

# Designing sustainable pathways: the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in transition. Findings from empirical case studies in the Western Isles

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## Abstract

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland represent a dramatic mountain-seascape which for long has been regarded one of the "classic" peripheries of Europe. This perception was mainly based on a rather homogenous picture of a residual problem area in terms of economic and socio-cultural disparities which did persist to considerable extent up until recently. However, as rural areas throughout Europe presently are undergoing significant processes of structural change, including economic, social, cultural and political adjustment in the context of globalization, a much more diverse picture of rural peripheries in Europe is emerging. As such the Highlands and Islands provide an outstanding example of recent restructuring not yet fully recognized outside Britain. This is particularly true for the Western Isles, a chain of islands on the western fringe of the country facing major challenges regarding economic performance and social well-being of its population. Against the background of an ecologically fragile mountain-seascape people of the islands find themselves increasingly involved in fundamental debate about appropriate ways of future development. As selected case studies show the idea of sustainability provides a conceptual frame that seems at the core of the present discourse. Several initiatives and projects reflect opportunities but also obstacles connected with the ongoing process of transition.

**Keywords:** rural peripheries, Highlands and Islands, Western Isles, integrated rural development, sustainability

## 1 Introduction

Rural peripheries throughout Europe, many of which are mountain landscapes on the inner and outer fringes of the continent, for long have been regarded backward, underdeveloped, and shrinking, and thus have been classified rather homogeneously as "losing areas" within the context of spatial development at large. This perception of a residual problem category in terms of economic and socio-cultural disparities does persist to considerable extent up until now. However, as rural areas presently are undergoing significant processes of structural change, including economic, social, cultural and political adjustment in the context of globalization, a much more diverse picture of rural peripheries in Europe is emerging.

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland provide an outstanding example of recent restructuring of a "classic" European periphery not yet fully recognized outside Britain. Against the background of an ecologically fragile mountain-seascape the population of the area finds itself increasingly involved in fundamental debate about appropriate ways of future development. This is particularly true for the Western

Isles which form the most outer part of the Atlantic seaboard and for long have been regarded “lost places” in the wider context of spatial development in Scotland and the UK. At the core of the present discourse the concept of sustainability provides a challenging framework however far from easy consensus building.

Not least contrary to original suggestions for large-scale industrial development many development projects in the Western Isles particularly address the natural and cultural assets of the islands. Local land-ownership, community businesses, and participatory planning thereby appear to be decisive “tools” for the design of sustainable pathways as indicated by an increasing number of promising projects throughout the islands.

In the following we will develop a brief overview of the Highlands and Islands with special emphasis on the Western Isles, as well as the dimensions of the present regional policy debate with regard to the economic and socio-cultural restructuring of this rural periphery. Selected examples of recent project initiatives will serve as illustrations of how island communities have argued and decided to design sustainable pathways for their future and how these are eventually being put into place.

Data presented in this chapter are mainly based on own empirical studies in the area, namely two research projects (2002–2005 and 2008–2011) in the Isle of Skye and in the Western Isles funded by the German Research Foundation. Major focus of the methodical design was on in-depth interviews carried out with local government members, project officers and employees of selected development trusts. In addition, the data collected was completed by desktop research which involved reviewing development plans and reports produced by the selected development trusts and exploring their websites. Interviews and data collection were followed up by visits to the sites. The selected development trusts included Galson Estate Trust (Isle of Lewis), North Harris Trust and Grimsay Boatshed Trust (Isle of Grimsay).

## **2 The Scottish Highlands and Islands: a classic periphery of Europe?**

For long the Scottish Highlands and Islands have been regarded one of the most characteristic peripheries of Europe. This perception relates to the extreme geographical location on the northwestern fringe of Scotland and the United Kingdom, but does equally comprise aspects of the unfavorable climate, deficits in accessibility, and low density of population. Furthermore outmigration and lack of employment are relevant connotations in this context. As such the Highlands and Islands have as well suffered from a great deal of neglect (Turnock 1974). However, no clear borderline of the area concerned does exist. Similarly used are definitions regarding the so called crofting counties established in 1886, the administrative (but much smaller) territory of the Highland Council created in 1975 and the geomorphological area of the mainland and island mountainscape northwest of the Scottish Depression between Glasgow and Edinburgh. Finally, the term also relates to the working area of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the Scottish Government’s economic and community development agency for the northwest area of the country.

