The Fall and Rise of the Scottish Community

Overview

Community-based organisations (i.e. bodies owned and controlled by a membership open to all in their geographical community) are distinct from intentional communities, which are generally self-selective. Despite suffering potentially terminal decline during the 20th century, community organisations are now thriving in Scotland and have received significant encouragement from government in recent years. This paper charts this rise and some of the opportunities they present for regeneration and renewal and offers some comparisons with their intentional counterparts.

Historical Background

The way in which Scottish Highlanders experienced community for much of the historic period was through the clan system. These networks of extended kin relationships formed the backbone of medieval society and even as late as the 17th century this Celtic way of life probably had at least as much in common with traditional Native American lifestyles as it did with the English-speaking populations of Lowland Scotland of the time.[i]

The clans were broken up in the aftermath of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion and by the subsequent Highland Clearances that led to communal systems of land holding being replaced by landed estates owned in perpetuity by aristocratic families. The result of these traumatic changes was predictable. Large scale emigration to cities and distant lands became the norm. By the 1960s levels of earnings, unemployment and continuing net migration were so bad that a government agency, today called Highland and Islands Enterprise, was set up to combat them.[ii]

In the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh the idea of community enterprise fared little better. The growing numbers of urban poor sought to improve their position through the activities of trade unions. The provision of key services (including housing for the majority) was seen as the responsibility of the state and of local authorities. Locally-based collective action was, generally speaking, not given a high priority.

By the latter half of the 20th century these "local" authorities had also abandoned their community roots, becoming (as they remain) amongst the largest in Europe, serving on average a population of 115,000 and in the view of some, creating a "democratic deficit". (Compared to the lowest tiers of government in e.g. Norway, where the average is 4,000 and Germany where it is 7,000.) Perhaps the nadir for the idea of community in Scotland came during the 1980s when UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher announced that "there is no such thing as society".[iii]

However it is in the nature of things that renewal often comes amidst the rubble of the old and the rest of this paper charts the remarkable rejuvenation of community-based action in Scotland during the last two decades.

Development Trusts

Attempts to promote common ownership have a long history in the UK. Some movements shared ideals that are prominent amongst intentional communities today. In the 17th century the Ranters' beliefs were in social equality and the divinity inherent in all mankind. William Blake observed the crushing effects of commercialism on the human spirit in London in the 18th century and called for "Mutual" to build a "New Jerusalem" - a rallying cry answered in the following century by the Rochdale Pioneers, who founded the Co-operative movement.[iv]

Nevertheless, such was the state of affairs in the 20th century that when a group of community activists came together in London to found the development trusts movement[v] in the 1990s, the time was ripe for a new and radical attempt to bring community ownership and activism to the fore. A UK-based organisation was created to promote community-owned social enterprises and after a few years it had collected over 200 members.[1] However, there was still but one member from Scotland. Had community action died north of the border?

On investigation it was agreed that the newly devolved Government in Scotland, (created with a broad remit over Scottish affairs in 1997 and now based at the Holyrood Parliament building in Edinburgh), had encouraged systems of engaging with communities that were sufficiently different from those at Westminster, to merit the creation of an independent sister organisation. Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS) was duly established in 2003.

Far from discovering a landscape deserted by community activists, only a decade later DTAS now has nearly 200 members of its own located throughout the length and breadth of Scotland, and especially in areas where community-based enterprise has attempted to meet the challenges of market failure - whether in the deprived urban housing estates or in the remote and (by now) sparsely populated Highlands. A 2012 survey found that in that year DTAS members had a combined annual turnover of £39 million and owned £51 million in assets.

