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Developing dialogues on land use decision making for natural capital

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Introduction

Responding to an increase in investment in land for natural capital purposes in Scotland, this project builds on, and provides tools, capacity, and knowledge regarding, good community engagement practice for communities and landowners. We conducted two participatory workshops in locations where green investment and landownership change recently took place, identifying challenges and opportunities in the community and discussing questions of who is community and what supports are needed for meaningful engagement. The data from the workshops have been used to create a report and a digital storymap to share with communities, landowners, organisations that represent rural communities, and policy makers.

Context

Natural capital investment is a rapidly growing phenomenon in Scotland, with new actors purchasing or investing in land for nature restoration, rewilding, afforestation, peatland restoration, renewable energy, and other activities that maintain or enhance natural capital, and/or sequester carbon.

Building on recent Scottish Government-commissioned research (*Social and Economic Impacts of Green Land Investment in Rural Scotland**), this project responds to a significant research finding and associated recommendations: for communities to be involved in land-use decision making, and for natural capital investor-owners to consider the long-term consequences of decisions and activities on local stakeholders.

New actors in the Scottish land market, purchasing or investing in land for green purposes such as rewilding or carbon credits, may not be as familiar with expectations for community engagement in land-related decisions (Daniels-Creasey and McKee, 2022). This project engages directly with investor-owners and communities who wish to improve community engagement and involvement in decision-making. It examines the growing space of land use change for natural capital purposes and seeks to overcome the risk of increasing inequalities (Sharma et al., 2023; McKee et al., 2023). The project provides tools and capacity for communities and landowners to deploy. Moreover, this research contributes to vocalising the needs of the community in this engagement process, warranting a rethinking of the directionality of the process

Objectives

The key aim of this project is to support community involvement in land use decision-making in contexts of natural capital/green land investment in rural Scotland. The main objectives associated with this project are:

- To design, facilitate, and report on two participatory workshops in rural Scotland to determine community needs that may be influenced by natural capital/green land investment land use change;
- During workshops, determine the needs of the communities related to current and future natural capital land use change and identify support needed by the community and/or the investor-owner to carry out meaningful engagement; and
- Increase capacity and knowledge of participants regarding community engagement, evaluated by surveys one month after the workshops.

Workshop Recruitment Poster



The poster features a header with ten colorful icons representing various themes: a hand holding a plant, a graduation cap, a water tap, a lightbulb, a bar chart, a network of nodes, a globe, a sun, a tree, and a group of people. Below the icons, the text reads: 'Come to a Workshop & Discussion on: **Community Engagement in Land Use Decision Making**'. To the left of the text is a photograph of a green valley with mountains in the background. To the right is a short paragraph: 'This workshop aims to support community involvement in land use decision making related to natural capital/ green land investment and land use change in the area. We want to hear from a variety of people who are or will be impacted by land use changes.'

*<https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-economic-impacts-green-land-investment-rural-scotland/>

Methods

Informed by a literature review we conducted that summarises the range of existing community engagement tools for natural capital investors, we conducted a participatory workshop in two communities where natural capital investment and land ownership change had recently taken place. We aimed to add to knowledge regarding good practice and case studies of community engagement in land-use decision-making and provide tools and capacity for communities and landowners to deploy.

Recruitment

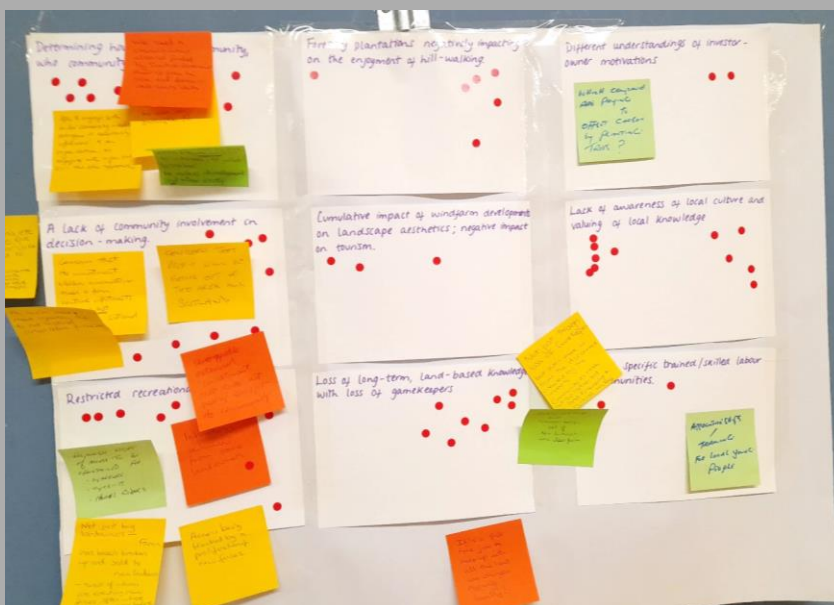
We selected two cases where recent purchases for green activities had taken place and reached out to key community stakeholders to gauge interest in our work. As they were receptive, we rented a community space and began publicising our workshop, open to all members of the local community and aiming to reach as many community members as possible. We advertised on social media, contacted local community groups and organisations, had posters put up in local hubs, and used our research networks to share information. We had participation from 34 stakeholders: area residents, local landowners, food producers, recreational land users,