A considerable part of this outstanding rural periphery forms the archipelago of the Hebrides, a widespread area of islands off the west coast of Scotland. Usually a differentiation is being made between the Inner and Outer Hebrides. While the majority of the first islands lie just off the mainland coast, including Arran, Islay, Mull and Skye, the latter are located beyond the The Minch and form the chain of the Western Isles (including Harris, Lewis and North and South Uist) exposed to the open Atlantic. Characteristically the islands share a number of distinct natural features, namely an extended mountain landscape and a varied coastline formed of cliffs, beaches and sea-lochs (fjords). Particularly due to the extreme climate (e.g. extraordinarily strong winds and high rainfall) the archipelago presents a highly fragile environment but of outstanding ecological value at the same time (regarding both flora and fauna).

Equally as the vulnerable natural environment the islands as well as the mainland territory share a distinct history with the rich but highly marginalized Celtic heritage at its core. Withstanding the increasing process of Anglification in Scotland since the Middle Ages the archipelago together with major parts of the Highlands remained one of the few strongholds of Celtic culture with continuous Norse (Viking) influence at the same time. The so called Lordship of the Isles represents a period of nearly 200 years when the area had gained considerable political independence and kept control over vast areas of land and sea (Hunter 2000: 112). However, by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century this influence of the Lordship had been lost and their territory finally been incorporated in the Scottish kingdom. More severe change resulted from the bitter Highland-Lowland antagonism and finally the failure of the Jacobitan rebellion of 1745/1746 as an attempt to reinstall the Stuart dynasty on the Scottish throne. In its aftermath the Highlands and Islands had to face systematic and violent repression of Celtic culture with the traditional clan system finally being replaced by the feudalizing policies of the Scottish crown. Even more dramatically since the late 1880s the so called Highland Clearances saw extended displacement of people from their land in favor of large scale sheep farming and hunting grounds in the hands of few aristocratic landowners. As a result large parts of the Highlands and Islands were cleared with a great amount of people forced to migrate either into the big industrial cities or to North America and other overseas destinations (Hunter 2000: 233).

The change of the Highland and Islands societies that followed the Clearances took rather dramatic forms of social and economic decline which condemned the remaining population to a life of marginalization. Subsistence farming, together with fishing and kelping (the collection of kelp for producing soda ash) were about the only sources of living. For long little was known about these circumstances to the rest of the country, before occasional travellers explored the area and reported about what they had seen and experienced, according to Samuel Johnson (1773) a world apart from the British society as far as Africa. This perception happened to persist at least partly well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite several means of justice and reparation, such as the Crofters Act in 1886 legalizing small scale farmers (crofters) and their rights to communal use of land for grazing, the Hebrides hardly experienced any successful attempt of economic reanimation. Rather contrary the islands

off the west coast (even longer than the more accessible parts of the Highlands) remained in a severe state of stagnation with a devastated environment which contributed considerably to the image of the area being a "problem region" even in European perspective (Turnock 1974; Wehling 1987).

### 3 The regional policy debate: conceptual dispute over future pathways

Little if any change had happened to the Highlands and Islands before in 1950 a British Government White Paper addressed the problems of the region by considering specific action to be taken to foster economic growth. In effect a general policy was proposed to improve services, develop primary industries and tourism, and make fuller use of the natural resources. Accordingly already one year before a special development area had been designated to concentrate efforts for revitalization in parts of the Highlands, this being the first time this kind of incentive was applied to a large rural area in Britain (Turnock 1974: 39). However, considerable uncertainty about appropriate measures to face the problems remained vivid for some time. Therefore it was only due to the implementation of the Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) in 1965, the government's first regional agency for economic development, that a more structured and holistic policy finally could take shape.