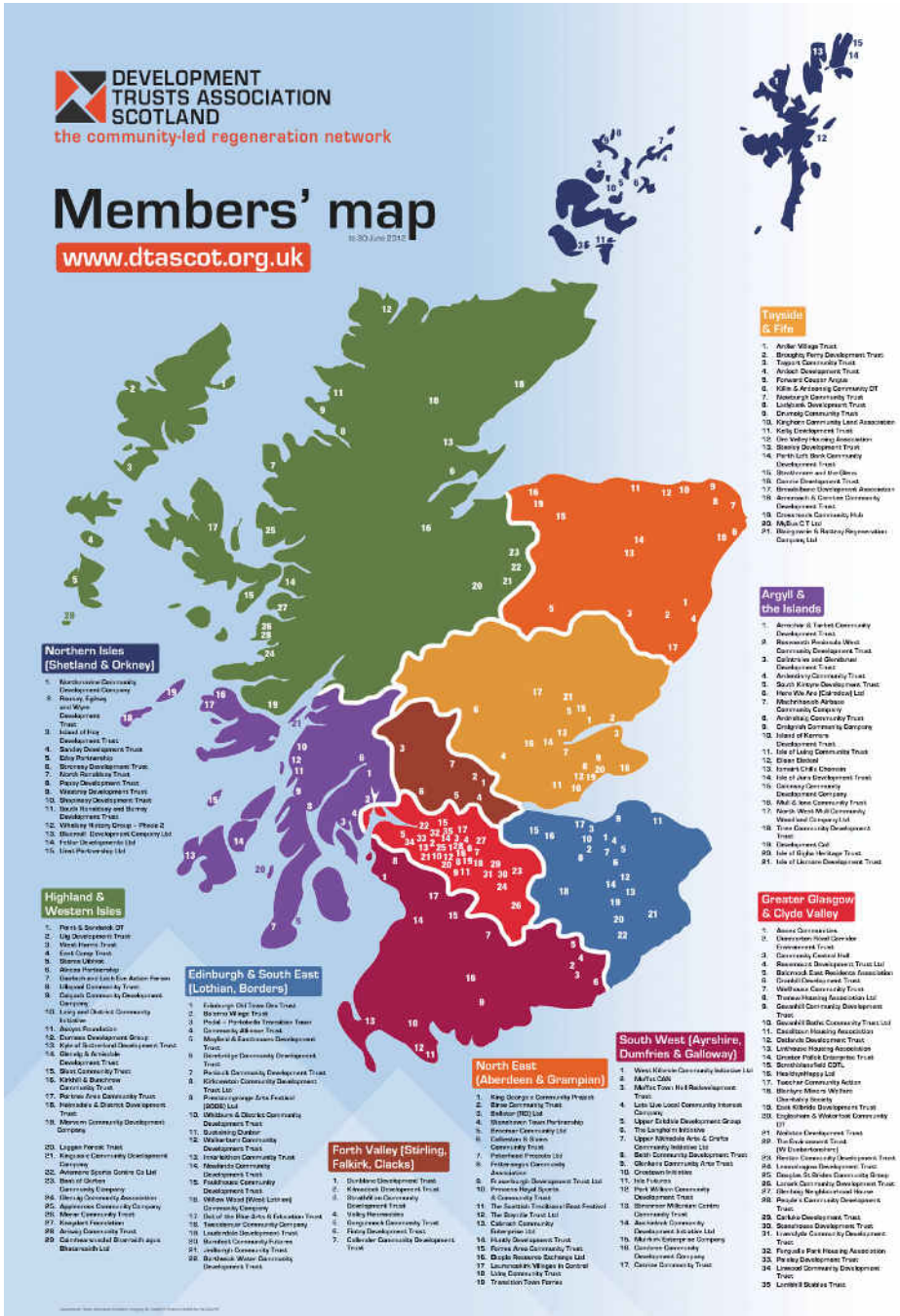
Scottish Community Alliance

Development trusts are the generalists of the communities movement in the UK. There are also other streams and in recent years the Scottish Community Alliance was created to coordinate the activities of groups and networks that have sprung up offering community-based solutions for specific challenges in relation to energy, transport, food, retailing, woodlands, housing, estate ownership, recycling and so on.

Community Energy Scotland is the body tasked with enabling community organisations to maximise the benefits available from renewable energy systems. Scotland has an abundance of potential, especially from wind power and marine systems such as wave and tidal. Financial benefits to communities come from two main streams - discretionary funds provided by mainstream developers and outright community ownership of turbines. A 2010 study identified the potential annual income to communities in Scotland being £35 million or

[1] Total UK membership is now circa 650 and in England the organising body has been re-branded as "Locality".

more by 2020 with the prospect of up to £100 million per annum if similar benefits could be obtained from offshore developments.[vi] The scale of existing benefits is sufficient for various trainings to have been offered on the planning and implementation of local community benefit funds.



Some of the community-based housing associations also have significant assets, as do members of Community Land Scotland. The work of bodies such as the Community Woodlands Association, the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens and the Scottish League of Credit Unions may have a less significant financial impact, but their members also provide important resources for the communities the serve. Overall, the bodies that subscribe to the Alliance have about 1,000 members.

