

THE THIRD ANDREW RAVEN TRUST MEMORIAL WEEKEND
ARDTORNISH, 19TH – 21ST JUNE 2009
VITAL COMMUNITIES

SUMMARY

The theme of this third annual weekend was “Vital Communities” – what attributes do our communities need to survive the rocky road ahead with vigour and profitability? Formal presentations and discussions were interspersed with time out and about, getting to know each other and the local area, and a light-hearted but nonetheless relevant look at the meaning of shopping.

Four speakers provided a thought-provoking range of perspectives on the ingredients of vital communities, how to tap back into these, and how essential they will be for our safe future:

- Alan Caldwell gave a glimpse of the fantastic energy and commitment with which the village of Comrie has purchased a 90 acre former POW camp for its own use, and the empowerment this process has generated. We need to give politicians permission to take the necessary decisions; and we need politicians to understand more about how vital communities work and what they can achieve.
- Deirdre Nelson’s inspiring insights from three artist’s residencies (Sutherland, Uist and Western Australia) revealed the power of art to express a community’s connections with its history and culture, and its desires. Ancient skills (sewing and knitting) were combined with the most modern technology (a “fish market” on eBay) to extraordinary and sometimes comical effect.
- Will Boyd Wallis (Cairngorms National Park Authority) focussed on the importance of our connectedness with the land, and the danger for a society which is losing touch with the natural world which sustains it. We need to enable these connections in every way we can – supporting our primary producers who do work on the land, and using other techniques like art to re-connect those who don’t.
- Kate Braithwaite of the Carnegie UK Trust talked about the need for a new economics to quantify the things that really matter in community wealth and vitality – beyond the hopelessly narrow measure of GDP. Resilient communities will be our ticket for a safe future. Politicians have yet to grasp this, but rural communities are in a prime position to demonstrate and lead the way.

Walks and visits in the locality highlighted the energy and engagement, and breadth of skills amongst Morvern’s small community, the degree of Ardtornish’s engagement here, the opportunities and obstacles for community enterprise, and Scotland’s as yet scarcely-tapped renewable energy potential.

Discussions and conclusions

Much of the talking and learning was about the *ingredients* of vital communities: education, communication, knowing each other and the place we come from, leadership, teamwork, entrepreneurship, eating together, a good shop. The discussion also began to unpick some of the *barriers*: GDP, ill-shaped structures of governance, agency ignorance of how it works; and some of the *mechanisms* for letting us make the changes we need to make: valuing things that matter, systems view to communicate with, art and creativity, enterprise to circumvent silly subsidies, payback to good ones, IT.

But two aspects of the weekend left the deepest impression. First, the very real and present sense of danger to the human population, from climate change, peak oil and the economic meltdown, to which we must respond with urgency. And secondly, the conviction of all participants, from their very varied backgrounds, that re-making and releasing the power of vital communities is the way to tackle the difficulties facing us. Getting our politicians to understand this is a major step, but the growing social movement of people who are taking things back into their own hands gives cause for hope.

INTRODUCTION

The Andrew Raven Trust Memorial Weekends seem to be a sort of slow-cooking process – highly stimulating and sustaining for those who partake, yet relaxed and not driven by the demands of output, and with a subtle wider purpose of letting flavours diffuse out over time. The recipe, though varying slightly from year to year, is tried and tested – 30 or so participants (invited “by a mix of guile and serendipity”), hosted in Ardtornish’s Edwardian comfort; fed, watered and mixed well by the light hand of the Raven family and other members of the Andrew Raven Trust. This process is in memory of Andrew Raven, whose understanding and commitment to rural development inspired so many people throughout his life. According to Andrew’s own brand of hospitality, participants were invited to share and see, not to work, but to enjoy themselves - none of which was difficult.

The theme for this third annual weekend was “Vital Communities” – what attributes do our communities need to survive the rocky road ahead with vigour and profitability? It is probably not surprising that other networks have come simultaneously to this same topic, given the hefty dose of economic reality currently going down, but amongst Ardtornish’s guests this year there was a striking commonality of beliefs and concerns, and a very resonant feeling that the vitality of our communities, at whatever scale, will be the answer to how we tackle our rocky road.

As usual, the weekend’s formal presentations and structured discussions were interspersed with time to walk and talk - getting to know each other, our hosts and the local environs - and other ingredients for collective vitality and fun, which this year included a virtual shopping spree in the Ideal Shop.

