownership (Galson Estate Trust, 2014). Over the next few years, the working group negotiated grant and loan funding—usually through contractual agreements with public agencies and charities—towards the cost of purchasing the land, at a cost of £600,000. A second public ballot was then held and, with a 76% voter turnout, a Board of ten Trustees was elected from 30 nominees to manage the business of the company. In 2007, the 22 villages of the Galson Trust Estate, with a resident population of just over 2000, were successful in purchasing the 55,800 acre (22,600 hectare) estate in the north-west of the Isle of Lewis, Scotland.

From an early stage it was apparent that although the existing croft rents and other accrued income from the estate would enable the Galson Trust to remain solvent, additional income would be required for the development ambitions of the residents to be realised. During the public meetings, consultations, and meetings of the Trust during this period, it was apparent very early on that the members of this community had long-term aspirations for developing numerous social and economic activities on the estate, rather than just the short-term profits characterised by the majority of landowners, and this was reflected in some of the suggestions in the community consultation survey. Some of these activities which have a relevance to the concept of sustainable development, have already been set in motion by the Trust; including discussion of the identification of land for social housing, the hiring of employees to assist with a contract with the Local Authority to manage local domestic waste disposal; staff for local environmental management schemes and environmental education; and an employee to focus on the reduction of fuel poverty by achieving greater energy efficiency in local housing. Around 71% of householders in the islands (as compared with the Scottish average of 27%) indicate that they spend more than 10% of their income on fuel, (The Energy Advisory Service [TEAS], 2014),

while 18% are in severe fuel poverty, spending at least 20% of their income on fuel; and 11% are in extreme fuel poverty, spending 30% of their income on fuel. The production and efficient management of energy locally is therefore of prime community concern.

2.0 The Wind Resource

During the same period of time (2004) that the community was organising their bid to purchase the Galson Estate, an application was made by a private company to the Scottish Executive (the civil service arm of the Government in Scotland) to create the Lewis Wind Farm—the largest wind farm proposal in Europe at that time. The proposal was to construct 234 turbines, each turbine being a 90m conical steel tower, with 100m diameter rotor, and a 3MW generation capacity. Roughly half of these proposed wind turbines were to be located on the land of the Galson Estate in a deal with the syndicate who owned the land at that time. There was considerable concern in these communities, both about the impact of such a massive development locally, and also about the perceived loss of the ability to influence local development issues in general. The land-owners had done a deal with a company called Lewis Windpower—jointly set-up by two generating companies, AMEC and British Energy, to make land available for the wind farm development, but the communities were not fully consulted, and would realise minimum benefits from any developments.

There were many objections to such a large-scale operation, both from the local communities and indeed nationally, followed by a process of formal public enquiry which is well documented (Wemyss, 2011). In the end, amid considerable local opposition to the proposal, the wind-farm planning application was rejected. It might be expected that there would then be a residual apprehension—even hostility—towards any further plans for the erection of wind turbines. In actual fact, the initial 2004 feasibility study by the Trust into local community landownership management options, specifically identified wind and wave energy developments as possible sources of revenue funding for the estate. A subsequent community consultation (Handley, 2013) in 2013 on opportunities for local development indicated that 19% of the responses also gave a ‘high priority’ to renewable energy generation options. When the subsequent (current) turbine site was identified as potentially suitable, a ballot of the township in this location also returned a result strongly in favour of the development. This more positive view of community owned wind turbines over external commercial companies has also been identified in other localities in the region (Warren & McFadyen, 2010).

In 2008, the Trust established a wholly-owned subsidiary trading company called Galson Energy Ltd in order to progress the wind energy generating ambitions of the community and feed profits back into the main holding charity (the Trust). This resulted in full planning permission in 2009 for three wind turbines near the village of Ballantrushal, the first of which was successfully commissioned in early 2014. It is significant, that of only four individual objections to the planning proposal, only one was from a person living on the estate (MacKinnon, 2014) compared with very vociferous opposition (Wemyss, 2011) and 10,924 letters of objection (Pasqualetti, 2011, p. 211) to the Lewis Windpower proposal for turbines in the same geographical area.

