

Digitalisation in Scottish crofting communities

In the Scottish Living Lab (LL) in the DESIRA project, we worked with a rural crofting community to understand the main opportunities and challenges relating to digitisation, and the vision that the community has for the next ten years.

Whilst digitisation presents many potential gains for the crofting community, there are challenges with realising these, mainly regarding digital skills and infrastructure. The positive future vision developed by the community focuses mostly on community resilience, wellbeing and quality of life.

The negative future vision points to how digitisation might support the decline of rural places such as Scottish crofting communities.

Policy should support these communities to access digital skills training and infrastructure, affordable housing, and empower them to participate in decision-making at the local level.

CONTEXT

In the Scottish Living Lab (LL) on the DESIRA project, we are working with a crofting community on the West Coast of Scotland to understand the impacts of digitisation in the past, present and future of the community. The LL is situated in a remote rural region of Scotland – the Coigach and Assynt region of Wester Ross. Crofting is a form of small-scale agriculture typical in Scottish Highland and Island communities. Crofters are pluri-active – they have multiple economic roles (various jobs etc.), because crofting itself is not a viable means of making a living for a household.

In relation to digitalisation, the general existing issues of the LL are mostly related to skills levels and access. Connectivity is not strong across the entire region. Broadband connectivity was installed fairly recently (beginning of 2020) and although this serves a large portion of the local population, it is not accessible to all – therefore digital divides are still present within the community. Furthermore, skills levels vary, which in turn impacts on the potential for digitalisation to bring positive benefits to the region.

Policy is in place to support the roll out of broadband connectivity across all of Scotland, including in remote rural regions (e.g., the Universal Service Obligation for Broadband (USO) implemented by UK Government which aims for 10 MBPS coverage for all) as well as to support the gaps in digital skills (e.g., UK Government Skills Toolkit which seeks to improve digital skills in a number of regions and sectors). Policy efforts to improve these issues are ongoing and the urban-rural digital divide persists in Scotland.



RESEARCH APPROACH

The objective of a recent workshop in the LL was to co-produce with stakeholders scenario narratives in order to identify areas of required support in the next decade.

The workshop asked: **What will crofting communities be like in 2031 given future digitisation?**

Participants explored plausible positive and negative scenarios for their community.

A participatory, normative methodology was implemented. Two main 2031 scenarios were developed – one reflecting a “better not best” (positive) future, and one which reflects a “worse not worst” (negative) future.



SCENARIOS DEVELOPED

The following scenarios were the two that were developed in most detail in the workshop.

“Gross Domestic Happiness” (Better not best best scenario):

This scenario describes a future in which the focus of development is no longer on technology corporations and large businesses profitability. The metric of success (“Gross Domestic Product”) has radically switched to embrace quality of life including the mental health and wellbeing of communities. Collective happiness goals alongside reinvesting funds into local communities, rising employee satisfaction levels, and an increase in flexible working

arrangements were key factors in the scenario.

“Digital Clearances” (Worse not worst scenario):

This scenario references the tragedy of the Highland Clearances, a forced eviction of small-scale farming communities concentrated upon the Highlands and western islands, between 1750 and 1860 in Scotland. This is drawn upon to evoke a vision of a bleak future in which the powerful elite disenfranchise crofting communities, enabled in their power by rapidly advancing digitalisation. The scenario is illustrated with visions of mass school closures, and escalating tourism driving locals out of the property market causing youth outmigration and declining local communities.



RURAL CROFTING COMMUNITIES HAVE CLEAR IDEAS ON THE DIRECTION THEY WISH TO TAKE IN THE NEXT TEN YEARS – THE POSITIVE FUTURE VISION CENTRES LARGELY ON COMMUNITY WELLBEING AND QUALITY OF LIFE. LIKEWISE THEY ARE CLEAR ON THE THREATS TO REALISING THAT VISION. DIGITALISATION CAN SUPPORT EITHER POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE PATHWAYS TO RURAL FUTURES.



