CAN ALL RURAL COMMUNITIES BE EMPOWERED?

Looking at empowerment issues through the lens of the Capacity for Change programme.

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Background

There is an increasing interest in creating stronger, vibrant and empowered communities.

Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan states that '*Scotland's communities are a rich source of talent and creative potential and the process of community empowerment helps to unlock that potential. It stimulates and harnesses the energy of local people to come up with creative and successful solutions to local challenges* (Scottish Government, 2009 p.6).

Empowerment is described as a '*process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them*' (Scottish Government, 2009 p.8).
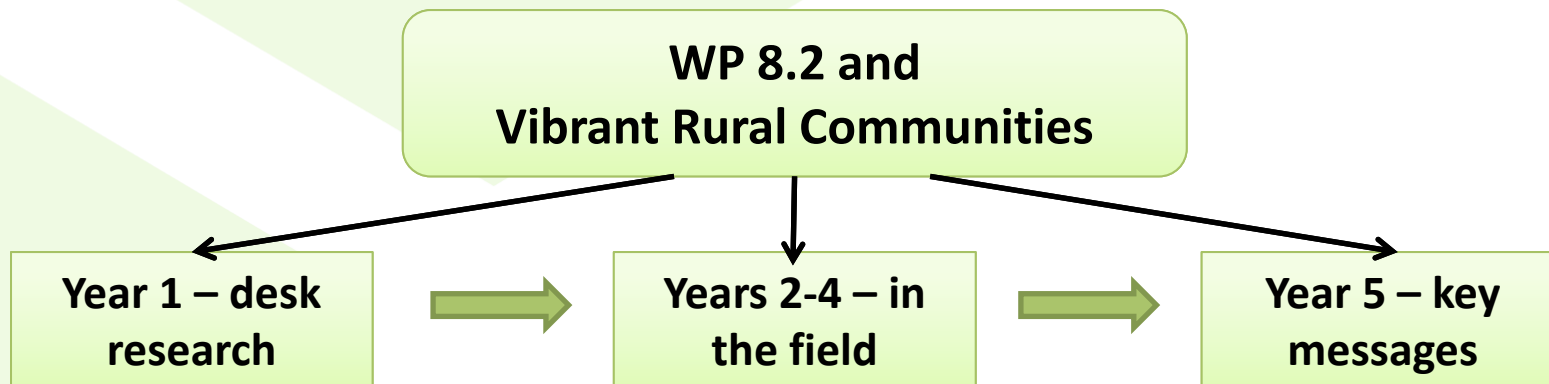
Vibrant Rural Communities

Can all rural communities be empowered?

How do we create empowered rural communities?

Research programme funded by the Scottish Government to explore *Vibrant Rural Communities*

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          │        WP 8.2 and           │
          │  Vibrant Rural Communities  │
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Year 1 – desk research	→	Years 2-4 – in the field	→	Year 5 – key messages

Challenges in empowering rural communities

- Aspects of capacity-building, or development, are often separated from empowerment

For instance, the proposed Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill (CERB) aims to *'strengthen opportunities for communities to take independent action to achieve their own goals and aspirations'* (p.5).

Under the heading *'Involving all our communities'* (pp.6-7), we read that capacity-building for communities is important. However, it is not being addressed within the CERB.

C4C Programme

- C4C = Capacity for Change
- EU LEADER funding
- Aim - To build equal, stronger, resilient and empowered communities through developing capacity which can lead to real and lasting change
- C4C invests time and resources in those less developed settlements and lead them to success

C4C engagement process

Identification and selection of C4C locations

⬇

Verification of community readiness

⬇

C4C villages receive support from LEADER project manager

⬇

Selection of a project idea

⬇

Development of a project

Three stages of the C4C study

Stage 1
Initiation of the research process

Stage 2
Exploring C4C processes

Stage 3
Finalising the study

- Development of C4C hybrid evaluation model
- Baseline data collection
- Quantitative & Qualitative info

- In-depth interviews with C4C stakeholders
- Interviews with C4C project manager
- Exploring How? Why? and Who?

- Final data collection
- Quantitative & Qualitative info
- Longitudinal data
- Measuring change

Current research progress

- Phase 1 completed - Data collected and analysed from seven C4C villages (n=178)
- Phase 2 – to be finalised by the end of August 2013

Skerratt, S. and Steiner, A. (2013) **Working with communities-of-place: complexities of empowerment.** *Local Economy* (forthcoming).

Our findings

Communities who do not engage

- Evidence indicates that offering help without being necessarily asked for it might be misinterpreted:

'It is important that the first step comes from a community. It's not us going to a village and selecting them. In Village 1 people said: 'you've selected us so there must be something wrong about the village so do something about it'. This is not how it works… It is important that the first step after initial or baseline information comes from the community.' (Project Officer)

Our findings

Communities who do not engage

- Lack of engagement makes it impossible to successfully run community projects:

'Village 2 didn't really grasp the potential of C4C. It was perceived just as a funding stream despite us trying to reassure that it's not necessarily about the money, it's about the process and getting village together and working towards common good ... Once we familiarised them with the C4C concept, we mentioned that it's their project that they need to develop it and take forward, it became quite clear that majority of community couldn't be mobilised to get behind it. We tried second time and (...) they were going to discuss it and they didn't want to put their time to develop this.' (Project Officer)

Our findings

In-community sub-groups and potential differences are the norm rather than the exception

New business ventures can change the dynamics within villages, bringing undesirable changes; this group of people appreciated 'peace and safety', perceiving their village as a 'residential' rather than 'business' area

VS.

New business creation is essential in building a sustainable village

Our findings

The backwards and forwards motions of community development processes

There are periods in which a community might progress their projects and then, on other occasions, slow down or even reverse achieved progress

'*I was disappointed as I've spoken to people about C4C and I got positive feedback and all of a sudden it turned around ... It's been a rollercoaster … now it's positive - they're very focused and constructive so it has changed quite a lot.*' (Project Officer)

Our findings

The fluidity of interests and powers at community level

The engagement of key individuals or community leaders might not only be insufficient but destructive. It is likely that certain structures of power or 'partial empowerment' disempowers communities as a whole.

'In terms of challenges, I certainly underestimated the power structures in Village 1 ... It was taken forward by one very active group or committee in the village and it was perceived as theirs ... it's their obligation or responsibility to do this and now somebody else is coming in!' (Project Officer)

Our findings

The differences between individual and community-level lives and aspirations

Based on the C4C analytical framework and data from 178 interviews with community members, individual resilience received higher scores than community resilience.

Although empowerment happens or exists at the individual level, it does not necessary translate into community empowerment.

Conclusions

- Empowerment process is complex and the belief in the self-fulfilling processes of community empowerment is naïve

- Empowerment of communities should start with building the capacity of communities

- Some communities choose not to engage

Recent publication:
Skerratt, S. and Steiner, A. (2013) Working with communities-of-place: complexities of empowerment. Local Economy

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