Given rather wide powers to take initiatives, and with considerable political backing within Scotland, HIDB was able to develop a strategic approach to the area's economic and social revitalization. Targeting economic growth and employment as the declared priorities of their policies, special attention was being paid to location of oil and gas production, to promotion of national and international tourism, but also to improvements of traditional industries such as fishing, fish processing, textiles and whisky, meant to provide new sources of employment and income beyond crofting. In addition general improvements of services and infrastructure (e.g. roads and railways) were targeted. Not least additional funding by the EU (since 1973) contributed substantially to the effectiveness of according measures. Finally, it is worth mentioning that activities of HIDB were also seen of considerable symbolic value in view of the exploitation of resources and political repressions the region had suffered so much from in the past (Hunter 2000: 355; Turnock 1974: 39).

Despite obvious improvements the policies of HIDB became subject of controversial debate (Mose 2005: 21). Whereas activities of HIDB were seen as a consequent strategy to economic revival on the one hand, doubts were raised regarding the primarily economic focus of action lacking necessary considerations regarding the complexity of problems identified in the region (especially social and cultural) on the other hand. In fact, activities of HIDB could not prevent development taking rather different courses in different parts of the Highlands and Islands. In result, considerable disparities remained vivid with mainly eastern parts of the Highlands claiming major increases in employment and population whereas contrarily the northwest coast and particularly the islands off the west coast were regarded as

“losers” of the policies applied. Obvious disparities are especially reflected by the patterns of population development. While since the middle of the 1960s the Highlands and Islands generally experienced a slow but constant increase of population again (for most part by in-migration) this was concentrated mainly on the northeast coast and in major settlements of rural areas, whereas many little villages and particularly a lot of islands continued to lose population. This was especially the case in the Western Isles which have experienced continuous decline until today. The most critical issue in this context is “brain drain” of young people who continuously leave the islands in order to seek education and employment on the Scottish mainland, mainly in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen.

Fundamental change to the conceptual basis of regional policies in Britain at large was brought about by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (later John Major) from 1979. Principle skepticism against any form of interventionist policy opened the field for increasing market orientation of the policies applied with the activation of private capital becoming the major focus of any measures to be taken. Consequences for the Highlands and Islands were rather obvious: After several adjustments of HIDB to the new conservative philosophy, the agency was finally dissolved and became replaced by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) in 1991 (Mose 2005: 22). Following earlier examples of so called “quangos” (quasi non-governmental organizations) HIE does not only stand for an institutional re-organization of rather groundbreaking character. According to several Rural White Papers of the Scottish Office of the 1990s HIE even more so has the liability for further adjustment of policy delivery in terms of targets to be set for individuals and groups to take more responsibility for their own development and thereby overcoming the corrosive psychological effect of negative self-images. Thus rural development should be more rooted in bottom-up approaches to hopefully achieve more durable processes of development firmly planted in rural communities themselves (Shucksmith 1999).

Since the Highlands and Islands have seen the implementation of several new policy instruments oriented towards more entrepreneurial, participatory, cross-sectoral, sustainable and thus integrated approaches in rural development (Brodda 2010; Rennie 2005). This includes incentives both at national and international level. Worth mentioning are the implementation of the Scottish Rural Partnership Fund in 1996 as well as the adaption of the European LEADER initiative since 1991. Further acceleration was due to the process of devolution finally leading to the election of a Scottish Parliament and the consequent installation of a Scottish Government in 1999. This has resulted in the application of additional funding instruments based on the above mentioned principles and with a special focus on the most fragile areas, including several islands on the western seaboard. However, a number of these instruments, such as the Initiative at the Edge, still appear rather experimental in character (Mose 2005: 23; Brodda 2010). More recently the Scottish land reform and its implications for rural development have gained special attention (Schmied 2001). Against the background of a nearly 900 year old feudal land right which had seen the vast majority of land remaining in the hands of a few private land-owners, the Scottish Government was seeking for a land reform that would allow communities gain

control over their land and thereby provide a basis for future development. According to the Land Reform Bill implemented in 2001, local communities and crofting communities are given the right to buy out their land. Accordingly the Scottish Land Fund provides financial resources for funding. In result several rural communities have made use of this right and bought out their land, some of which even did so before formal installation of the act. A growing number of buy-outs, including several cases on the western seaboard and in the Hebridean archipelago such as Egg (1997), Knoydart (1999), Gigha (2001), North Harris (2003) and Galson (2004) illustrate the striking response expressed towards land reform across the country. Even more, it also reflects the increasing awareness among local communities of the need for economic and social change in the wider context of the Highlands and Islands and the identification of appropriate pathways at large.