Background to Ardtornish Estate and the Morvern Community Angus Robertson, factor for Ardtornish, and lifelong friend of Andrew Raven

The background to the Ardtornish Estate presented a subtle but highly relevant introduction to the theme. It revealed how dedicated the Estate is towards supporting the strength and prosperity of the community (objective number one in Ardtornish Estate Policy) and the inextricable link of land ownership and responsibility. Over 35% of Morvern’s employment comes directly or otherwise from the Estate’s assets.

The Estate seeks to support the community through public access for social and economic benefit, land release for domestic and commercial development, and by encouraging (and being part of) community groups. Morvern’s 300 souls do a lot – with 9 separate community groups each holding multiple meetings per year, the danger of burnout is very real. But the community is alive to its opportunities, and has amongst other things taken charge of its own petrol station, established a community woodland and exerted a strong influence over the new Local Plan. Other ambitions (new primary school, new crofts, community workshop units) are in store.

The closure in December 2008 of the Lochaline sand mine (accounting for nearly 28% of employment from the assets of the Estate) is either a disaster yet to be quantified or a new opportunity for the community to take charge of its future.

SATURDAY MORNING PRESENTATIONS

Ingredients of the Vital Community Alan Caldwell, Comrie Development Trust

Alan Caldwell has 25 years' experience in the "humorous, radical and fascinating" world of community activism – helping communities plan, prepare and make things happen. But becoming a voluntary board member of the Comrie Development Trust (CDT) 4 years ago has been a humbling experience, fundamentally changing his view of his own role within a vital community.

The topics of the previous Andrew Raven Trust weekends (climate change and the implications for rural land use, and sustainable affordable rural housing) are two of the biggest challenges we face, and vital communities are crucial to helping us face them. Vital communities let us live, work and entertain ourselves locally, which we need to do more powerfully and quickly. But we also need to give our permission to politicians to make the necessary changes. As Scotland's Environment Minister Roseanna Cunningham recently told a conference in Comrie ("Join the Revolution", June 09), if she took the decisions she thought were right, she would be voted out of office.

There is a clear process to making a vital community:

- Involving the community, in all the discussions and decisions about its future;
- Planning effectively what is to be done and how;
- Establishing a vision – "imagining our future"; and
- Organising to make the plan happen.

What has happened in Comrie?

During the last 3 years the people of Comrie have come together with extraordinary energy and passion to bid for and purchase (under the provisions of the Land Reform Act) Cultybraggan – a former POW camp on the edge of the village. They are now the proud and busy owners of 93 Nissen huts and 90 acres of land, which are being used by local entrepreneurs for food production and small business units. Less clear so far is what the village will do with its nuclear bunker.

The "to buy or not to buy" ballot in the purchase process had a 72% turnout (second only in the Land Reform process to Birse in Aberdeenshire, but with a much larger population). 96% of respondents voted yes.

So what is it that makes Comrie such a vital community?

- Respect for everybody's share and role in shaping the vision. The ability to foster common ground and rise above disagreements is what builds the community's sense of purpose and one-ness. Comrie's experience has been that, over time, more and more people are engaging with CDT, which now has 700 active members out of a potential 2000.
- Responsibility of owning land and buildings is massive. Comrie is lucky in being a very entrepreneurial community which is willing to commit seriously to a venture like Cultybraggan, and to take risks along the way.
- Celebration to ensure that all the small steps and successes are marked. Everyone loves a party, and events which bring people together like the Comrie Alive Festival (with cinema, market, village lunch, photo, ceilidh and ecumenical service) are key in building strong communities.
- Communication has to be good and is the thing to work hardest at. If it's not good, there is a danger that people may invent what they think leaders are doing – an unhappy result which could almost have CDT board members empathising with Alastair Campbell.
- Enterprise brings rich rewards, and even with the prospect of failure, probably takes a community further than waiting for the next round of grants. Enterprise has to come from within the community, but needs support from outside. Agencies are only just beginning to understand their role in this.

It is wonderful that Scotland now has its own Parliament and Government. Without wanting to encourage a proliferation of bureaucrats, perhaps what is missing is a Minister of Logic to foster these 5 ingredients in the Scottish community.

Insights from 3 artist's residencies (Sutherland, Uist and Western Australia) **Deirdre Nelson**

Originally from Northern Ireland, Deirdre Nelson studied textiles at Glasgow School of Art, and has worked with children, adults with learning difficulties and in multi-cultural communities in Scotland and abroad. In recent years she has devoted more time to her own work, and been invited as artist-in-residence to a number of communities.

Knitting birds in Sutherland

This residency in North West Sutherland was related to history and heritage of the area. Deirdre chose to work with children at Scourie Primary School, with the island of Handa as her focus. Just settled in her B&B, the Postie handed her his business card ("Crofter and White-Settler Instructor"). Coming from Ireland where feelings about "blow-ins" are similar, she knew just what to do. She wrote to inform Postie that as a good white settler she would put up trespassing signs, provide unsought advice on agriculture, and mix only with other white settlers – which correspondence won her some acceptance in the community.