The total cost of the first turbine phase was around £2.4 million (plus VAT) for the installation of a functioning 900 Kilowatt turbine, with two additional turbines planned for the same location. Start-up investment for the first turbine was through a cooperative bank loan, and efforts to raise funds for a further two turbines raised £750,000 through a share investors scheme open to the public. It

is anticipated that when fully operational, each turbine will produce revenue of up to £150,000 per year, yielding as much as £450,000 annually for re-investment in the local community. This income will be deployed to three key areas: (1) repaying the investment costs of the turbines; (2) creating a reserve fund for the Galson Trust; and (3) establishing a development fund to help facilitate selected community activities on the estate.

3.0 The Marine Resource

As part of a doctoral study on agents for change in the sustainable development of renewable energy in the Highlands and Islands region of Scotland (Billing, 2015) the commercial interest in wave energy in this region recommended the Galson Trust Estate area as one of a number of case studies.

The west coast of the Galson Estate Trust has attracted attention from three wave energy developers since 2005 due to its high energy marine environment and relatively unobstructed coastline. In 2011, a 4MW site and a 40MW site were leased by the Crown Estate Commission to two different wave energy developers; Voith Hydro Wavegen Ltd. and Aquamarine Power Ltd. For the Galson Estate Trust community, this resulted in a planning proposal for a long breakwater (up to a 1,300m) to be erected near a local slipway in the village of Shader and 40-50 Oyster devices (harnessing kinetic energy from the waves) to be placed within 500m of the shoreline (Aquamarine Power Ltd. Projects, 2013). Voith Hydro Wavegen was given full consent for a 4MW site at Shader, although it was also looking to gain consent for a 30MW site in attempt make the development more financially viable by attracting large investors. The 30MW would result in a 1,300m breakwater.

The Wavegen proposal resulted from the local Shader community initially contacting a local marine engineering consultant in 2005 to enquire if the slipway could be repaired and upgraded. Discussions between the community and the engineer resulted in a decision that one of the options for paying for the slipway, and providing enough protection from the harsh marine environment for its safe use, was to involve a wave energy developer (Personal Communications, 2012a). Without the skill and foresight of the Shader community and the local consultant, it is uncertain that Wavegen would have proposed the Shader site (Personal Communications, 2012b). Under the proposal, the village would gain an upgraded slipway and jetty (and a breakwater which could be developed for multi-purpose use), and The Galson Estate Trust would gain rent for the onshore station as well as compensation for increased road traffic and the subsequent disturbance during construction (Xodus Group, 2012). The project was shelved late in 2012, due to lack of investment and uncertainty over whether the regional interconnector (power cable) link between the mainland and the Western Isles would be approved by the Government (BBC News Scotland, 2012). However, the legacy of the proposal represents a shift in the perspectives of this small community. Previously, they would most likely have considered only applying for a government grant to repair the slipway, only for it to need repairing again at a future date. Now, the community is independently seeking an alternative, innovative and long-term solution.

In 2011, the Trust formalised the processes for developing renewable energy initiatives by hiring a full time Renewables Development Officer (Galson Estate Trust, 2014), shifting the responsibility for negotiations from skilled volunteers to professionals who have been employed to fill specific roles.

Aquamarine gained full planning permission for their 40MW site in October 2013 (Aquamarine, 2013). The Trust was involved in discussions with Aquamarine from the beginning of the Local Authority planning process, because they recognised that the development could provide income through leasing land for the shore-based station, compensation for works access, a quota of the value of the energy generated (Macleod, 2011, as well as the long term, indirect benefits such as shelter for small recreational boats. Through these benefits, the Trust may gain as the first full scale commercial wave energy farm in the region. The Trust has also had the foresight to enter the negotiations with an understanding that although the wave industry does not currently have much to offer in terms of direct community benefits, it may in the future (Personal Communications, 2012a). In contrast with the Lewis Wind farm proposal, the primary reasons that the wave generation proposal and the community initiative to establish wind turbines have met with enthusiastic regional support, is because of the substantially reduced scale of these initiatives and the greater involvement of, and benefits to, the local population.