Against the sketched background the Western Isles provide a special and particular interesting example for the present process of restructuring. With regard to population development, but also economic performance the islands for long have been in a specifically difficult situation facing the classic problems of a rural periphery, e.g. outmigration, limited sources of employment and income, limited quality of infrastructure, and lack of accessibility. All in all this has much contributed to the image of fragility and vulnerability so often associated with the islands. Significantly the title of one of the more recent development programs addressing the problems of the region, the Initiative at the Edge, gives indication for this perspective (Brodda 2010). However, due to the increasing efforts that have been made to foster economic and social development, particularly the policies conducted under the umbrella of HIE since the early 1990s, according to Schmieid (2004: 72) all of the Highlands and Islands, including the Western Isles, have seen considerable restructuring of the economy although a number of differences to the rest of Scotland still remain (e.g. the greater importance of the primary sector). Today the economic structure generally appears to be much more diversified than in the past, including traditional industries such as textiles (Harris Tweed) and whisky as well as a variety of modern services. Tourism has become one of the most important sectors altogether mainly capitalizing on the region's natural and cultural assets. Furthermore modern information and communication play an increasing role with e-commerce companies now locating even in the Western Isles. However, public administration and education remain the most important employers across the Highlands and Islands.

In the course of the highly visible process of restructuring attention is being drawn to the role of local actors involved and the political debate on economic and social development in this context. This perspective is particular important in view of the recent adjustment of regional policies especially towards participation and sustainability which would require significant efforts in building consensus about certain strategies, initiatives and projects. The Western Isles supply two rather outstanding examples of the obvious difficulties that have been connected especially with large scale development projects in the islands previously: the former projects of a superquarry at Lingerbay on the Isle of Harris and a huge wind farm on the Isle of Lewis both of which caused highly controversial debate among local communities at the time and even raised national attention across Scotland and Britain.

Typically both projects illustrate a situation of mutual interference of local and global interests on the one hand and economic and cultural notions on the other hand.

The struggle about the Lingerbay project was about the decision of the Western Isles Council, taken in 1992, to approve the application of a multinational corporation for planning permission to quarry 600 million tons of anorthosite over a sixty-year period from the mountain of Ronevhal, overlooking the township of Lingerbay in southeast Harris. While considerable numbers of the Harris population were in favor of the project promising additional work and income in a region traditionally short of employment, other groups of people organized themselves to resist the superquarry as they saw it as a major threat to the natural and cultural environment afflicted with the image of the Clearances. According to Mackenzie (2001) the dispute mainly evolved around different understandings of "community" and "sustainability" among people in the island. While for one side safeguarding of the local communities' future would only have been able by adapting to the demands of development in the context of the global economy, the other side contrarily believed in the need to root any form of development in regard of the traditional unity between people and land and the inherited culture of communal land-use. Ultimately the quarry project was finally rejected by Scottish Government in 2000 on the basis of a Public Local Enquiry ran over 9 months while at the same time the installation of a community run development group, Harris Development Limited, provided a new frame for the design of more sustainable development initiatives embedded in the local community's culture (Mackenzie 2001, 2004).

Former plans to build one of Europe's biggest wind farms in the northwest of Lewis give further evidence for the potential of conflict connected with the issues of development (Rincon 2006). Plans for the project presented to the public in 2004 caused massive opposition from various actors including several conservation groups and local residents. Although the original number of 234 turbines had been cut to 181, opposition continued to persist. This was also in contrast to the Western Isles Council which had been backing the project in general. Despite the developers trying to assure local residents of the economic benefits especially in terms of new jobs to be created, more than 5,000 inhabitants signed a petition against the original wind farm plans. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds as well as the Scottish Wildlife Trust also remained extremely concerned about the potential damage to vulnerable bird habitats and some of the world's most extensive and intact areas of blanket bog caused by the project. In regard of the strong opposition the whole project was finally turned down by Scottish Government in 2008. However, in late 2010 plans have been approved for another wind farm in the southeast of Lewis. Originally planned for 53 turbines, due to strong opposition both of local residents as well as Scottish Natural Heritage and the John Muir Trust, a landscape conservation charity, numbers were reduced by the developer to 39 in total. Also location of the turbines will no longer effect protected peatlands in the area. Accordingly the generating capacity of the wind farm came down to 118 MW. To generate greater acceptance the developer agreed with Western Isles Council upon committing one per cent of turnover of the wind farm to the Muaitheabhal Community Wind Farm Trust, to enhance the ecological and cultural heritage resource of the Eisegin estate