The history of Handa is one of terminal emigration – the birds form the present community, but the people are gone, many to Cape Breton. This dynamic of emigration and immigration, and the common cultural connections with Cape Breton (names, music, red hair and indeed birds) captured Deirdre's attention. On her first visit to Handa the sight of a snarled but colourful tangle of nylon netting washed up on the beach got her thinking about recycling, and she decided to use this resource to knit the birds of Handa (where feathers were once bartered for wool to make fishermen's jerseys). Later, the children each made a bird to represent themselves - some with striking self-awareness! A link forged with a Cape Breton school continued working on the project beyond the life of the residency.

Knitting fish in Uist

In Uist, the task was to make contemporary art work related to a collection of artefacts at Taigh Chearsabhagh. This "community stuff" included fishing gaffs, other tools, furniture, and more contemporary relics such as a local DJ's vinyl collection, and a platform shoe. Connecting materials to their history, Deirdre made textiles linking the items to the island's culture – thus a seat cover for an archived chair, embroidered with the Gaelic proverb *He who burns his bottom must himself sit on it*, and a handle for a gaff reassuring that *The fisherman is welcome home, whether he has a catch or not*.

In this former fishing community, local women were at one time proud to gut 60 herring a minute. In a new hive of production, Deirdre set up knitting bees, this time to knit fish. Such was the enthusiasm for this activity that a Church meeting had to be cancelled as all the women were otherwise occupied. Efforts to tempt men into the frenzy were less successful, though of course the making of lobster creels, still undertaken, is another sort of knitting. To raise money for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution a "fish market" for the knitted produce was held in the village hall; fish were also auctioned to buyers around the world via eBay. The project raised £1700 and won the RNLI's Wacky Wellie Award.

Shopping in Western Australia

Initial impressions of Australia were daunting in scale (the landscape, the uncompromising and very un-organic style of farming); and in a strangely British one-street town amidst an ocean of wheat, the effects of colonisation and the unrecounted

stories of the Aboriginals were disturbing. Fresh from Uist, Deirdre found more connection with small things like flowers and birds, and a local craft group making toys and clothes for children in Africa.

Coming to know the place a little, there seemed to be an issue about what people wanted and could not get, their frontier hardiness in making do, and (scale again) the distances they might travel to obtain the locally unobtainable. A "Homemakers' Show" unearthed a splendid dressmaker's pattern for ladies pants, but an 80km drive was necessary to buy a bra. The Farmers' Cooperative in town advertised itself as a "Local Hero" and "Universal Provider", yet folk complained about it. So what might the ideal shop, a true universal provider, have for sale? Locals responded enthusiastically to this question, with answers prosaic (rain, more rain, rice salad), profound (more choice, health) and sometimes poignant (a new back). Wanting a practical outcome to the project, shopping bags embroidered with this community wish list were sold to raise money for the Flying Doctors.

What is an artist's residency?

Introducing her talk, Deirdre explained that these projects were not only for art's sake, but relevant to a community both past and present, making work which had life beyond the residency in linking people together, fund-raising, and highlighting the issues of a community. This came across very clearly, but the over-riding message she gave her listeners is how relevant art is to the community – as a physical expression of its needs and desires, wit and will, and its collective memories.

Community Partnerships and connections with the land Will Boyd-Wallis

Will Boyd-Wallis is a Trustee of the Andrew Raven Trust, former employee and now Trustee of the John Muir Trust, and now works for the Cairngorms National Park Authority. The connection between land and people is a consuming interest.

Our connection to the land

The connection that people have with the land around them and the resources it provides is hugely important. Those of us who are lucky enough to collect our own firewood have direct appreciation of how the labour of collecting, cutting, splitting and drying the wood in summer is compensated by the beauty and warmth, and utility, of the fire in winter. But even such a simple and primeval thing as a real fire is now alien to many. As a society we are losing touch with the natural world that sustains us, and this is a dangerous neglect. We need to know these intimate connections with the earth to understand our place within it – the sound of waves and wind, the taste of fruit, the texture of wood and earth. Even as we become more distanced from the environment, perhaps the growth of hill-walking and other outdoor pursuits is a sign that we want to rekindle that connection with the land.