business owners, and representatives of interested organisations and local governance. Knowing that some investor-owners have recognised the benefits that good practice community engagement can bring to natural capital projects, we contacted four investor-owners. They declined to participate, preferring to conduct their own engagement activities, but they did request that our findings be shared with them.

Activities

We presented findings from the *Social and Economic Impacts of Green Land Investment in Rural Scotland* project and facilitated a form of dotmocracy - adding to and then voting on opportunities and barriers identified in the previous research - to identify which challenges and opportunities were relevant to the workshop community. In small groups, participants then discussed the questions of who is community, how to reach them, and community and landowner needs. The workshop concluded with a discussion of future visions for land use in the area and suggestions for supports for community engagement and decision making to reach that vision.

Data collected from the workshop included photographs of activity outputs (see the photograph below for an example), audio recordings, and researcher notes. We undertook a thematic analysis of the data. A month after the workshop, we sent an evaluation survey to participants and analysed the results.



Findings

As a part of this research, the data gathered during the two community engagement workshops were studied using a thematic analysis method. In this, we found approximately nine themes that emerged during the workshops. Through quantifying the themes, four principal themes emerged relating to engagement: participatory decision-making and community engagement, governance, inclusion, and community needs.

Participatory Decision-Making and Community Engagement

Discussions around significant land use changes occurring in the surrounding areas and the engagement with the community were at the forefront of the debates. A few participants of the workshops, coming from the perspective of private property, did not perceive the land use changes as intrusive or even something they should have an opinion about. *“Planting trees, or not planting trees. It doesn’t bother me any way. There weren’t many sheep on the ground anyway.”* Others questioned this balance of power: *“Who decides the future of an area, and should it be more democratic?”*

Most participants mentioned a significant lack of involvement in decision-making and continuously emphasised a need for more meaningful engagement. There is a certain lack of procedure regarding the empowerment of the community when engaging in land-use change, as the commitments and degree of engagement are stipulated by the investor-owner rather than the community. One workshop participant stated that investor-owners are *“actively reducing ‘size’ of community for consultations and [use] divide and rule tactics by investment groups and landowners to their advantage”*. Moreover, it was commented on that the routes to communication are one-directional: engagement only occurs if the landowner makes a positive effort, but there is no procedure for community organisations or individuals to proactively engage.

Some members of the community felt inundated with land-based projects in their surroundings. *“It’s a full-time job to keep up with all the land use changes happening locally!”* Moreover, there is no singular platform on which to become more informed on these projects. It was perceived that the community as a whole has consequently become increasingly apathetic to the natural capital projects, in part due to their experience with the community consultation and engagement processes in the past. There is little trust in the probability of meaningful empowerment of the community, nor in the receipt of effective community benefits or a sense of mutual understanding from these consultation and engagement processes. Moreover,

increased apathy could also stem from the increased alienation of the land, its culture and cases where the people with land-based knowledge no longer able to work on the land, such as the gamekeepers and local tenant farmers. As the rift between the community and the land on which they dwell expands due to the explicit or implicit actions of investor-owners, so does the sense of apathy and disengagement on how that land is used.

Governance

The commentary around governance, both at national and at local level, was subject to much scrutiny in these workshops. In particular, concern was raised around the lack of regulation around natural capital markets framed as an *“[u]nstopable external investment that does not really benefit the community”*. Also, there is a need for *“more discussion about the question of whose natural capital is it in the context of history of cleared communities resulting in the present distortions in patterns of land use allowing these large-scale capital acquisitions”*. Moreover, the changing political environment was mentioned, where policies based on *‘fads’* might lead to more long-term land use change and may be difficult to reverse.