affected by the wind farm site. Additionally, a further 0.5 per cent slice of turnover will be paid to the Western Isles Development Trust involved in economic, social and recreational projects across the islands (The Scottish Government 2010).

In summary both the Lingerbay quarry project and the Lewis wind farm project clearly illustrate skepticism and reservations among local communities with regard to large-scale development schemes in the Western Isles. Rooted in a vulnerable environment of high ecological value and rich in cultural traditions people are increasingly concerned if not alarmed in regard of projections of future development pulled on them from outside. Thus there is an ever greater demand for the design of alternative pathways adapted to the fragile natural environment and more sustainably embedded in local communities and their culture.

#### 4 Designing sustainable pathways: three cases of renewal

As sketched briefly above, the Scottish Highlands and Islands since long have been experiencing enormous challenges related to economic decline together with ageing and out-migration. This is particularly true for the Western Isles which have lacked some of the socio-economic regeneration and population recovery experienced in the Inner Hebrides. Loss of human potential in terms of young people leaving the islands is still rather dramatic as population decline between 1991 and 2001 amounted to 10 per cent respectively around 250 people per year out of a total population of 26,180 (Schmied 2004: 70–72; CNES 2011).

In response to the described problems since the 1990s the Scottish Executive has taken different forms of direct and indirect intervention by making use of EU rural development programmes as well as a number of national initiatives alike. Programmes such as LEADER, the Initiative at the Edge and Dùthchas stand for a rather diverse set of rural development instruments having been introduced to empower communities and develop innovative local projects with model character for regeneration (Brodda 2010).

Recent years have particularly seen a boom of bottom-up and multi-sectoral initiatives run by community groups as driving forces. Various sustainable practices in the field of renewable energies, health care services or preservation of traditional skills are currently being developed by a number of organisations spread out across the Western Isles such as development trusts, charities, community business, to name only a few. In the following section three examples of development trusts in the Western Isles will be presented.

**Galson Estate Trust**, established in 2004, is located in the North West of the Isle of Lewis. Since the community buyout in 2007, it has managed 56,000 acres of land under the responsibility of 11 trustees. Two thirds of the 2,000 resident population of the 22 crofting townships are members of the Trust. In comparison the Galson Estate is the second largest community buyout in the Western Isles partly funded by the Scottish Land Trust and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (BBC 2007).

The overall objective of the Trust is rural regeneration. This will be achieved by the principles of sustainable development and therefore, combating social and



economic deprivation within the Galson Estate area (Galson Estate Trust 2011a). The core activities of the Galson Estate Trust include land management, renewable projects (wind turbines), estate businesses (leases, rentals, land sales, extractions, crofting), a business centre (under construction since 2010), and recycling.

The Trust generates income mainly from public funds (e.g. Scottish Natural Heritage). Furthermore, in 2009, Western Isles Council granted planning permission for three turbines on the Galson Estate which are expected to provide a revenue stream for the Galson community to progress the development of the area. However, the most stable source of income comes from the sale of land for new developments, leases from commercial developments, mortgages of houses built on the estate, rentals for the communication masts, and royalties for the sand and rock quarrying (Galson Estate Trust 2011b).

As mentioned before, the Trust is currently in the process of constructing a business centre on the estate. It will provide office spaces for the Trust staff and for rent, a crofting archive room, a meeting room, retail and business information area, a multi-functional area for businesses, land management and environmental seminars, markets, including a crofters' market providing local producers with an outlet for their products. The design of the business centre incorporates a wind turbine, providing a renewable energy source and an electric vehicle with its own charging point. Thanks to its central location in the Galson area, it should be easily accessible and well used (Galson Estate Trust 2011c).