Perspectives

Farmers, crofters, stalkers and foresters are directly engaged in reaping the land's produce, and as the primary producers of our food, fuel and building materials we owe them support, and must recognise the value of their knowledge about soils, weather and the behaviour of animals. There are many ways of connecting with the environment – farmers, ecologists, hill-walkers each have their own perspective, but all deserve mutual understanding and respect. The National Park recently organised a visit for local schoolchildren to meet gamekeepers at Balmoral, to hear about their work, and eat venison burgers. What was most striking about the event was how much both parties enjoyed it, and how it engendered respect.

The role of land art

Not all of us can work on the land, nor even get out in the hills. Land art, like that by Andy Goldsworthy, Chris Drury and others, creates a bridge and opens channels between ourselves and nature. It's like looking at a view upside down or putting on your glasses; suddenly there is new clarity as if what you see has been crystallised and altered; the complex becomes simple and vice versa.

Vital ingredients for a vibrant community:

- People. Are the essential ingredient, the *sine qua non*, and amongst which we need respected leaders to make things happen.
- A unifying need or challenge. Need (for collective effort) was what bound many communities historically, and can spark a renewal now.
- A wide range of skills – from trades to fund-raising.
- Open-ness – welcoming and wanting new ideas, and new people (like the Lofoten islands with their immigrants from Somalia).
- Understanding, trust and forgiveness.
- Community spirit – communities need enthusiasm, energy, pride in themselves and hope for the future.
- Celebration of successes, and to counteract the exhaustion of the long slog.

Fundamentally, it is teamwork in pursuit of shared goals that makes a vital community. But other (often external) influences are needed to heat the pot:

- Housing, employment and training
- Land management support (SRDP, LFASS) and other funding
- Community energy schemes
- Marketing of local produce
- Infrastructure such as transport and broadband
- For agencies to be open-minded, to listen and adapt to what communities can tell them.

A community's sense of place... its cultural identity... its roots in the surrounding landscape, are what bind it together. Anything that can help the variety of people in a community to connect with the land will help to connect them to each other and see beyond their differences. If they can do this they can do great things.

The Vital Community – what works, what needs fixing?

Kate Braithwaite

Kate Braithwaite is Director of the Carnegie UK Trust's Rural Programme, which is working in collaboration with the Falkland Centre for Stewardship, demonstrating practical ways of developing resilient rural communities.

Community satisfaction and well-being – what really matters?

To assess what really matters in the true wealth and vitality of a community we need to measure the unique assets of each place – its natural, human, cultural capital – but in our present narrow measure of GDP only built and financial capital count. We have to question the basic premise of economic growth. Recent observations about green shoots of recovery are mad. The reality about growth is that we can't have it – and many of us probably don't want it either (a New Economics Foundation survey found that an increasing proportion of those with incomes over £40,000 would be willing to trade all or part of pay increases for more time off; and a large majority of respondents described themselves as socially motivated individuals living in a materialist society). What is heartening about this is the sensation that the population is really beginning to wake up to a "no growth" scenario. And we do have ways of quantifying aspects of the things that really matter – not just economic well-being but life satisfaction, core values and guiding principles, support networks, health, security and safety.

Community Planning

One thing we need to do is to encourage people to list the assets of their place and what they are passionate about, and to think about why they value things as they do. Community Planning as a statutory activity is dire, unintelligible and bureaucratic – but there is another kind (the sort which takes place in village halls and is much more likely to get to the heart of things), and this is fun, energising and frequently involves cake.

Leadership

It is very important to foster the “fiery spirits” in a community – as one village recently articulated it “if you chop down the tall poppies only the weeds remain”. Recognising this, the Carnegie Trust has set up a Fiery Spirits Social Network, putting these community amateurs in touch with each other, to learn and share experiences.

Eating Together

Of course there are many unsuccessful communities, which are often the ones with a high proportion of incomers or second homes. Hoping to winkle people out of their houses, away from TVs, computers and all the things that effectively lock us apart from each other, the Carnegie Trust and the Eden Project have organised a “Big Lunch” on the 19th July, inviting the people of Britain to stop what they are doing and sit down to eat and talk and laugh together.

Education

Children are a special but often neglected subset of ourselves, and we need to ask what sort of communities we are creating for them. One community recently identified a set of ingredients for preserving children: sunshine, fresh air, fresh cut grass, bugs, sand, feathers, seaweed. The English school curriculum is a terrible experience for children and teachers alike. What is needed is far more teaching about place and entrepreneurship relevant to each community. Place-based learning gives education a direct bearing on the social and ecological niches that children actually inhabit. Activity learning and outdoor classrooms are far more energising and inspiring to the learners.

What can we say about the future?

