

# Communities and Wellbeing

## Local Assets, Local Decisions and Community

### Knowledge Exchange workshop:

**'What does success look like in community resilience?'**

**Monday 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2016 Birnam Arts and Conference Centre, Birnam.**

### Introduction to research

This event marked the first knowledge exchange workshop of the 'Local Assets, Local Decisions and Community Resilience' research project. It will run from 2016 to 2021 and is funded by the Scottish Government, as part of its Strategic Research Programme.

The project team includes researchers from the James Hutton Institute (Dr. Mags Currie, Dr. Annie McKee and Dr. Annabel Pinker) and Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) (Dr. Elliot Meador and Dr. Marianna Markantoni). The project's funding contact is Graeme Beale, Head of Rural Communities Research at the Scottish Government<sup>1</sup>.

#### Box 1. Main research question:

What does 'success' in rural community resilience look like, and how can methodologies capture the impact and outcomes of policy and practice interventions?

The workshop aimed to:

- Engage community representatives and other organisations who work on community resilience with the current research programme.
- Develop a better understanding of: what the concept of 'resilience' means to those who live and work in rural communities in Scotland; why resilience is important; how participants can influence the direction of the research, and how useful outcomes for practitioners and policy makers can be provided.

This report summarises the key points of discussion throughout the workshop. The researchers' presentation - which included a description of the context of the project, current government policy and academic definitions of rural community resilience, as well as a practical example of a resilience assessment tool is available from the research team<sup>2</sup>.

#### Box 2: The Scottish Government definition of community resilience:

"Communities and individuals harnessing resources and expertise to help themselves prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies, in a way that complements the work of the emergency responders". This definition is taken from the key policy document: 'Preparing Scotland: Scottish Guidance on Resilience' (Scottish Government, 2012).

National Outcome 11 states that: "We have strong, resilient and supportive communities where people take responsibility for their own actions and how they affect others" (Scottish Government, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> Full details of the Strategic Research Programme 2016 – 2021 can be found here: <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Research/About/EBAR/StrategicResearch/strategicresearch2016-21/srp2016-21>. This project contributes to the theme 'Food, Health and Wellbeing'.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Resilience Compass' is available on the TESS project website: <http://www.tess-transition.eu/tools/>





## Summary of group discussions on core research questions

### What does resilience mean to you? Does it matter, and if so, why?

## Responding to disasters

- Resilience is associated with challenges such as climate change and natural disasters. However, it goes beyond disaster response(s), also involving preparedness, taking responsibility, and the power of communities to implement change.
- Resilience as 'emergency planning': many communities are more resilient than they think with regard to responding to emergencies.
- There is a need to recognise local expertise and local views.

### *Ability of communities to deal with external pressures*

- Resilience **overlaps with other concepts**, including ‘sustainability’, ‘vibrancy’, and ‘thriving’.
- The role of local plans, resources, institutions and leadership were highlighted.
- Participants emphasised that community ownership (i.e. of assets) and sense of ownership over community actions were central to their understanding of resilience.
- Community confidence was fundamental to ideas of resilience, and the belief that community action can lead to change. This is underpinned by community consultation, continuity, and long-term planning.

*'Deeper resilience' (i.e. supporting systems to generate a genuine, caring society)*

- This included community health and wellbeing, as well as a diversified economy.
- It is important to analyse social, environmental and economic community needs, and endeavour to ensure that communities fulfil their potential for resilience (but not at the expense of the resilience of other communities with greater challenges).

Many of the terms used in response to the question 'What does resilience mean to you?' are represented in the following illustrative 'word cloud' (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 'What does resilience mean to you?' Responses from group discussion.**





## What fosters resilience in rural communities?

A number of interrelated factors that can foster resilience in rural communities were discussed as follows:

- A **'can do it' attitude**, in conjunction with a high level of activity within a community, is a key factor in fostering resilience. However, a 'can-do-it' attitude may be influenced by previous experiences or local history of power relations (e.g. the influence of feudalism or authoritarian local authorities), and may be challenged by perceptions of path dependence. 'Resilience' does not equate to 'resistant to change'. Communities must be made to feel that they have **efficacy and agency**, i.e. they can 'make it happen'. This can be considered a cultural shift in some communities which have previously not had the opportunity to be involved with local decision-making.
- A **'culture of learning'** is also necessary for resilience, including opportunities for training, as well as social and cultural events between generations. The role of key community leaders is recognised and it is suggested that these individuals are given more targeted support in fostering resilience.
- **Access to funding** is also critical. There are concerns that grant applications do not reflect inclusive consultation processes, and communication within communities is vital for fostering resilience. Nonetheless, community confidence can be enhanced, and resilience fostered, through small grants providing visible projects, and through spending funds on what the communities think that they need. Furthermore, there is a need for funding to support the transition from capital projects to the next stage of development. In addition, enabling healthy local enterprise and recognition of the role of social entrepreneurs is important for fostering resilience.
- **A level of risk awareness** is important but being overly risk averse can restrict resilient actions being taken. A lack of strategic training, knowledge, expertise, and practice is stated as not conducive to fostering resilience; Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS) can offer strategy sessions with development trusts.
- Resilience is fostered through **involving the wider community**, businesses, and others not directly involved with actions that help support resilience. There was discussion amongst the groups regarding the value of supporting 'organic' projects, which enthuse community members, and those that are more strategic in nature.
- There is also **a need to establish local development priorities**, assess financial viability, and ensure sufficient volunteer interest and energy. A community action plan, in which all community members can participate, prioritise, and influence, is promoted as a route towards proactively and democratically fostering resilience.



## What needs to come from government and other 'external' actors, and what can come from within the community?

### External actors and government:

The role of external actors and government was highlighted in relation to: the provision of secure funding for communities, greater decentralisation of government agencies, and awareness of the 'cultural lag' surrounding new powers for communities. As described:

**Funding:** The participants raised major concerns regarding the uncertainty of where funding was going to come from given the current political climate and change (i.e. Brexit). One participant stated: *'[There is] . . . uncertainty about the future state of things, [and no] answers about where the funding is supposed to come from. Money - it helps, but it's often bureaucratic and [awarded] retrospectively.'* This also points to the related concern that organisations may have to take on debt until they are retrospectively reimbursed.

**Decentralisation:** Dealing with centrally controlled bureaucracies was considered a disadvantage; participants also pointed to the difficulties of dealing with local authorities. Furthermore, it was agreed that community projects face difficult competition from private economic development projects, which bring in tax revenue. It is anticipated that the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 would change this.

**Cultural Lag:** It was suggested that there is a 'cultural lag' associated with the Community Empowerment Act (which should not be viewed as a panacea). Entrenched behaviour is not easily or quickly adapted, thus: *'it may take a new generation of people under the Community Empowerment Act to change the way things are done.'*

### **Enhancing resilience within communities:**

**Volunteerism:** Volunteering in local communities is valuable, especially within communities that can't afford an employee to work on community projects/programmes. Participants spoke about the benefits of volunteering in fostering local growth and creating momentum around new or stagnated projects.

**Local knowledge:** Subsidiarity was suggested as the best approach for decision making. Local knowledge was thought to create 'better' or more efficient opportunities for engagement. It was considered more valuable and effective than 'outsider' knowledge, (i.e. centralised or government knowledge).

## **How do we know what works in rural communities?**

### **What promotes community resilience and what features can help to identify that a community is resilient?**

Participants agreed that there is no single way of identifying a community as 'resilient'. What is seen to be a resilient action in one community may not be the same in another community. Community resilience is the result of 'a specific need being met at a specific moment'. Resilience must be collectively, and proactively-driven by the whole community. Individuals who were identified as "drivers" of resilience? need to pass on their knowledge and skills to others in the community.

### **What support needs to be in place for resilience?**

Rural communities were viewed as always having to "take responsibility for themselves". Whilst it was acknowledged that resilience needs to be driven from a local level, support from outwith a community can aid empowerment processes. However, it was noted that not all communities know what to do and not all external organisations know the best way to help. The community itself is best placed to say whether a resilient action has been successful or not. There may also be times when resilient actions are difficult for communities to pursue, i.e. the community may know a way in which it could become more resilient, but does not have the means to make that happen.

### **Being able to deal with uncertainty**

Communities need to start thinking in a preventative way, being prepared for different eventualities and moving forward to "a new normal" from each challenge or shock(s). The bigger or more persistent the shock(s), the more challenging it will be to community resilience.