A specific feature that distinguishes the Galson Trust from other development trusts in the Western Isles is its close cooperation with Lews Castle College, Stornoway. For example, the mast of the wind turbine on Galson Estate is on loan from the College and provides data for the Trust's community wind project. The mast is also used by the College as a training facility for students on related courses. Another project carried out in cooperation with Lews Castle College is the "Theta"-project which has the key objectives of promoting tourism based upon the unique cultural, environmental, and historical assets of the area.

Established in 2002 in the course of a community buy-out (Hunter 2007), the **North Harris Trust** manages a 620 ha large estate on behalf of the community in the northern part of Isle of Harris. The three overall aims of the North Harris Trust are the economic, social and environmental regeneration of the area (NHT 2011). The Trust is involved in a wide range of activities including housing, land management, social initiatives, however, probably the most important activity are projects dedicated to renewables and energy saving measures. The Trust's focus on "green" energy projects started in 2007 when the North Harris Trading Company Ltd was set up as a wholly owned subsidiary of the Trust. Since then, the Trust has become involved in investigating and delivering energy generation projects as well as promoting community and household energy conservation.

So far, a wind turbine has been commissioned at Urgha Community Recycling Site. Moreover, the North Harris Trading company received planning approval in March 2010 to erect two wind turbines to the north of the Scaladale Outdoor Centre which will benefit from energy generation. In addition, the Company plans to set up another wind turbine on the Monan site. Given the acceptance of local people,

planning permission and grid connection, the company estimates that the project “will generate a substantial return for the next twenty years which can be invested in the local community.” Concurrently, construction of the Bunavoneader hydro-electric scheme is in progress. Earlier on, in 2008, the Company planted 25,000 trees on 2.5 ha of land at Kyles Scalpay as part of a trial to investigate the practicalities of growing wood crops for fuel. It is expected that in the near future, the wood crops will be suitable for drying, chipping and burning in solid fuel boilers (NHTC 2011). The current top priority of the Trust is the construction of Zero Carbon Business Unit which was started to be built in late summer 2010 (NHTC 2010: 1).

Regarding energy saving measures, the North Harris Trust set up the Community Carbon Challenge project in partnership with the Energy Advisory Service (Western Isles) in 2009. The project was seeking to eradicate fuel poverty and encourage a reduction in carbon and energy consumption in North Harris. Over the two year project, over 100 homes have had insulation measures fitted without any charge (NHTC 2010: 2).

All these activities prove that the North Harris Trust is very much involved in promoting and experimenting with “green” energy. The Trust also has recognised the opportunity of creating an additional stable income stream which renewable projects provide. This income supports other Trusts’ projects such as Community Development Fund or a project on tourism infrastructure. Eventually, an important contribution to sustainable development of North Harris are seven jobs which have been created by the Trust.

Finally, a third example of sustainable community development is the **Grimsay Boatshed Trust** on the Isle of Grimsay. Established in 2002, the Trust aims at “improving the quality of life for young and old on Grimsay and the neighbouring islands through projects which preserve the past for use today and tomorrow” (UCVO 2011a). In particular, the Trust focuses on preserving traditional boat-building skills to support the local fishing community activities and diversify the local economy. In order to pass on the boat building skills to the young generation, a boatshed workshop has been built. Its manager, an experienced joiner and boatbuilder, provides training on construction of traditional Grimsay boats. As a result of the cooperation with a local secondary school, a new two-year course in traditional boatbuilding skills for secondary school pupils has been created with funding provided by LEADER+ programme. The course has been recognised as a boatbuilding qualification and is the first in Scotland in traditional boatbuilding skills. The Boatshed Trust also offers an apprenticeship for those who would like to set up own business in future.

In addition to the provision of the boatbuilding course, the boatshed has become a stimulus for local economic development and community-oriented activities. Regarding the first, the boatshed manager and his apprentice construct boats for sale and offer boat repairs. In 2010, 96 boats from across the Western Isles were repaired in the boatshed. According to the manager, the Boatshed is fully financially viable. The Trust has currently about 110 members whose boats are maintained by the boatshed.