Furthermore, the relationship between participants and the legislation impacting the land-use, employment opportunities, culture, agriculture, access and housing of the communities they live in was mentioned during the workshops. *“Communities need more opportunity to shape government policy, for instance land reform [...] regulation, wind farm and renewables subsidies, woodland creation and peatland restoration.”* There is a general sense that these communities are subject to, rather than co-creating the legislation and there is little knowledge on a route to effect governance. *“How can local priorities be reflected in national imperatives?”*

“Who decides the future of an area, and should it be more democratic?”

“Communities need more opportunity to shape government policy, for instance land reform [...] regulation, wind farm and renewables subsidies, woodland creation and peatland restoration.”

Inclusion

Whilst all of the literature we surveyed on community engagement for natural capital investors includes 'identifying stakeholders' as a step in the process, Highlands Rewilding (2023) specifically recommends reaching out to a range of actors, broadly categorised as stakeholders, communities of interest and communities of place. Similarly, the Scottish Land Commission advocates for inclusivity (2019). When workshop participants discussed who 'community' consists of for the purposes of consultation, the general principle was one of inclusion. Participants suggested a broad interpretation of community, commenting that landowners or developers consider 'community' as those in the immediate vicinity of the landholding. It was suggested that this is perhaps to limit the number of people requiring consultation, or perhaps to 'divide and rule'; a small community has less power. Participants suggested that different land use decisions may require different boundaries for consultations, e.g., flooding concerns may affect an entire watershed.

Participants also suggested that a diverse range of people be consulted. They pointed to those who may be harder to reach or engage, or are heard less: young people age 16-25, young families, and recent arrivals. Some felt that not only residents should be included, but all those who have a stake in the future, including people who work but don't live in the area, second home owners, or even tourists.

Participants also brought up the question of criteria for a landowner being part of the community: is it dependent on family history, money invested, or engagement with the resident community? Many distinguished between 'historical' landowners, who are perceived (by the community) to have an intricate connection to the land and its community, identifying themselves as 'custodians' of the land. This, in contrast to land investors whose primary objective is profit.

Relatedly, some literature suggests a 'culture of engagement' be created (Hafferty et al., 2023). Participants agreed that there needs to be a sense that engagement was not solely based on landowner needs but was a 'two-way street'. They worried that estate workers might feel vulnerable and unable to speak, and cautioned that engagement starts in the owners' 'own house', meaning how they treat workers spreads to the community. Some expressed sympathy that landowners may fear embarrassment or being wrong, and that it takes a strong leader to engage.

Community Needs

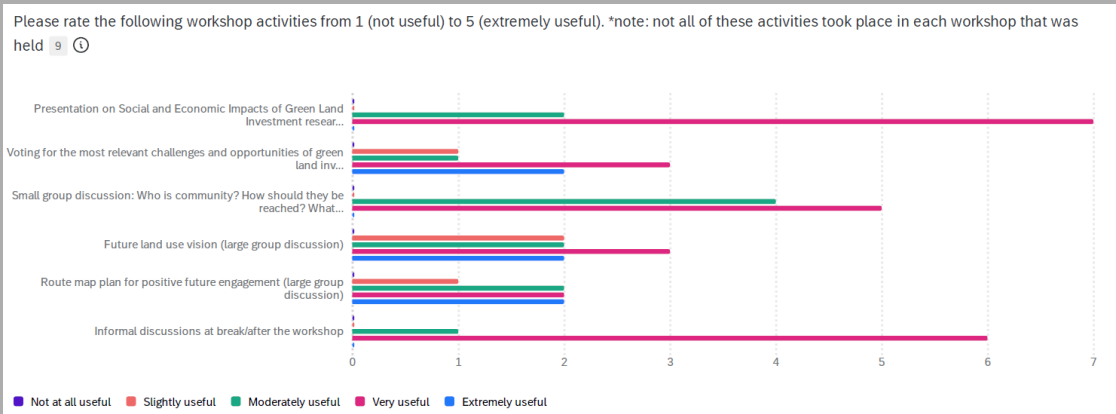
Transparency and accountability emerged as two prominent community needs for effective engagement. Participants said they sometimes don't know who absentee landowners are or how to reach them, and more transparency about ownership and ability to contact owners is needed. The Scottish Land Commission (2023) recommends contact information and clear channels of communication be available. This is a first step to accountability. Participants felt that government needed to set rules for landowners and managers buying land, setting out standards of engagement, e.g. for communicating events and receiving feedback, and perhaps funding a communication channel for communities and owners. Participants also wanted to know landowner plans, which they felt they often had no understanding of, or which inaccurately portrayed the activities that took place subsequent to sharing of plans. There was a feeling of uncertainty that made it difficult to feel secure and plan for the future.