We can say for sure that things will not carry on as they are now. We must say that enough is enough, and recognise that we cannot resource our way out of climate change, peak oil or credit crunch. The challenge facing rural communities is an “adaptive imperative” – we need resilient rural communities capable of riding, and thriving on, shocks from many quarters. Resilient communities will be those that quickly accept that any status quo is likely to be challenged, and unlikely to last for long.

If we want to undertake some future-proofing, some big things need to change:

- How we produce and distribute food
- How we produce and distribute energy
- How the Scottish Government appreciates and values the by-products of good land management (such as carbon capture, biodiversity, access)
- Biggest of all – our political system hooked on growth needs to go!

Rural communities are in a prime position to show the way here. They are privileged in having a clearer understanding of the connectedness of human society with the land, and the imperatives and responsibilities of food production, energy production and water management. It is much more obvious to a rural perspective that the Tesco trucks simply cannot keep doing the distances, and why not, and what would work better. Now we need to optimise the vision of what rural communities can do for themselves, and for the country as a whole.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

This session typified the mood of the weekend. It was mostly a conversation, weaving back and forth, building on and building in all the views raised. As always, the cake could have been sliced in various ways, but was so cohesive that it is served in the following 3 chunks:

Big problems

So many people are so very disconnected from the most important things in life. As of this year more than 50% of the global population is now urban, with several cities of over 30 million. Politicians have delivered what (they thought) most people wanted – Orwellian vision of fat animals in a shed with a gigantic lever shovelling in the food. Growth is a substitute for redistribution of wealth – politicians avoid the latter because it is so difficult to address. We need to make very substantial changes in society. The wee (local) things are great, but we need to do the big (national, global) things as well (and quickly). The credit crisis felt like the cusp of a new economics, but did we grasp the nettle?

Some solutions

Social enterprise will be how we solve the world's ills and manage to leave the traditional model of growth behind (and Barack Obama has established a billion dollar fund for social enterprise) - but few people understand the term. We need a distinction between growth and growing communities (ref. the "genuine progress index" www.gpiatlantic.org; and Lochaber HIE's "community confidence indices"). We need to get policy-makers to understand social enterprise and the workings of good communities.

Rural communities rely on the random whims of short term funding, but in the next decade much of this will disappear. So a different style of resourcing will be needed – the next generation will have to have control over their own resources, releasing the capacity of people on the ground.

The social movement of people who are tired of things not happening is building – examples such as climate camp, community land trusts for affordable housing, and the development trust movement work because they are about collective responsibility not individual gain, and they get people out, away from TVs and computers, working together towards shared goals. Such demonstrations of power from local communities motivate those in power to take bigger steps. Localisation could be a much bigger solution than we have yet thought.

In Scotland, the land may have much more potential than we realise. So - no more hand-wringing about incomers – we need lots more people living where they can be connected. At the same time, we need a little positive discrimination to foster indigenous people and their knowledge, culture and skills. Schools should get the young to think about how they can make a good living in their native area.

What about communities that have already lost most of their people? One answer is that it is people (locals, incomers, old or young) who create the demand for services from their communities. More people means more demand. We need to make the planning system plan high quality communities for tomorrow - so that people can see what will be on offer (schools, shops, business opportunities) in the future.

Signs of hope

Problems can be solutions. Cuba couldn't rely on Russia for oil any more so it went organic and now has burgeoning organic agriculture. Farming should be (can be) about farmers growing food for people to eat, not crops as commodities. And organic farming involves lots of labour, therefore bringing a *de facto* connectedness with the land. We

should use machetes not machines for cutting verges – don't let's get hung up on Health and Safety – think of the employment.

Procurement is a big block but it can work the other way. Argyll and Bute Council has passed a rule that children must be able to visit the producers of food used in school meals (no Argentinean beef there then).

Lean times coming could bring us together. Lots of people are wanting hens all of a sudden. And allotments.

OUT AND ABOUT

Over the course of the weekend we visited **Ardtornish's first hydro scheme** (2 more in the pipeline now), **Achnaha Community Woodland** at Lochaline, the part-restored **Killundine Burial Ground**, and the now closed **Lochaline sand mine**. Impressions from these visits were, first, the admirable (enviable) energy and engagement of the people of Morvern with their surroundings – the Morvern Heritage Society, which is responsible for restoration of the burial ground, has a programme of activities to rival many's a larger and better funded organisation.

Secondly, the breadth of skills and learning amongst even such a small community (300 people) – history, archaeology, ecology, publication of books and leaflets, iron working, masonry, mining, fishing, farming and forestry to name but a few! The now famous "Lever and Mulch" method for eradicating rhododendron (envy of the Forestry Commission) was developed by Morvern men Gordon French and Donald Kennedy, (quick, effective and absolutely no chemicals or power tools. See www.morverncommunitywoodlands.org.uk). A forceful lesson that even our most fragile-seeming communities have skills and resources which can be released if the ball once starts rolling.

