

# **Scottish Community Empowerment: Reconfigured Localism or an Opportunity for Change?**

**Katey Tabner**

**University of the West of Scotland**

Community development and regeneration policy in Scotland employs aspirational language, depicting communities as the empowered drivers of economic and social change. It anticipates that willing, able and highly skilled community groups will come forward and assume responsibility for the delivery of local services. This narrative fails to account for the impacts of austerity, the complexities of empowerment (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013) or what will happen to communities who fail to be empowered. The article challenges the positive narrative employed in Scotland by highlighting issues that complicate the empowerment process. It concludes by suggesting ways in which a 'Scottish Approach' to policy making may help to create opportunities for empowerment policy in Scotland to better address the challenges, inequalities and complexities of empowerment.

## **Responsibilisation and Community Governance**

In outlining a vision of civic life in Scotland, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act (Scottish Government, 2015) assumes the presence of active, engaged, willing and committed communities. Through the Act, the Scottish Government outlines an approach to governing Scotland 'underpinned by the belief that the people of this country can, and should, take increased responsibility for the issues that affect our nation' (Scottish Government, 2009; p.2). This narrative has subsequently been woven into national strategies on service provision and design, regeneration, social enterprise and the third sector, the government's National Performance Framework and Community Engagement Standards (Scottish Government, 2011a; Scottish Government, 2011b; Scottish Government, 2016). As a result, Scottish community development policy rests upon the principles of responsabilization and empowerment

of communities as a response to austerity and the rolling-back of services (Featherstone et al., 2012; MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014; Peck and Tickell, 2002).

The co-option of communities into this process serves to depoliticize increasing inequality and deprivation brought about by austerity. Existing research indicates that new responsibilities afforded to communities under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) and Localism (England and Wales) Acts (such as asset transfers, right to buy, and participation requests) recruit communities as the developers of local services, whilst governments enable change (Aiken, Taylor and Moran, 2016; Connolly, 2016; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Painter et al., 2011). This co-option of communities into the reform agenda has been described as both ‘neo-liberalism with a community face’ and the creation of communities as sites of governable terrain (Carmel and Harlock, 2008; MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014; p.446). These community governance projects are promoted through the use of language that focuses upon the resilience and capacity of communities to respond to policy incentives (Joseph, 2013; MacLachlan, 2016; Mowbray, 2005; Netto et al., 2012). Indeed, it is frequently the access to pre-existing sources of capacity, skills and resilience inherent within communities, which dictates the success of organisations in accessing funding and support (Craig, 2007; Walton and Macmillan, 2015), whilst groups unable or unwilling to comply with governance criteria have been found to be ineligible for funding and support (Barnes and Prior, 2000). In Scotland, compliance with community governance objectives is made manifest through requirements to link with priorities of regeneration strategies and local action plans to access funding and support.

### **Noncompliance and inequality**

Scotland’s empowerment policy adopts a holistic view of communities and the individuals comprising them. This policy assumes that individuals are willing members of community groups and that individual interests align, however fails to acknowledge the myriad of reasons behind non-participation. It also reconceptualises non-compliance as a form of individual or civic deviance (Kothari, 2001; p.148). The social and personal factors contributing towards decisions to participate (or not) have

been found to range from local politics and pre-established hierarchies, to lack of skills needed to complete practical development work, e.g. form filling, to the uncertain and ‘non-linear’ nature of development work (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013; p.324). Additionally, by failing to acknowledge the individual motivations behind participation, empowerment policy assumes individuals to have high levels of resources, skills and capacity to engage. Unfortunately, owing to the implementation of Scottish empowerment legislation in response to austerity, communities without these characteristics are subsequently penalised when they are unable to replace retreating public service provision (Findlay-King et al., 2017). Existing research has indicated that this ‘neo-liberal offloading’ can lead to insecure community services, the burdening of communities, and deprived communities being disproportionately affected due to levels of social capital being expended (McKendrick et al., 2016; Painter et al., 2011; p.42). Consequently, communities with the time, skills and capacity to engage become privileged, forming a local ‘consultative elite’ and furthering existing inequalities and the under representation of marginalised groups (Shaw, 2017; pg.11). These issues open up questions about the types of groups being privileged through the empowerment process, a process typically found to support pre-existing local power structures (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013). This emphasises how disparity in pre-existing levels of skills and social capital within communities can affect their ability to be empowered (Findlay-King et al., 2017; Mohan and Stokke, 2000).

