Do rural and urban Scotland need each other?

Gina Wilson, Senior Projects Officer, Carnegie UK Trust, June 2015

Austerity has bitten and the wounds are not evenly spread. Reductions in public services and disrupted disposable incomes have deepened problems for some, and created opportunities for others.

Within and across urban and rural, there are ‘communities of challenge’ that have needs based on any number of variables (employment, health etc). The shared challenge is likely to be one of inclusion – impeded by physical, economic, social or cultural constraints. Remote rural areas and dense urban neighbourhoods undoubtedly present different considerations, but it is the interrelationships between areas which contribute to economic and social progress.

Place-based or place-less approaches?

Place-based approaches drawing on local assets and networks are most likely to be successful. Yet, uneven capacity can risk exacerbating inequalities. There is debate about the extent to which fundamental structural disadvantage can be addressed solely through development from within communities. Existing power imbalances already show a bias towards those communities that have the skills, assets, networks and institutional capacity to compete. It is not clear where support will come from to create capacity-building at community level on the scale required and in a systematic way to prevent the entrenchment of two-speed development.

To explore public views towards giving communities greater control of services, Carnegie UK Trust commissioned ICM to carry out an online poll in January 2015. It found that 71% of respondents from Scotland felt that the amount of control they had over public services in their area had remained unchanged over the last 5 years.

Dramatic fluxes in Scottish political flows indicate that the mood is for fundamental
change. Change in the way we think about the relationship between individuals, communities and the state. With the language of co-production widely recognised, people expect to be part of the design process for the world in which they live – however they define this. Homogenous categorisation (including urban or rural) is not dynamic enough to define the way in which we experience our lives.

**Wellbeing**
The greatest opportunities to improve wellbeing will be found by focusing on those who face the most obstacles. In preliminary thinking underpinning the Carnegie UK Trust’s work around the concept of the **Enabling State**, Sir John Elvidge states, “giving a central place in our thinking to the capacity for communities, families and individuals to provide mutual support and self-help is the most convincing way to add to the wellbeing we have now”.

Governments can take **8 steps to an enabling state** in which communities take more control:
1. Get out of the way
2. Give people permission to take control
3. Help people to help each other
4. Help people to do more
5. Give people more rights
6. Enablement is the new normal
7. Invest in disadvantaged communities
8. Tangible focus on wellbeing

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill, approved last week, gives communities in both urban and rural areas more rights to take over land and have a say on how their services will be delivered. Decentralising decision-making to improve community engagement is a vital step. So too is improving the usability and quality of open data. Inequalities of place are not well handled in data aggregated at a national level, such as Scotland Performs. Measuring national trends is important; findings means of simplifying and increasing data-driven decision-making is the next step in making and measuring social progress.

**Interrelationships**
*Understanding Scottish Places* is a step towards using national data to interpret interrelationships between places. At this stage, it is based on towns with populations of over 1000. Accessible visual presentations of information support practitioners to understand their town’s function, particularly in relation to the flows between towns. In the future, this type of resource needs to become more detailed (including much smaller settlements) and include locally available data (to bring qualitative richness and relevance). The simple, interpretive presentation of this type of data can help us take a holistic approach to planning; cognisant of subtle differences between communities.

**Digital**
Infrastructure and access differences between urban and rural areas are often discussed in
terms of a digital divide – the perception being urban in, rural out. The Carnegie UK Trust has recognised particular challenges for rural areas through our work calling for more action to inspire a community enterprise approach to the development of rural broadband and options for future public investment in rural broadband. The perception of infrastructure as the main obstacle masks a much more complex set of barriers to digital inclusion, which affect urban and rural areas in similar ways. For the final fifth of people not yet online, these barriers are usually multiple, inter-related and personal to them. They tend to be related to lack of interest; cost; concerns about technology and comfort or preference for doing things in person. An individualised approach, finding personal hooks is required to engage people and help get them online.

Yes, urban and rural Scotland need each other. The need is even greater in the communities of challenge that exist within and across these categories. Advancing our understanding of the interrelationships between all communities and maintaining a focus on inclusion will help us to progressively improve wellbeing.

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