"Rural communities revisited: on empowerment, resilience and complexities – *making the invisible visible*"

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Rural communities are increasingly perceived to be the appropriate 'home' of rejuvenated local democracy, a strengthened local voice, and locally-led change delivering significant and inclusive place-based outcomes. The policy direction of travel is towards a rights-based approach which puts individuals and communities at the centre of decision-making, with local appropriation of resources and responsibility for their use and management being viewed as entirely appropriate. Capacity-building is part of this growing lexicon, but is rarely resourced to the same extent. Similarly, sound governance processes are referred to but not always exhaustively examined as pre-requisites for programmes or projects. The policy and practice trajectory pervades the public sector.

This paper focuses on Scotland's journey towards rural community empowerment, whilst also reflecting more widely on the UK's devolved administrations of Wales and Northern Ireland to observe common threads. I will particularly examine themes of community empowerment, rural poverty (including fuel poverty) and mental ill health.

What we can see are patterns which: assume and presume capacity and interest amongst communities; do not address the growing inequalities within and between communities; have not assessed the implications for equity and social justice in how citizens are variously experiencing empowerment and disempowerment through these processes.

Rural communities, and individuals within those communities, do not start off as equals – in terms of resources and access to resources. As the "community empowerment" process continues to gather unquestioned pace, those inequalities are persisting and in some cases increasing. This leads to three sets of questions now facing us.

Firstly, who is responsible for these growing inequalities? Communities? Policy-makers? Public sector service providers? Who will pick up that responsibility in practice? Are we going to see increasing pressure on the third sector/charities who traditionally have been at the forefront of dealing with market failure, now having to deal with a new kind of *empowerment distribution failure*?

Secondly, what are the long-term implications of this failure for rural community resilience - where there is a growing gap between the new haves and have-nots? What new dis-empowerment landscape will we see, in a context of tighter public sector service budgets and a re-imagined and re-budgeted present and future of community-centric services? How can social justice and social inclusion actually be delivered within this environment?

Thirdly, what is our response to be as researchers? Do we continue to examine empowerment and resilience in unproblematic ways, remaining relatively unquestioning in our stance? Or do we dig deeper to ensure that we are rigorous in looking at the

empowerment processes from multiple perspectives, remaining dissatisfied until we know we have exhausted the evidence and saturated ourselves with triangulated data?

In this paper, I conclude that we who are in a privileged position with time, space and resources to reflect and inform, have a duty to share responsibility for building a more complete picture, one which demonstrates the complex, non-linear, excluding nature of empowerment, the unevenness of engagement. We need to remind ourselves and others that realities are rich and diverse. We know that *we* are complex and would rarely accept being reduced to a series of binary choices and two-dimensional characteristics. So it is with individuals and communities. I would therefore argue that we have a responsibility to persist in our articulation of complexity, in clear and purposeful ways, to ensure that we do not fall into reductionist traps and simplistic landscapes of empowerment reproduction but respect the complex realities of those who are experiencing (dis-)empowerment within today's rural communities.