Broader economic issues also play a key role in defining the success and support needs of community groups involved in empowerment activity. Looking specifically at community empowerment within a Scottish context, Scott (2012) has highlighted that legislation has failed to acknowledge the influence of local economies on project success. Currently, communities are viewed as sites of enterprise, creating a culture of competition whereby communities must make themselves attractive to external investment (Shaw, 2017). However this fails to recognise how community enterprise projects depend upon the strength of local economies to support enterprise activity, and that communities already affected by poverty will struggle to attract outside

investment, in the form of tourism, or local investment from community members paying for services (Scott, 2012; p.85).

### **The specific case of small community groups**

A central marker of success for Scotland's empowerment legislation lies in how well it is able to activate and empower communities to take on new powers. Literature exploring the needs of community groups indicates that the challenges they face are more complex than currently acknowledged in the positive rhetoric surrounding empowerment. Primarily, it is important to acknowledge that empowerment activity is a political act with opportunities for personal, local and regional tensions to arise (Sharma, 2008). In some instances these tensions can worsen existing community relations. Exploring these issues in a Scottish context, Skerrat and Steiner's (2013) work underlines a need to challenge expectations surrounding communities and empowerment activity. They highlight groups choosing not to engage in empowerment programmes and, amongst those who did engage, groups were fragmentary with changeable personal and collective motivations. The authors also emphasised the iterative non-linear nature of development work, which results in a more complex empowerment process (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013). Such work highlights the importance cooperative local networks can have for empowerment activity, and cautions against assumptions of empowerment as a natural outcome.

Small community organisations that take on much of the empowerment activity are also vulnerable and at risk of being overwhelmed by the new responsibilities placed on them. As groups increase their responsibilities, access funding or establish partnerships with professional agencies, they are required to increase professional capacity. This not only creates an administrative burden for small organisations, it endangers the collaborative and peer-led process, which defines community-led work. Conn (2011) describes this process as an intricate balance between the vertical, hierarchical world of corporate organisations and the voluntary, peer-led and horizontal structure of community groups. The defining factor of community organisations, according to Conn, is the way in which 'individuals, when they come together voluntarily through their shared interests, connect to give each other mutual

peer support in some way' (Conn, 2011; p.5). One of the ways in which professional community development practitioners aim to address the imbalance between the existing skills of community organisations and their new responsibilities is through 'capacity building' exercises. However existing research has highlighted that in many instances this support fails to provide what community groups need. Donahue (2011) explores the issues of support for community organisations and indicates that, in many instances, community groups objected to taking part in vague, capacity building exercises instead of accessing training, which addressed their own specific organisational aims. Areas in which support was needed were around governance, volunteer staffing and generating sustainable income beyond revenue funding (Donahue, 2011). This highlights the fragility of organisations across the community sector and the challenges they face as they look to take on responsibilities locally.

### **Divergence: a Scottish approach to Localism**

Despite its neo-liberal underpinnings, Scotland's Empowerment legislation arguably provides some basis for a participatory alternative to the prescriptive market liberalism of the Localism Act in England and Wales. The consultative nature of policy design and implementation within Scotland may allow more opportunities for addressing the challenges and complexities of empowerment activity. In defining how Scottish policy-making differs to that of Westminster, Cairney, Russel and St Denney (2016) suggest that Scotland benefits from adopting a more consultative and cooperative style of policy making. This approach sees the government work in partnership with stakeholders to support policy objectives. The authors suggest that a positive rhetoric has come to be associated with Scotland's policy making process, based upon this collaborative, joined-up approach. This, they suggest, risks overlooking the complex and unavoidable external 'universal' issues which affect Scottish policymaking. These include a lack of control over reserved powers, the inevitability of 'bounded rationality' affecting the decision-making process via limited information or time constraints, and the tensions associated with managing austerity and localism (Cairney, Russell and St Denny, 2016; Cairney and St Denny, 2015; Pugh and Connolly, 2016). The authors highlight territorial advantages of making policy in Scotland. Firstly, the smaller scale of Scottish politics generates an