Although the economic development options for the Trust are slowly increasing due to their persistence, ingenuity and learning, there is still an explicit intention that a balance needs to be sought between local economic prosperity and the deep connection that the communities hold with their traditional lifestyles, the land, and the seascape (Personal Communications, 2014).

4.0 Discussion

A pragmatic conceptualisation of sustainable communities has been described (Bridger & Luloff, 1999) where five inter-related dimensions are identified. These factors are: (1) an emphasis on increasing local economic diversity; (2) the importance of self-reliance (as distinct from self-sufficiency); (3) a reduction in energy use coupled to the careful management of waste; (4) protection and enhancement of the biological diversity of natural resources; and (5) a commitment to social justice housing, employment, access to public services, and local participation in local decision-making. There is an explicit understanding that the success of sustainability as a practical concept is multi-factorial, cross-sectorial, and a combination of empirical measurement with the acknowledgment of less tangible influences. The Trust has initiated development activities in each of these five areas (See Table 1).

Table 1: *Indicators of Greater Community Sustainability*

| Sustainability Targets | Galson Trust Achievements |
|---|---|
| Emphasis on increasing local economic diversity | Increased local employment |
| The importance of self-reliance | Ongoing achievements in independent revenue accrual |
| Reduction in energy use coupled to the careful management of waste | Management of schemes for household energy efficiency and for the suitable management of domestic waste |
| Protection and enhancement of the biological diversity of natural resources; | Management activities on a local nature reserve |
| A commitment to social justice housing, employment, access to public services, and local participation in local decision-making | Discussion of local initiatives for the creation of social housing and also the creation of a partnership project to address the relief of local fuel poverty |

In some respects, this more ‘rounded’ approach towards definitions of what constitutes “sustainable development” in rural communities, resonates with the concept of the ‘shadow landscape’ (Bryant et al, 2011), in which indicators of marginality, population movements, multiple-scales, and the social face(s) of interaction with the natural environment are combined. An earlier work of fiction by Gunn (1988) explored this concept of “the other landscape” as a pervasive sense of ‘layers’ of how we perceive and understand the Highland landscape, some of which are more/less visible and comprehensible than others. The concept of “shadow landscape” according to Bryant et al is perhaps less positive in its positioning of rural communities, but it attempts to make a comparative analysis of the multi-faceted perspectives of rural living in order to better understand the many inter-linked complexities. Supplementary approaches have emphasised the need to understand the actors (local and external)—their values, practices, and culture—in order to enhance our knowledge of the rural space (Madsen & Adriansen, 2004).

This builds upon earlier work that focuses on the community as a source of social organisation and local action (Bridger & Luloff, 2001). This approach also takes a broad view of “sustainability” as something which does not diminish the economic argument (Macmillan, 2000) but also encompasses both social equity and a healthy natural environment. More particularly, it emphasises the recognition of local communities as a driver in promoting local action and the cultivation of social capital – a factor considered to be undermined by the historic legacy of concentration of private landownership in the Scottish Highlands and Islands (Bryden, 1996). Specifically, the recent huge growth in community land ownership can be argued as a response through which “*in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world, the search for a geographically based community becomes a means of exerting some control over at least a portion of one’s life.*” (Bridger & Luloff, 2001, p. 460). The Scottish Government have recently indicated that they wish to further extension of land reform and “the right to buy” extended to more community groups (Land Reform Review Group [LRRG], 2014).