Another lasting impression is the degree of Ardtornish Estate's engagement with Morvern, through employment obviously, but also as active members of the community and community groups, and by its support for local projects. Things to learn here for other land owners in Scotland.

The visit to the deserted sand mine, with its quietly rusting superstructure and astonishing catacomb of tunnels, was sobering and anxious-making. Opened in 1943 to provide highest quality silica sand for optical instruments in submarines, the mine was mothballed by Tarmac in 2008. In the local opinion this need not have happened – numerous cost-saving measures are available – but poor management, an under-motivated workforce and external dealings in the market for silica sand have forced the closure and consequent loss of jobs. This seems a great opportunity for a community-owned venture – re-opening the mine, glass-making, glass re-cycling centre for the West Highlands, or using the tunnels for another purpose altogether such as a storage facility. But a glitch in Tarmac's lease for the mineral rights (from Ardtornish and Forestry Commission) – which failed to stipulate that if mining stopped the lease would revert – may be a spanner in the works.

Finally, why doesn't Scotland have thousands more hydro schemes like Ardtornish? With its quiet, unobtrusive extraction but thunderingly useful results, this 750 kW run-of-river system (built 1996) sustains the whole estate and has paid for many other improvements. What might the total hydro (and wind) potential of Scotland's public land holdings (National Forest Estate, MOD ground, Crown Estate) amount to? Scotland the renewables OPEC of the 21st century?

Wandering through woods and back along the old coast road there was a fantastic quiet buzz as people fell easily into conversation, picking up on the themes of the weekend, linking and sharing their own experiences. Some snippets from this were:

- What makes a good community (integrated, busy) or a bad one (split, too obvious an income differential, or local/incomer differential, which could be the same thing).
- The difficulty (prejudice/rejection) or joy (welcome, support) of being an incomer.
- The challenges of returning (from the big smoke to a wee community) – roots and determination required.
- The challenges of weaning oneself off the big smoke – is it wicked to want more films/music/art in the sticks?
- Very basic aspects of human communities – kinship and kindness, neighbourliness and friendliness, working hard together.
- Power and devolution, appropriate scales of local governance (burghs? islands?).
- Too much government (smothering bureaucracy). Under-valued role of local authorities as employers.
- Architecture - buildings to last (tenement/castle – 200 years lifespan; new buildings – waste in 50 years). What do cheap/expensive mean in terms of construction and lastingness? Need for new ways to value/afford labour.
- Tax to reflect potential public utility of land, and encourage desirable development - <http://www.landvaluetax.org/what-is-lvt/>.
- Seeing things a different way – aerial photography.
- Saying things a different way – art.

SATURDAY EVENING: FOUR RESPONSES TO THE PRESENTATIONS

Patricia MacDonald summarised her impressions from the presentations. We need time for creative processes to work. Alan's experience in Comrie illustrated that it takes time for people in a group to learn from each other. We should not expect big changes overnight. Will and Deirdre both talked about connecting with the tangible details of our environment, as an essential part of the vital community. With so much of the world's population now urban, there must be other ways to make those connections – and there are. Nicola Killean's work with Sistema Scotland (based on the Venezuelan orchestral model El Sistema) is transforming lives of children in Stirling's Raploch through music. Sound is as real a part of our environment as the bits we can touch. All the speakers referred to the connection of people to place. The cultural landscape is a subset of the environment, whether urban or rural. Kate talked about putting it all together strategically. Making these connections is a kind of ecology – where individuals with all their multifarious skills come together in a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts.

Angus Hardie was thinking about power, and how the Concordat between the Scottish Government and Local Authorities has brought a welcome devolution of control. But will local government pass it on to communities? In fact the structuring of governance in Scotland has been going the other way, becoming more centralised not less (most centralised in the civilised world, with one representative for every 32,000 people). Which effects a disconnection from democracy. Compare local government election apathy here with 70% turnout in French Commune elections. Government has mastered the language of communities but not the real support; it is the dogged determination of communities which sustains, not public policy. Over the next few years the financial crisis will be the opportunity to reverse the prism through which the state views communities, not as empty vessels into which it pours resources for consumption, but as a rich source of solutions to its own problems and issues.