There are also a significant number of community bodies beyond the membership of the Alliance. It has been estimated that there are nearly 76,000 assets owned by a total of 2,718 community-controlled organisations in Scotland, and with a combined value of just over £1.45 billion. Collectively these assets comprise 187,372 hectares in area, 95% of which is made up of 17 large rural estates under community ownership. About 73,000 of these assets are units of housing owned by 84 community-controlled housing associations, housing co-operatives and rural development trusts. A further 2,740 assets are those that bring benefit to, or can be accessed by, the whole community they are intended to serve, such as village halls.[vii]

Two-thirds of community-owned assets by value are to be found in remote rural areas, while those areas provide a home to just 6.5% of the population. In sharp contrast, just over one in every twenty community owned assets can be found in large urban areas where 39% of the population lives.

Comparison with Intentional Communities

Many of these community organisations have features commonly associated with intentional communities. These include: open, democratic processes; a focus on wider social benefits rather than simply on productivity or profits; community-led and independent of any kind of private or public sector control; non profit-distributing. They are usually also inclusive i.e. membership is typically open to all who live in a geographical area, although a small proportion are "communities of interest".

Decision making procedures tend to be less complex with a greater emphasis on majority rule and less on obtaining consensus than is often the case in an intentional group. This is partly because in some cases they are larger, with many hundreds of potential members (even if only a relatively small proportion are active) and partly because there is less of a need to offer any kind of notional "membership benefit" that includes a greater degree of control for any single individual. Membership is usually a given once an individual has chosen to move to the area.

It is hard to know the extent to which this has caused difficulties. Certainly, for many new community bodies there can be stresses and strains in for example dealing with the novel ideas involved, the economic opportunities provided by renewables and the difficulties of dealing with employee relations (especially in remoter rural areas where everyone tends to know everyone else's business - or at least thinks that they do). To date none of these problems appear to have been insuperable, although the modern community movement is still in its infancy.

The concept of an "anchor organisation" has been promoted of late. These are development trusts or other community bodies that typically invest in an important locally owned asset and provide a significant element of local leadership – a united voice which also holds and manages assets. They exist in both urban and rural areas and are seen by some as an ideal vehicle for promoting regeneration and renewal. Thus as a community body matures and takes on more responsibility it may, in some limited ways, begin to resemble an intentional community, especially if it is seen as a vital and enduring organisation of considerable local value to its employees, members and stakeholders. An urban example would be Inverclyde Community Development Trust, located on the western edge of the Glasgow conurbation. This organisation, which serves a relatively impoverished community, now employs 85 full time staff and has a turnover in excess of £3 million.

There are however few that would espouse any specific philosophical ideal - partly because this would tend to make membership less inclusive and partly because it may lead to a less successful fundraising strategy, give the public sector and UK Lottery's keenness to ensure that support is not provided to quasi-closed organisations masquerading as 'communities' (as these bodies would define them).

Government Response

The Alliance, working together with Scotland's leading community sector intermediaries argue for resources and decision making to be devolved to the most appropriate local level and for the achievements of the sector to be acknowledged as making a significant contribution towards improving the quality of life for everyone in Scotland.

Perhaps in a less challenging economic climate the community movement might not have received so much attention from central government as it has done, but whatever the reasons communities are increasingly being asked to take on much more responsibility for local affairs than used to be the case. There is evidence of this across many areas of Scottish Government policy as outlined below.

Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill

Known as CERB to its friends, this bill has significant potential to encourage the community ownership and control of land and other assets, and the capacity to generate income streams that are independent of the state. These are critical issues in determining the degree to which a community becomes "empowered". This process, so the Alliance believes, should based on a number of first principles: [viii]

• **Self-determination**. Local people being allowed to determine for themselves how their community is defined and which structures are best suited to take forward their plans.

• **Local people leading.** Community empowerment best occurs when local people lead the process in a bottom-up activity. This is in contrast to regeneration efforts led by outside consultants and agencies.

• **Subsidiarity.** This is the proposition that a matter ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest, or least centralised authority capable of addressing that matter effectively. (The word as defined by the OED is "that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level.[2])

There already exists a "Community Right to Buy" land that comes on the market in rural Scotland. This, as set out in the existing Land Reform Act is essentially a community right to register an interest, with the community being given the first opportunity to purchase (at market value) should the property come up for sale. CERB and perhaps also the land reform review will consider whether and how this right should be extended to urban areas as well.