In contrast to the common perception in which community action is only prompted by a crisis, the movement to purchase the Galson Estate was stimulated by a sense of optimism generated by the Land reform Act 2002, and the perceived benefits for local opportunities. This is consistent with data noted by Skerratt (2013) in her review of community resilience in the context of Scottish land reform, showing that communities adopted deliberate proactive actions as an essential component to enhance their own sustainability, rather than simply reacting to external threats. This in turn led to the perception of the commercial wind-farm development as an impediment to greater local participation and control. This was accompanied by a public awareness that collective action to acquire and manage the estate offered greater possibilities for long-term sustainability, rather than simply short-term profits. This conflict between the long-term, collective good, versus the short-term gain to the individual is a feature of all of the recent community trust buy-outs. In the specific case of the Galson Estate Trust, it is clear (through the dialogue of community and public meetings) that the collective trust and collaboration associated in forming the Trust has led to a strengthening of the social capital of the 22 villages on the estate. This is evident in three main ways; firstly in the enhanced level of public engagement with the work of the Trust through business meetings and subsidiary activities; secondly through the mobilisation of skills and services from individuals and groups in the community (e.g., making use of volunteers and retirees); thirdly, in the increased activity of clubs, societies and events within the community. The operational management of the Trust, run by

a volunteer Board employing professional staff, is perceived by the community (through interviews and public meetings) to provide realistic alternatives to the regional failure of market mechanisms, the disinclination of private landowners to engage in certain issues, and other external forces of negative change in a very rural area.

The ability of a community to respond to change is recognised as a significant contributory factor in social sustainability and termed 'resilience'. Community resilience has been defined as:

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.*" (Magis, 2010, p. 402 emphasis added).

The Galson Trust case study appears to be consistent with the reflections of Skerratt (2011) that several communities in the Highlands and Islands (of Scotland) have utilised the mechanism of the Community Land Trust to identify independent revenue streams (often from renewable energy generation) and to use these for local (re-)investment. This measure of economic independence is associated with a growing community confidence and sense of self-identity as well as a shift in attitudes towards long-term developmental aims and a decreased dependency upon external funding sources. Specifically, there is a growing realisation, as evidenced in local public meetings and in the regional media, that the association between community land ownership and new opportunities to engage in alternative energy generation can provide an independent source of revenue to enable the community to progress long-term developmental goals.

The revenue from the community wind turbine(s) is considered by the Trust Board to be both a commitment to self-managing long-term community sustainability, and a reward for this shift in development perspective. The enabling legislation that has allowed the Galson Estate Trust (and other communities) to develop their natural assets for the benefit of the local community as a whole has helped to dispel "*the view routinely trotted out by Scotland's landed elite that it is land use rather than land ownership that matters.*" (Macleod, 2014, p. 17). Significantly, since we began the preparation of this publication, the Scottish Government has released the far-reaching final report of the Land Reform Review Group (LRRG, 2014) which, among other recommendations is seeking to extend the sorts of significant benefits that have been experienced by the Galson Estate Trust to other people, through the transfer of another one-million acres of Scottish land into community ownership. Implicit in the title of this report—"The Land of Scotland and the Common Good"—is the notion of the collective benefits of public social capital and local empowerment that can accrue following the process of successfully acquiring community land ownership. This close symmetry of theory and practice offers a rich area of further research for the associations between community assets, social capital, and the pursuit of sustainable rural development.

5.0 Conclusion

The recent socio-political changes associated with land reform in Scotland, especially in the Highlands and Islands, have provided an important platform for greater public awareness of opportunities for the long-term sustainability of rural communities in this region. This, in combination with new opportunities to capitalise on the natural resources of the region for the generation of energy (predominantly wind and marine sources) is also perceived to have improved the level of resilience of these rural communities. In particular, the acquisition of community land ownership has provided: (a) a vehicle for the widespread public engagement with a more democratic and consultative approach to local development issues; (b) the physical asset of the community land, both as a source of income and as a base for further development; and (c) the legal and physical ability to initiate revenue-raising initiatives, such as the generation of energy from local resources, which can be used to support social and economic benefits in the community. This association of the community owning the land assets and the ability to generate independent streams of community income is a catalyst for changing how these communities are beginning to re-conceive the concepts of rural sustainability and community resilience.

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