George Campbell was struck by Deirdre's use of art and technology to reconnect people with their place. RSPB is now using a webcam at its osprey hide, which has a huge avid

following and a lively blog. This access to a virtual environment, and other creative tricks we could make with our technology, might be part of the answer for reconnecting an increasingly urban population. Energy scarcity and food security seem to be the biggest issues facing us, and we need more mechanisms like Community Energy Scotland to support these needs. If repopulation of rural areas is going to be part of the solution, we should learn from the Norwegians, who have had an active repopulation policy since the 1940s. Communities like the Lofoten Islands are very vibrant, and the accommodation of incomers has not changed the essential cultural landscape there.

As a teacher **Jenny Desfountain** feels privileged to be working with the future – children will make real what we imagine. At last there is cause for optimism about Scottish education. The current administration has had the maturity to build on, not trash, its predecessor's work, and after 20 years of dictat, education policy is now moving fast away from box-ticking and exam results. The new Curriculum for Excellence defines core capacities we need to give our young people (confidence, effectiveness and responsibility as citizens) but leaves it much more to schools to work out how and what should be done to get there. Schools are now mandated to use more creativity- and art-based learning, more cross-disciplinary techniques to build skills in teamwork and problem-solving, and to help children develop capacity to grow, not just economies, but the communities they live in. This is one way in which Scotland is beginning to count values beyond GDP. The African proverb has the wisdom – *It takes a village to raise a child*.

SUNDAY MORNING DISCUSSIONS

Shopping at the Ideal Shop

Echoing the project in Western Australia, participants were all invited to consider what things they would hope to find in the ideal shop. Answers (on luggage labels) were to be posted in a certain chest of drawers for collection before bedtime on Saturday. The full delights of this list were revealed the following morning, and sparked an impromptu, hilarious but nonetheless highly pertinent discussion based around shopping.

Expectations: A Highland visitor went into a Post Office in London and asked for a pound of sausages, to be told "We don't sell sausages – this is a Post Office." "Not much of a Post Office then, is it?"

The role of the shop: For the *craic*, a place where you meet your neighbours, the link-point of all the communities within the community (the bridge club, the young mums, the church-goers, the commuters – everybody eats and shops). Has a notice board. The place which knows the old people and will notice if they're not about as usual. Shopping is a community activity. Good shops are helpful. They don't have to stock everything – can source things for people. The Apple (computer) shop gives lessons on how to use its products. Losing a village shop is a kind of bereavement for the community. Wee shops formerly relied on income as sub post offices, but in many places this has been replaced by a van (which appears for about 2 hours per week).

What supermarkets are like: Silent, stressful, anonymous. On-line shopping reinforces the anonymity and loneliness of the supermarket experience.

Community shops: Are a tried and tested mechanism. They need good management, and communal drive.

Fish van: A place where queues form and people chat. Concern expressed for coastal communities which may not have this resource.

Planning: We should plan our communities so that walking to the shop (work, school, park, pub, anywhere) is a pleasant experience (cf half a mile of horrible car park to get to the mall). Are we waiting for peak oil implications in our car society to creep up, or planning now? There is some discussion of a 5mph planning framework. Good road planning which clutters up the town with people slows cars down without speed limits or traffic lights (like Stromness). But planners' power is constrained by greater (market and development) forces. Which links to the overwhelming view of government that the answer to the recession is loans and spending – when we know that places with more localised control will be much more resilient. Which links to the need for a happiness index.

Shopping and religion: The shop (as community centre) has replaced the church. Ministers (worrying about their own loss of custom) should start shops. Knowing how these things go in Scotland, soon we'd probably have 5 or 6 shops in every village (and a free one).

Closing Discussion about Vital Communities

A subtle but persistent culinary theme permeating the weekend (Tescos, school meals, rice salad, cake, doubtless reinforced by the excellent Ardtornish nourishment) surfaced with some presence in the following discussion.

Food (carrots and tatties)

On food and health, we need to strengthen the link between a sustainable diet (which arguably must be organic) and a healthy diet. We should consider if our food and how we grow it is enhancing the community. Despite the "food renaissance", the Scottish diet is still going downhill – a 10 year review of the Scottish Diet Action Plan found that 9 out of 10 dietary factors had either remained static or shifted in the wrong direction. The new Scottish Food Policy concentrates strongly on "grow your own", but also pushes local authorities to follow best practice on procurement. (Allotments again).

There are many enthusiastic and hard-working vegetable growers in the Highlands. How does their (unsubsidised) food productivity compare with that of hill farmers? Uist could grow carrots but those imported from Holland would still be cheaper, which is the effect of subsidies direct or otherwise, including for transport. But the dominance of subsidies can be subverted (and see beer and bread below) - the shop in Fionnphort stocks only local potatoes when they are in season, arranged by simple teamwork between shop and grower (and leadership to make it happen).

