

Rural development policy and community data needs in Scotland

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Received 9 August 2002; accepted 22 August 2003

Abstract

The objectives of Scottish rural development policy are moving towards economic, social and environmental sustainability, promoted through local community empowerment. The new challenges raised and future data needs were considered using three scenarios. Workshop discussions were held with participants from all levels of rural development. The possible re-orientation of data availability and provision were investigated. The need for accessible and appropriate forms of data to lift current constraints on rural community empowerment and participation in local development, and to support rural communities' decision-making and strategic planning were highlighted. Issues of ownership, confidentiality, access, quality, consistency and funding were raised, alongside communities' training and education needs in information handling and interpretation. The implications for participatory rural development via community data infrastructure provision are discussed.

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Keywords: Community; Data; Information; Participation; Rural development policy; Scenarios; Scotland

Introduction

Rural areas are today subject to major structural change. One main driver of change concerns the agricultural industry: its declining economic importance, along with other primary activities in rural areas, and the inevitable reform of agricultural policy emanating from Europe, illustrated by Agenda 2000 and the Rural Development Regulation, decreasing levels of support to farmers unless linked to rural development or environmental objectives. This situation is accompanied by the growth of the service (information and knowledge)-based economy, alongside wider global, economic and societal change in rural areas.

These changes bring both threats and opportunities to rural areas, reflected in rural development policy, which no longer centres solely on agriculture as the conduit through which development takes place, accompanied by the increased role community involvement is

afforded in such policy. This is visible at EU level, where since 1996 the European Commission committed itself to “revitalising rural economies through the adoption of policies designed to promote the development of rural areas taking account of the changing aspirations and priorities of their citizens”.¹ Shortall and Shucksmith (1998) suggest that the Europeanisation of rural policies is evident in member states. Issues relating to community empowerment and rural development are arising in many member states each with their own approaches and supporting data infrastructure; as such this research by focusing on the current position in Scotland will be of broad interest to many practitioners and policy makers across Europe.

The paper examines community-based, locally orientated and responsive policy strategies to provide for the disparate circumstances found in rural Scotland today. The background to this research considered the identification of future data needs of rural Scotland as part of work performed on behalf of Scottish Executive Rural

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¹ Preamble to the Cork Conference, November 1996.

Affairs Department entitled ‘Towards a rural spatial data infrastructure for Scotland’. This was achieved by generating various scenarios of a future rural Scotland and their associated data needs, using these as the basis for a series of workshop discussions. This paper has evolved from the research findings and explores the role of community-level data in community empowerment and rural development.

Rural development policy and community involvement in Scotland

In Scotland, the need for capacity building and community involvement as part of rural development has been seen “as necessary, not just to ensure that rural development strategies actually target real need, but also to indicate a sense of ownership among rural communities of their own development ... Only through community involvement can the aims of people centred development strategies be realised” (Scottish Office, 1998, p. 3). Following this, the introduction and development of community planning and rural partnership initiatives have occurred. This has been accompanied by the increased role of ‘governance’ as opposed to direct government action and intervention (Stoker, 1997; Marsden and Murdoch, 1998). The result is that public, private and voluntary sector agencies and organisations along with local communities have been brought together to formulate and implement policy delivery. Community participation, as both an aim and instrument of rural development policy, is still evident in current policy statements: “We are committed to the Community Planning process to encourage the delivery of a shared vision for each community, using joined-up strategies and community involvement to help meet the needs of rural communities” (Scottish Executive, 2000, Chapter 4, p. 6). Today, Scottish rural development policy is moving towards economic, social and environmental sustainability, promoted through local community empowerment.

The role of information in community participation and development

Inadequacies in political socio-economic infrastructure and knowledge bases have been viewed as some of the most significant roadblocks to achieving genuine participation (Arnstein, 1971). This still remains true today. The vital role performed by information and associated interpretation in community participation can be seen in both media- and agency-generated hype. This fails to provide a basis for participation, as information is distorted, and effectively one way, with most information being thick on description rather than

content. Only when information informs, as opposed to instructing, can the community interpret this and other available information, and move forward to greater participation in development. One way of illustrating this has been to visualise a ladder of citizen participation; each ladder rung climbed is symbolic of the progression of the individual and community from manipulation, cynical consultation and poor information towards genuine consultation and ultimately citizen control (Arnstein, 1971; Burns et al., 1994).

Alternatively, information provision, interpretation and ability to feed back into the development process can be illustrated by the ‘bottom-up’–‘top-down’ typology of community participation. ‘Bottom-up’ or ‘grass roots’ approaches are based on empowerment through local knowledge and capacity building to ensure involvement in community life and promote genuine participatory development. Conversely, ‘top-down’ approaches of community participation and development are usually paternalistic and pseudo-participatory, whereby various participatory devices are initiated by an agency to arrive at a pre-determined outcome in an attempt to gain local legitimacy (for further discussion, see Midgley et al., 1986; Nelson and Wright, 1995).

Future scenarios for rural Scotland

Scenario construction

Three future scenarios were developed, based on the ‘future-forward’ approach followed by Birnie et al. (1995), to consider possible changes in rural Scotland over the next 10–15 years. The use of future scenarios is common in foresight exercises to develop “visions of the future to guide today’s decision makers. It is about anticipating the future; identifying potential needs, threats and opportunities, and taking action now to ensure that people ... are better placed to respond effectively” (GOST, 1998).

Following identification of the issue(s) to be examined, the next stage of scenario construction was the identification of key decision factors influencing the scenario outcome; these are external and relatively uncontrollable by potential actors. As Wilson (1998) notes, one example of decision factors is anticipated government regulations. As a result, scenarios were developed with permitted variations in agricultural and planning policy. Assumptions/driving forces were developed and applied to all three scenarios. These related to markets and technology, the UK economy, social, cultural and demographic trends, and structural funding.

The three scenarios are described below. A description of outcomes for each scenario is reproduced in Fig. 1.

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