

Report from Arkleton Seminar 2012  
Rural Development in an Age of Austerity



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## Format of the Seminar

The Arkleton Trust Seminar took place between 19<sup>th</sup>- 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012 in Douneside House, Tarland, Aberdeenshire. Participants from rural policy and practice and from academia attended the seminar, chaired by Professor Mark Shucksmith. The format of the seminar involved morning and afternoon sessions across four days, with discussions, debates, small group sessions and presentations.

The overarching questions to debate were *'How to do rural development in the economic downturn? How can people and communities live and thrive in rural areas at a time of rapid change and reduced public spending?'*

The attendees (listed in Annex 1) came from a diverse background of policy, practice and academia and international contexts. Representation of rural life in Greece, Ireland, England, Scotland, America, Romania, Bangladesh, India and Zambia was present at the seminar. This allowed for knowledge to be shared between a wide variety of contexts. The discussions took place under 'Chatham House rules'.

## The Arkleton Trust

The Arkleton Trust was founded in 1977 to study new approaches to rural development and education and to improve understanding between rural policy makers, academics, practitioners and rural people. It has a long history of supporting national and international approaches to rural development policy and practice and encouraging the sharing of experience and knowledge, with the particular aim of assisting and promoting rural development in the poorer and developing countries around the world.

## **Themes Emerging**

### **Resilience and the challenge of austerity.**

Prior to the seminar, a number of papers were shared between participants. Mark Scott's paper on resilience was found to be particularly helpful. This distinguished between concepts of resilience as 'bouncing back' (to business as usual) and resilience as 'bouncing forward' (ie. adapting to changing contexts, as an evolutionary transition towards more sustainable ruralities). Resilience in the later sense offered a useful lens through which to reframe rural development policy and practice, pursuing networked rural development approaches. In essence, this emphasises an enabling state building the capacity of people to ensure the future of their places, drawing on assets and networks both within and beyond their localities, to deal with change in an uncertain and unpredictable world.

Participants shared their experiences of such approaches in practice from various countries. Themes emerging from this interchange included: a community's general awareness of the issues (often located in a wider commitment to social justice); confidence to act, individually and collectively; political leadership and activism; decentralisation of power; enabling public policy (legislation, finance, support); and networking of the experience. Such practice is more difficult now because of a lack of finance and EU state aid rules. In some parts of the world, further obstacles include lack of control of assets (notably land), clientalism and corruption. Nevertheless the seminar heard accounts of many inspirational examples of rural development practice.

### **Are there opportunities to be gained from the recession?**

There was some discussion about whether rural areas are better able to withstand the recession. It was noted that there has been a lower decline in employment in rural areas compared to their urban counterparts. In several countries represented, the recession has led to counter-urbanisation among young, educated people, who are moving back to their familial areas and

homes, often to reduce living costs while jobs are scarce. New people coming into a community can bring new ideas and new energy. It was commented that, in Greece, the only positive signs of development were coming from rural areas in the face of ongoing austerity measures. The importance of these opportunities for rural areas was discussed. Questions were raised as to whether there was something 'different' about rural areas which has allowed them to emerge more positively from the recession than urban areas – different assets, different networks, different capacities? Or was it simply easier to be underemployed in rural areas, with family support substituting for the support of earned income and a welfare state.

It was also noted that the effects of the recession may simply be delayed in rural areas, rather than bypassed. Moreover, in moving back to rural areas, residents were not expecting an increase in income, but instead cutting costs (especially housing costs), and might expect a better overall quality of life than if they remained unemployed in cities. The persistent notion of the rural idyll and romanticisation of rural living was noted as continuing to affect how people perceive rural living in at least some countries.

### **Demography is not destiny**

The changing make-up of demographics and the potential impact for rural areas was discussed. A number of factors are causing these changes. The counter-urbanisation discussed above, with younger people returning to rural areas certainly is affecting rural areas in a number of countries. However, this is not universal. In the US, for example, people are not moving at all, due to the unavailability of housing finance. Rural areas in this context are experiencing gentrification, with people tending to 'age in place', and having more limited access to services as their needs become greater. This was discussed as being particularly problematic in some of the poorer countries. Furthermore, the issue of 'brain drain' was discussed. It was commented that 'brain drain' does not simply refer to educated people moving away from an area, rather that educated people are moving out of an area, without being replaced by people of a similar educational level.

The discussion, however, was framed around the comment that ‘demography is not destiny’. Rather than take a deterministic view, progressive steps can be taken to use the changing demographics as an opportunity, rather than a problem. Regarding the issue of gentrification, all were pointed toward the significant research on older people as volunteers, indicating that an older population can be service providers, rather than seen in the negative light of post-productive service-users.

The issue of ‘brain drain’ led to discussions about the need to change traditional higher education models to allow for higher education in place. The model of the University of Highlands and Islands was given as an example of a high-quality, decentralised university model, which enables education in rural Scotland. Programmes of work-related learning through Cornell University work collaboratively with local rural businesses to create innovative student placements, clearly showing the need for educated workforces in rural areas. Newcastle University’s Northern Rural Network has fulfilled a similar role in terms of continuing professional development and lifelong learning.

These discussions also highlighted a further key theme to the seminar – the importance of cultural context throughout. Some countries are seeing counter-urbanisation, some are dealing with gentrification. While the importance of international learning and understanding was a crucial part of the seminar, it is important to acknowledge that there is no blueprint for rural development, without deep understanding of cultural and geographical contexts.