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[2] Those tempted to view the word "subsidiarity" as no more than Euro-jargon should read **"**In Defence of Subsidiarity**"** by George MacDonald Ross at www.senscot.net/. The idea was apparently mooted by Pope Pius XI in 1931.

Land Reform Review

The SNP manifesto contained a commitment to the review of the Land Reform Act and the re-introduction of the Scottish Community Land Fund (both originally created by the earlier Labour/Liberal Democrat administration). Part of the review group's remit is to "assist with the acquisition and management of land (and also land assets) by communities, to make stronger, more resilient, and independent communities which have an even greater stake in their development".

This ongoing work will attempt to build on recent successes, which include the extraordinary transformations of various Highland estates which have been bought up by community bodies. Examples include the island of Gigha, the Knoydart Foundation and Stòras Uibhist in the Outer Hebrides.

This last example is a development trust that is so large you can see it from space! Stòras Uibhist (the store of Uist) is a collective term for various related organisations that form the community-owned group ownership of the South Uist Estate, which has a population in the vicinity of 3,000. The estate extends to 93,000 acres of land covering almost the whole of the islands of Benbecula, Eriskay and South Uist. It is home to over 850 tenant crofters and numerous businesses in the aquaculture, agriculture, fishing, food processing, construction, tourism and service sectors. This organisation was created to oversee a £4.5million community buy-out of the estate that took place in November 2006.

They are by no means alone. More than half of the landmass of the Outer Hebrides is now community owned, a dramatic change from a century ago when absentee private landowners were the norm. (The Stornoway Trust was formed in the 1920s but the remainder of these buyouts have happened in the last two decades and more are planned.) It has become clear that community ownership has the potential to transform decaying economies and cultures in the west Highlands and that the experiment is likely to be worth repeating elsewhere.

Regeneration Strategy and COSS

Launched in December of 2011, this strategy promotes community-led regeneration for the first time in Scotland, signifying a major shift in policy direction. In the same year DTAS received funding from the Scottish Government to establish a "Community Ownership Support Service". In its first year the initiative fielded enquiries from 179 community organisations that were either interested in exploring the idea of taking on an asset, or were in the process of acquiring an asset, usually from a local authority.

Communities Day and Rural Parliament

On 26th April 2013 the first ever "Communities Day" was held at the Holyrood parliament. This event enabled community activists to meet directly with Members of the Scottish Parliament and their advisors and to hold both plenary events in the main chamber for the 250 delegates and workshops in the committee rooms. It is too early to tell what direct impact this event may have, but symbolically it places the communities movement at the heart of Scottish society.

Delegates from all over Scotland attending Communities Day at the Holyrood Parliament

The idea of a 'Rural Parliament' is also being explored. The concept has existed for some time in several European countries and provides a platform for the "rural voice" to be heard. In the Scottish context the very varied geography and the diversity of cultural history in rural areas may make the creation of a unified rural vision harder to achieve than elsewhere, but the community movement has had a significant role in advising government about this proposed event.

Political and Economic Landscape

In the UK as a whole the political landscape is usually dominated by "policy instability built on a divisive rural-urban culture".[ix] By contrast, Scotland's "rainbow parliament" is more akin to the European experience. It has four major parties and several smaller ones and their relative positions cannot be described purely on the basis of a simple left/right axis. Similarly, the wider sectoral landscape in which community bodies are working defies a simple description.

The public and private sectors are well known. The "third sector" is the name used in the UK to refer to charities, voluntary organisations and community owned bodies. "Social enterprise" as a concept does not fit easily into this simple system[3] and as development trusts are essentially community-owned social enterprises, their place in the scheme of things is not

[3] The UK Department of Trade and Industry offered this definition in 2002: "a social enterprise is a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners."

straightforward to explain. Furthermore, local authorities must now have "community planning partnerships" although their relationship to the communities they serve is sometimes questioned.[x] Social enterprise groups within local authority areas have been encouraged and, in some places, thrive. With so many community-based intermediaries, a national "Social Enterprise Coalition" etc. the landscape has become cluttered.

This may be a welcome sign that economic and social diversity is being reflected in the institutions that serve the third sector's interests. Alternatively this may prove to be a short-lived spring in which many flowers bloom, but only a few last the test of time.

Observers of the Scottish scene will be aware that a referendum on whether or not Scotland should seek to become independent from the United Kingdom will be taking place in 2014. This has been described as the biggest decision for Scots in three centuries - where then, if at all, does the communities movement stand on this important topic?