Resilience and adapting (more carrots)

Further to carrots – Birse was asked (by transition towns) how many carrots it grows. The answer is none, but crucially, the community knows it could if it needed to. The important thing is capacity to respond to changing need. But the ability to adapt depends on having sufficient options, and some communities don't. It is hard to rebuild a community without a purpose. After 30 years of de-personalisation there needs to be an invitation, a declaration of intent to do something collective, even if the reason is invented; otherwise the community is just where people sleep.

We also need a broad toolkit to respond to changes we can't yet imagine. Perhaps it is time to wean ourselves off sticky labels and make better use of IT (fish auctioned on eBay, RSPB virtual nature reserves). The internet makes for good communications and inclusivity, and has completely transformed entrepreneurship in the Highlands, but we could do more with it, and should learn from our youngsters.

Systems approach/Digesting the whole

Identifying the characteristics of vital communities is one thing, but perhaps we need to develop a systems model of communities, so that we can understand the relationships

and feedbacks, what controls what. After all, community is a social system linked to an environmental one. Some felt this to be unnecessarily complicated – communities are about people and all that is needed is the impetus (for example, leadership by a development trust as in Mull) to get people out and about, doing things and learning together. But other communities (like some in the Hebrides) are not so lucky, and may have slipped below a threshold of resilience, so a more strategic intervention is needed.

The issue is not about collecting data, but about understanding how the system is working, and where/how to intervene effectively to improve things. There is very little grasp of this “rural sociology” at government level, yet government and agencies have a huge impact on communities, which is (at present anyway) inevitably sectoral. (And coincidentally, Jim Hunter has asserted that every population projection in history carried out for the Highlands has proved to be wrong. Lochaline is greatly exceeding Highland Council’s anticipation that a one-room school would accommodate its needs).

Modelling the workings of communities would make visible to agencies what is going on, to understand and value the process and its parts. Perhaps even a simple overlay process using existing information (such as various agencies have been collecting for years) would let us map community capability in a meaningful and applicable way.

Small beer/big beer (and bread)

As constraints on public expenditure increase and funding per sector dwindles, how will community needs fare against other things like health and education? The ability to generate their own revenue is what releases communities from the tyranny of grants. This process is often assisted by public funding, and there may be natural justice in proposing that grant aid be conditional on contributing back to the pot in future. Many (successful) communities would agree.

Another response to the diminishing pot is to realise that public funding isn’t everything - entrepreneurship can effect surprising changes, and quickly. The Skye brewery has created a demand for Skye-grown barley – the first for 40 years despite all subsidies. Wheat grown at Falkland is now being used for Scottish bread. As well as revenue, these achievements also engender another vital ingredient - community pride.

Haggis

We must not forget about community psychology. What is important is that communities redevelop confidence and self-belief, that change can happen and they can make it happen. Orchestras and knitting bees both do this. So does the ancient activity of community eating – one place is so enthusiastic about its Burns Supper that it now holds a duplicate in September.

And a plea for revolution (before soup)

The weekend was wonderful and the ideas were all great. The freedom to conceive new things without the imperative of reaching profound conclusions was uniquely liberating. But there really isn’t much time before things will go horribly wrong, and we need to act. One little task that each participant could take away with them was to get hold of the new film “Age of Stupid” (easily downloaded at www.ageofstupid.net) and put on a screening in their home communities in a way which empowered folk to respond.

CONCLUSIONS

Much of the talking and learning was about the *ingredients* of vital communities: education, communication, knowing each other and the place we come from, leadership, teamwork, entrepreneurship, eating together, a good shop. The discussion also began to unpick some of the *barriers*: GDP, ill-shaped structures of governance, agency ignorance of how it works; and some of the *mechanisms* for letting us make the changes we need

to make: valuing things that matter, systems view to communicate with, art and creativity, enterprise to circumvent silly subsidies, payback to good ones, IT.

But the frightening things facing the world were never far in the background, so the conversation also seemed to be an affirmation of understanding about *why* we need vital communities. In this way vital was interpreted both in the sense of *alive* (communities which shine with activity and intent), and *essential* (needing to become this way to negotiate the road ahead).

At one point participants were asked to wean themselves away from ingredients and try to arrive at some definitions of the vital community. This they more or less failed to do, but perhaps we don't need definitions – we know instinctively what vital communities are because we are native to them, and everyone knows, some way or another, what it feels like to be part of one. What the weekend seemed to be concluding is that the thing we need to know is *how* to re-appropriate our communities, how to re-make them. And there are lessons out there, it is already happening, albeit still piecemeal and hesitant but gaining strength.

Report author: Ruth Anderson ruth@dundavie.wanadoo.co.uk