## **Institutional roles**

The role of the State, Universities and the voluntary sector in the context of the recession led to much debate and discussion.

### *Role of the State*

In the context of recession, the role of the State is changing. Questions as to whether the role of the State should be as enabler for communities or redistributor of wealth (or both) were raised. The role and scope of local government in the context of highly centralised national (and international)

government was also raised. The importance of the State in building capacity, educating communities on rights and leadership skills was recognised.

Capacity building for communities to create innovative solutions for themselves was agreed as a desirable duty of the State. It was however, raised as a point of concern, that 'capacity-building' has been a desirable outcome for development for many years and it is still being talked about, rather than implemented.

### *Role of Universities*

The traditional 'research-heavy' role of the university was criticised and challenged. There was a desire to see universities moving towards practice-based research. Having an intersection of rural academics and rural practitioners led to expressed desire for joined-up practice. There is a need for rural development practice, but this also needs to be evidence-based change. With more applied research from universities, the impact of research becomes stronger and more far-reaching. Examples of moves in this direction were given from Newcastle University, aspiring to be a 'Civic University' and seeking to put its excellence in research and teaching to a social purpose; and Cornell as a 'Land Grant University', both using their role as researchers and educators to improve outcomes in the community.

### *Role of the Voluntary Sector*

The increased role of volunteers in times of austerity was discussed. As services are withdrawn, increasingly volunteers are needed to fill the gaps. This was acknowledged as being problematic. The stress of expectation of provision of services (particularly familial care) and potential impacts on employment were raised. This discussion reflected on the discussion regarding the role of the State – is the State reneging on its duty of care to citizens by withdrawing services on the assumption that individuals will take over? This was a particularly pertinent question for the UK, in the context of Cameron's 'Big Society' model.

## **Recommendations**

An important outcome from the seminar was the agreed need for recommendations for policy, practice and academia. Coming out of the recession, it is important that the lessons learned from austerity continue to be implemented, rather than 'going back to the old ways'. The following recommendations give an indication as to how to move forward.

### **Enhancing the Public Sphere**

- Encourage experimental/novel programmes for development
- Access to open source information, knowledge and research
- Use of social media to exchange knowledge
- Encourage inventorying of community/pooled resources
- Management of said common/pooled resources
- Local programmes to reflect and react to community sentiment
- Leadership and capacity-building training

### **Expand the civic role of Universities**

- Enable and incentivise community outreach
- Provide user-friendly information
- Public policy to encourage and use academic research
- State subsidising of graduate students to work in small/mid-level business

### **Moving beyond Bounded communities**

- Enhancing partnerships between existing communities to shape new communities
- Pooling resources between communities to enhance capacity
- Becoming aware of inter- and intra-community conflicts to increase success of this programme



## John Higgs Memorial Lecture

The attendees had the privilege of attending the first John Higgs Memorial Lecture. As a tribute to the founder of the Arkleton Trust, it was fitting to hear from Richard Leafe, Chief Executive of the Lake District National Park, on good practice in Rural Development. Richard discussed the Partnership model for development being implemented in the Lake District. Bringing together a diverse range of partners, from government, business and NGOs, the National Park has pioneered an all-encompassing Partnership model, whose priorities are:

- Low Carbon
- Affordable Housing
- Profitable Farming and forestry
- Sustainable Transport
- Adventure Capital
- Valley Planning
- Rural Broadband

This radical approach moves away from a purely environmental protection model, instead putting community at the heart of a Sustainable Development model, leading to cultural change amongst all stakeholders.

The importance of strong leadership and vision in this type of collaborative approach was notable, as the work involved keeping highly divergent groups focussed on a common goal. The importance of planning in advance and ensuring that training in facilitation for all involved was noted.

The Partnership model has the benefit of creating an innate system of checks and balances, which may not be as easily achieved through other means, and was seen as a potentially positive model for rural development going forward.

The Partnership Priorities agenda has wide scope and addresses key issues in Sustainable Development. As with all development agendas, the challenge for the National Park is to ensure that the agenda is lived and real, rather than remaining thoughts written down. However, with the strong leadership evidenced, this model does appear to have the foundations for success.

List of participants:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Atterton, Jane	Scottish Agricultural College
Brown, David	Cornell University
Bryan, Amanda	Aigas Associates
Cannon, Terry	Institute of Development Studies
Charalambos, Kasimis	Agricultural University of Athens
Glazgow, Nina	Cornell University
Gzartzois, Menelaos	Newcastle University
Healey, Patsy	Newcastle University / Glendale Gateway Trust
Higgs, Caroline	Arkleton Chairman
Holtom, Pat	East of England Rural Forum
Leafe, Richard	Lake District National Parks Authority
Madine, Chris	Arkleton Trustee
Ní Dhónaill, Caoimhe	Queen's University, Belfast
Oprean, Monica	Satul Verde
Rennie, Frank	Arkleton Trustee
Roy, Audrey	DEFRA
Saraceno, Elena	Consultant – rural policy. Ex BEPA.
Shortall, Sally	Queen's University, Belfast
Shucksmith, Mark	Newcastle University, Arkleton Trustee
Swan, Nikki	Arkleton Trust and Sustainable Development consultant
Watson, Drennan	Landwise
Watt, John	Highlands & Islands Enterprise