POLICY RELATED DISCUSSION

Proposing a shift to developing the mental wellbeing of employees and residents outlined in the better not best scenario, recalls the Inclusive Growth mandate set by the Scottish Government. Within this broader remit, the National Planning Framework (NPF) offers a long-term vision for development across all of Scotland including rural areas, seeking a place-based approach to driving equality and inclusivity within the job market - promoting wellbeing and the creation of sustainable and diverse places. The fourth iteration of the NPF is currently in draft and is expected to be approved and adopted by the Scottish Parliament later in 2022. Setting out a vision for 2045, emphasis is upon planning decisions (including crofting land) to support the goal of achieving net-zero by 2045 in Scotland. An increase in flexible working arrangements and supporting diverse economies requires a notable investment in broadband connectivity to remote rural areas. Equitable and reliable access to broadband speeds comparable to urban areas is paramount to driving investment in rural crofting communities. Building on the success of the Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband (DSSB) programme, the Reaching 100% (R100) programme aims to ensure every business and home has access to superfast broadband. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for reliable broadband connectivity across the whole of Scotland. The rollout takes time and needs to account for significant geographical differences.

In the second scenario, the outmigration of younger working-age residents was identified as key to the overall decline of crofting communities. Access to and affordability of both crofting land and housing are identified as key challenges to not only outward emigration but also to prospective new entrants to crofting. In 2021, the National Development Plan for Crofting was published that seeks to provide the Crofting Commission (the statutory non-departmental body in Scotland) with adequate resources to

tackle absentee crofters, ease succession plans and enable new entrants to crofting.



The waiting list for new crofts is long and streamlining these processes online could help speed up the transfer of crofting land. Securing affordable housing and strengthening community interest in rural housing issues are key to viable future rural communities, not only for crofting but for other residents and the continuation of key services such as local schools. Bolstering local interest and authority in decision-making processes surrounding crofting land could also inhibit so-called 'Green Lairds' who have the means to purchase vast swathes of land in rural communities for carbon-offsetting purposes. Finally, a growing concern around sufficient digital literacy skills could be aided by the establishment of a local 'hub' or even a university within the local area, serving as an anchor organisation to develop and preserve skills in the immediate area.



POLICY INSTRUMENTS ARE REQUIRED THAT SUPPORT THE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF RURAL AREAS INCLUDING CROFTING REGIONS IN SCOTLAND. THESE SHOULD FOCUS ON A NUMBER OF KEY AREAS INCLUDING AFFORDABLE HOUSING, DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT FOR DIGITAL SKILLS, AND INITIATIVES AND POLICIES WHICH SUPPORT THE YOUNGER-AGE POPULATION TO SETTLE AND THRIVE IN RURAL AREAS.



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POLICY OPTIONS

Affordable housing and crofting land

- Provision of affordable housing and crofting land, particularly for younger-age population and in-migrants wishing to contribute to the local economy will be essential to support the sustainability of rural crofting communities.

Developing digital literacies and skills

- Provision of digital skills initiatives targeted at the most remote rural places, including crofting communities, will enhance digital literacies leading to higher benefits from rural digitalisation.
- This could be done via localised rural skills hubs or university campuses in more rural areas across Scotland to increase skills development in rural regions.

Supporting younger-age population to move in to and stay in rural crofting areas

- Ongoing policy support is needed to tackle absentee crofters, ease succession plans and enable new entrants to crofting. Policy should support the demand for new crofts by streamlining the process through online channels.

Strengthening local interest in participation and decision-making processes

- Support should encourage community interest and participation in local development issues and decision-making processes relating to rural housing issues, digital infrastructural issues and the continuation of key services such as transport and schools.
- This will be key to viable future rural communities, not only for crofting but for wider local communities.

This policy brief is published in the frame of the EU-funded DESIRA project and aims to provide recommendations for policy makers on how to support digitalization in the context of rural crofting communities in Scotland.

Contact: Leanne Townsend
James Hutton Institute
Email: leanne.townsend@hutton.ac.uk



More information at: www.desira2020.eu

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