environment in which policy makers work in close proximity to local authority, statutory and voluntary sector partners. As a result, relations are possible which allow policy makers to overcome organisational silos prevalent in the policy making process of larger polities. Secondly, increased contact with stakeholders may help overcome policy ambiguity surrounding key terminology and ensure activity to support policy is effectively administered. Finally, owing to its size and enhanced network of cross-sector partnerships, greater discretion over policy outcomes is possible (Cairney, Russell and St Denny, 2016).

However, in acknowledging any value that a Scottish approach could bring to the implementation and monitoring of empowerment policy requires acknowledging the broader underlying ‘universal’ issues of austerity and neoliberal reform driving UK policy. Whilst austerity and neo-liberalism have been acknowledged as drivers behind the Localism Act, Scotland’s empowerment legislation risks offering a distractingly positive veneer on what may turn out to be neo-liberalism ‘by the back door’. The implementation of Scotland’s neo-liberal agenda may also prove more efficient than its counterpart in Westminster, owing to the embedded nature of empowerment legislation within the National Performance Framework, local action plans and regional strategies. Acknowledging these aspects creates a critical rationale to suggest constructive ways in which policy solutions can move beyond the simplistic and overly positive narrative of ‘empowerment’ towards addressing the complex and challenging reality of community development.

Such solutions may be able to take advantage of the territorial factors, specific to Scotland, outlined by Cairney et al (2016). As the authors note, Scotland’s policy making community is relatively small in size, with significant overlap and partnership working between sectors and agencies. Whilst this level of networked governance can be difficult to manage, significant opportunities are also created for bottom-up feedback and empowerment of community groups. In ensuring on-going consultation and discussion with community groups and local partners, there are opportunities for the complexities and difficulties facing local groups to surface. Through increased feedback, policy ambiguity may also be resolved. The significant role played by the

voluntary sector in the delivery of services and administration of funding also provides opportunities to overcome the challenges of tailoring support to meet community need. By providing meaningful, and potentially challenging, feedback about what is, and importantly isn't, working in community 'capacity building', the voluntary sector has opportunities to better represent the experiences of local community groups. Wide distribution and use of reports detailing the challenges facing groups engaged in empowerment activity will be useful; a recent review of Big Lottery funding provides a good example of how policy discussions can better account for the complex and uneven nature of empowerment (Scottish Community Development Centre and Community Enterprise, 2017). Finally, further development requires that community empowerment remains a policy priority. If Community Empowerment falls out of policy vogue, as frequently happens with such 'headline' policies, groups starting their empowerment journey may also fall out of focus. The complexities and challenges they face will require continual engagement from the Scottish Government, statutory partners and the Scottish voluntary sector.

### **Conclusion**

The Scottish Government's vision of empowerment requires skilled, resilient and committed individuals to volunteer in taking on additional responsibilities. Through rebranding austerity as empowerment, policy serves to de-politicize tensions and inequalities and relocates conflicts into local communities. It fails to acknowledge community diversity, inequality in community capacity, skills and the influence of local economies on the long-term success of empowerment projects. As a result, it may unfairly privilege communities most able and willing to engage, over those more disadvantaged. The Act also significantly understates the work required to successfully run community projects, applying principles of free market liberalism to voluntary groups. Organisational instability and fragility mean that such an approach is not sustainable in meeting the needs of community organisations or ensuring ongoing open and equal access to community services. However, there is scope for the Scottish Government to address the issues faced by communities based on its particular territorial advantages. Fundamentally this requires a more nuanced

understanding of empowerment activity, community diversity, the voluntary nature of community organisations and the challenges they face.



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