The short answer is that (to date) no-one has asked. Community bodies are invariably not party political and whilst the actions or inactions of government are of considerable importance to them, outright political allegiances are all but unknown now and unlikely in future. Some, especially the woodland and recycling groups have a consciously green agenda - but then this is now commonplace and hardly an indicator of fervent support for the Green Party as such. As social enterprises, development trusts often act as small businesses, but as community owned bodies they straddle the left/right divide. The Alliance is a supporter of "double devolution", a slogan used to support subsidiarity as a concept, but as two thirds of Scots support greater powers for Holyrood too, this is hardly a controversial stance. Perhaps all that we can say is that political parties of every stripe have a tendency to want to control things from the metaphorical centre and that communities and their supporters, by and large, are likely to resist this trend wherever they encounter it.

Nonetheless, concerned that the debate leading up to the independence referendum has yet to engage with local people and their communities, (having thus far been the preserve of politicians and Scotland's chattering classes) the Alliance is embarking on a road show of local events around Scotland with a working title of ‘The Big Vote’. Both the pro-Independence ‘Yes’ campaign and the Unionist ‘Better Together’ alliance have committed themselves to take part in these events, which will examine both sides of the debate from the perspective of each community's aspirations and concerns.

The Future

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland have undergone a remarkable transformation over the past half-century. An area once marked by its economic failures now scores higher than the Scottish average on a range of statistics. This change has partly been due to happenstances such as the impact of the oil industry (although Shetland is the only part of the UK that has any kind of oil fund) and increasing affluence and improved communications that have enabled in-migration and a significant growth in the tourist industry. Nonetheless there are those who maintain that a key driver of this success is that since its inception Highlands and Islands Enterprise was given a remit to develop not just the business sectors of the region, but also its communities. This remit does not apply to its Lowland counterpart, Scottish

Enterprise, and it is unlikely to be a coincidence that most of the urban areas of Scotland that were a cause for concern 50 years ago still languish at the bottom of the economic and social pile, whilst an albeit incomplete transformation of the Highlands has occurred.

These developments have been so remarkable that it may be worth ending on a note of caution. The community sector in Scotland is still relatively small and fragile. Community-led regeneration has its opponents, especially in urban areas where there are entrenched interests in both the public and private sectors. A high profile economic failure here and there, a change of government attitude, a continuing and deepening recession, might all contribute to the stalling of this movement. Nonetheless, such have been the changes over the past decade that given another ten years or so of fair winds and it is likely that we will be seeing a genuine and permanent transformation of communities throughout Scotland.

Alex Walker, ICSA Conference, Findhorn 2013

Further Information

DTA Scotland: http://www.dtascot.org.uk/

Scottish Community Alliance: http://www.localpeopleleading.co.uk/

Locality: http://locality.org.uk/

Alf and Ewan Young (2012) The New Road. Argyll Publishing.

References

[i] See for example See James Hunter (2000) Last of the Free: A History of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Mainstream. Edinburgh.

[ii] David Turnock (1974) Scotland's Highlands and Islands. "Problem Regions of Europe" series. Oxford University Press.

[iii] In an interview for a magazine on 23 September 1987. For details see the Margaret Thatcher Foundation website.

[iv] See Steve Wyler (2009) A History of Community Asset Ownership. Development Trusts Association. London.

[v] 'Development trust' is not a legal format and although many such have charitable status, the concept also embraces co-operatives, CICs and other forms of constitution.

[vi] A Guide For Community Groups on Investing for Community Benefit (2010) The Pool in Scotland. A report for Community Energy Scotland and the Scottish Community Foundation.

[vii] Interim COSS report (2012) Development Trusts Association Scotland.

[viii] Development Trusts Association Scotland Response to the Scottish Government Consultation on the proposed Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill. An estimate

recently produced by SCA is that there is now a collective membership of 1,269 community groups which involve well over 100,000 individuals, employ 5,500 staff, engage 20,000 volunteers, own or manage 250,000 hectares of land in addition to hundreds of buildings of all shapes and sizes and generate a combined annual income of £600 million.

[ix] Madhu Satsangi, Nick Gallent and Mark Bevan (2010) The Rural Housing Question. The Policy Press.

[x] It has been argued that they are really 'Public Services Strategic Planning Partnerships' and that the word "community" should be dropped from their title. See e .g. DTAS Response to the proposed Community Empowerment Bill *op cit*.