### **What undermines success?**

Factors that undermine success in rural community resilience include: an inability to find funding; a community that feels disenfranchised; insufficient cohesion, capacity and trust within the community; and concerns that resilient actions will lead to removal of external community support (e.g. withdrawal of support from local authorities).

### **Assessing how resilience is promoted or enabled**

It is important to assess how resilience is best promoted or enabled, as this contributes to a better understanding about how resilience emerges. Effective evaluation may allow best practice to be shared between communities. Evaluation could be both subjective and objective, and should recognise that resilient actions must be considered over a period of time (i.e. longitudinally). To what extent are the factors that contribute to resilience shared from one place to another?

The groups considered how communities currently share their expertise with regards to enhancing resilience, as summarised below.

It was agreed that learning from communities with similar characteristics would be beneficial, but that context is critical and can limit the transferability of factors contributing to resilience.

#### **Box 3: Community-based expertise is shared through:**

- 1) Face-to-face exchange of experiences and opinions, which is considered the optimum sharing method;
- 2) Inviting key speakers from successful projects;
- 3) Organising community 'parties';
- 4) Developing searchable internet resources (contributed by communities) to document best practice;
- 5) Working with the Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS) (e.g. providing travel funding for peer-to-peer experience sharing);
- 6) Through community council forums for ideas-sharing and community updates.





Transferability is impacted by:

- The **role of 'key people'** in taking forward actions that enhance community resilience. The experience of these individuals (and associated factors such as leadership characteristics, networks, and trust) is not easily transferable between communities.
- **Transgenerational interaction:** of concern is not only the transfer of experience from one community to another, but also from older to younger generations. How can we encourage the involvement of young people, and how to find successors to those in community leadership roles at

present? Transferring expertise is also limited by **volunteer fatigue** (unless supported by a paid local development officer) and general community apathy towards undertaking resilient actions.

- A key motivator is an **'external threat'** or emergency, which leads to reactive community action. Proactive resilient actions require a more appealing frame/driver to increase local support, e.g. participatory budgeting as an opportunity for communities to influence local service provision.
- **Complexities of empowerment** in small communities, i.e. regarding who has control/influence, concerns regarding representation, and local democratic participation. Concerns regarding the challenge for small communities to compete with larger communities were raised, as larger communities are believed to be able to 'achieve more'.

Key elements that would support the transfer of resilience factors within and between communities include:

- 1) **The role of technology, digital connectivity and communication** in rural areas, particularly in relation to access to information and knowledge-sharing platforms, such as social media.
- 2) **Rural businesses and enterprises** can play a key role in sharing expertise; for example, successful rural business models may be transferable between businesses. There is a demand for creating networking opportunities for small and home-based rural businesses, in order to facilitate learning and the exchange of ideas.
- 3) **Local Resilience Partnerships** involve numerous community groups across the country and maintain a close working relationship with Police Scotland. The Partnerships can support the transfer of knowledge and understanding regarding community resilience.



## Workshop feedback and ways forward

- The research team need to present a clearer definition of what they understand rural community resilience to be.

*We agree that we can increase the clarity of how we present our understanding rural community resilience. The workshop event helped to clarify what we understand as 'rural community resilience'. Rural community resilience is closely related to sustainability in rural communities, and 'resilient rural communities' are empowered, connected, and cohesive, have resourceful capacity, and can face constant change by developing new strategies to in response to challenges and shocks. There is evidence that some local authority resilience officers are employing similar definitions.*

- Workshop participants felt that "resilience" is the buzzword of the moment. Will it still be by the end of the project and does that matter?

*This links to the point made above – resilience is about enabling communities to survive and develop into the future. This will still matter whether resilience is a buzzword or not, and where there is a political will to support community life in rural areas.*

- The workshop involved an over-representation of empowered and proactive communities, and there were no representatives from those communities facing challenges.

*We agree that it is easier to attract more empowered communities to take part in these types of events. We need to think about how we can overcome this, and we aim to see the stakeholder network develop and grow as the project proceeds.*

- What is the Community Resilience Assessment Tool, and what will it look like?

*We are beginning to develop a tool that will be useful to rural communities and those who support them. The literature review, this knowledge exchange workshop, the forthcoming policy event, and the re-analysis of existing data should help to generate an initial prototype tool by September 2017. The workshop provided the research team with very useful direction and ideas. The tool will continue to be refined over the course of the project.*



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