Concurrently with the setup of Boatshed in 2002, Grimsay Community Association was created. The Association promotes the “educational, cultural and economic opportunities for Grimsay” (UCVO 2011b), and organises events and launches projects related to the heritage of Grimsay such as local boat making, lobster fishing, crofting and local culture (Gaelic songs, stories and poetry). A popular annual event is Grimsay Boat Day where locals and visitors have the opportunity to take part in a parade of local boats and learn more about the region and its people during conferences and ceilidhs (traditional social gathering which usually involves playing Gaelic folk music and dancing). Other events organised by the Grimsay Community Association include summer exhibitions on local history or craft combined with lunch, winter ceilidhs and Christmas dinners. Furthermore, the Association produces publications, CDs and DVDs on local history and events. There are three sites on Grimsay with exhibitions on boat building, fishing and island life developed and managed by the Association.

Even if there are some aspects of the Grimsay Boatshed which make it controversial among local residents, the achievements of the boatshed in providing boat repair services, attracting tourists, raising awareness for local history and heritage cannot be overseen. In addition, the number of B&Bs on Grimsay has increased along with the growing number of local events and regular boat trips. Summing up, the Grimsay Boatshed has raised the profile of a peripheral and remote community, making it well known in the Outer Hebrides and beyond.

Set against the background of economic and social problems the Western Isles are still facing today, all three bottom-up initiatives illustrate cases of significant rural revival. With more and more visible outcomes increasing attention has been raised not only across the islands but well beyond. According to Mackenzie (2001: 225) initiatives and projects like these can be interpreted as expressions of a certain “narrative of sustainability” particularly rooted in the cultural heritage of the Hebrides and associated values and attitudes towards nature, land, community, and development and thus a specific way of life.

## 5 Synthesis

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland and the Western Isles in particular for long have been regarded one of the classic peripheries of Europe. Economic decline, population loss and cultural marginalization, but also deficits of infrastructure and thus lack of accessibility have contributed to the image of a “problem area”. However, due to different forms of political intervention since the early 1990s the area has been undergoing significant processes of considerable restructuring yet hardly recognized beyond Scotland and Britain. Especially the implementation of several new policy instruments with a focus on more entrepreneurial, participatory, cross-sectoral, sustainable and thus integrated approaches in rural development are at the core of the new policies being applied. More recently the process of Scottish devolution has given further boost to economic and social revival with the land reform and the option of community buy-outs providing important legal tools for local

communities gaining control over their land. However diverse the picture of present restructuring appears, with significant differences between different areas across the Highlands and Islands, the general outcome of these incentives seems to be rather obvious: Improved infrastructure, new employment, growing population and, most important, increasing political consciousness all give evidence for a remarkable as well as surprising recovery of a once “lost place”.

In the course of ongoing economic and social restructuring increasing attention is being drawn to the role of local communities involved and the political positioning required with regard to different options for development at hand. As has been shown by the examples both of the Lingerbay superquarry and the Lewis wind farm projects local communities in the Western Isles have experienced highly controversial debate with considerable frictions due to controversial judgment over the pros and cons of large-scale industrial development. Whereas both projects were finally rejected by Scottish Government, it was mainly due to several bottom-up initiatives to provide an arena for alternative development projects. Consequently the Western Isles as well as other parts of the Highlands and Islands over the last years have seen the spring-off of various projects in the area of renewable energies, health care, and tourism just to name a few. However small-scale these projects appear especially in terms of employment and income, they seem to offer particularly room for participatory involvement and thus consensus building among local communities. Furthermore projects strongly relate to an environment highly valuable with regard to its natural assets as well as rich in cultural traditions of the Gaelic.

It is against this background of a most vulnerable mountain-seascape on the edge of the continent that one of Europe’s most peripheral rural areas happens to experience outstanding processes of recovery in economic, social, cultural and even political perspective. It remains to be seen and will be an interesting as well as exciting subject of further scientific observation whether this development will pave the pathways for more sustainable future local communities have struggled for so long.

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