The Bigger Picture

While we expected workshop participants to concentrate on methods and processes of engagement, a significant finding was that they felt there was an essential first step that needed to take place before meaningful engagement was possible, and that was knowledge of a larger-scale context for land use decisions. Participants maintained that communities should be involved in a masterplan or vision for the area that informed all subsequent decisions. One participant mentioned that the community had no local land-use plan or biodiversity action plan and thus no context on which to gauge decisions. Participants also pointed out that statutory, piecemeal consultation was not enough. At the same time, they felt that consultation scope can be too narrow – for example, consulting about one windfarm without considering the many already in the area. They saw this as lacking big picture, joined-up thinking. One participant suggested there are too many different places to monitor with proposed plans for change of land use and communities need one place where they are all brought together (e. g., Scottish Forestry registers). People gave other examples of what they considered successful joined-up planning and engagement: Forestry and Land Scotland regional advisory groups in the 1990s, Cairngorms' Connect roadmap for 2050, and deer management groups. In fact, some participants suggested that the term 'community engagement' was inappropriate and what is needed is community partnerships – a view supported by Community Land Scotland (2023).

"Perhaps you should be starting with the community, what is good or bad for the community and what is the response to those needs by those who own the land? It seems to me to come from the wrong direction."

Results



Participant Outcomes

To determine the success of the project, we first assessed participant satisfaction by short pre- and post-workshop surveys to gauge expectations (94% indicated their expectations were met) and again afterwards to evaluate utility and intentions for use of the knowledge and materials generated. The follow-up survey responses showed that creating space for local participation and making visible the power dynamics which are at play within Green Land Investment scenarios was useful for participants. Notably, none of the activities were rated 'not useful at all' and the 'slightly useful' activities were ones that ran out of time – showing that engagement takes time and flexibility and resources to do well! Respondents also found the opportunity to listen to others' perspectives and build understanding to be of benefit, even if they disagreed; communities are heterogenous places. Intentions to use the information included "working across [area name] for better environmental solutions" and "engaging with other landowners in the future who provide consultations".

A month after the workshops, people had perceived "More people talking about and aware of these issues" and "A desire to meet and take them forward." However, respondents noted that leadership was needed to take this forward, perhaps suggesting a need for capacity building.

Outputs

Long-term benefit is linked to our outputs. With the data, we created a report and an accessible, attractive storymap. Project outputs are aimed at three main audiences. The first are natural capital investors who feel an obligation –or in the future, may be required– to engage with local communities about their land use decisions.

Second are policy makers, in particular the Scottish Government's policy teams working on land reform, agriculture, natural capital, and rural communities, as well as government bodies (e.g. Scottish Land Commission, NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland). It is anticipated that project outputs could inform ongoing policy development such as Land Reform (Scotland) Bill's requirement for land management plans and the future Scottish Government Climate Change Plan which may require large-scale land use change. We hope project outputs can inform ongoing policy development and identify opportunities for targeted Government support.

Finally, outputs will be shared with organisations that represent rural communities and landowners across Scotland, (e.g. Scottish Rural Action, Community Land Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates) with the intention that the practical guidance generated may benefit their members.

Conclusion

“Procedural justice is concerned with the fairness of how decisions are made and by whom [...] perceptions of procedural justice are thought to be a key driver of perceived legitimacy” (Ruano-Chamorro et al., 2022, p. e12861).

The importance of procedural justice in land ownership and land use decision making came out very clearly from our workshops.

Without meaningful community engagement, a sense of powerlessness and lack of democratic decision-making furthers community apathy. Ruano-Chamorro et al. propose that advancing procedural justice in conservation requires six “process properties”:

- 1.transparency
- 2.accountability
- 3.neutrality
- 4.correctability
- 5.ethicality, and
- 6.trustworthiness

Workshop participants brought up many of these properties. They identified transparency and accountability as key. They referred to honesty and accuracy regarding land use plans, suggesting neutrality in communication. Ethicality was raised with questions of investor-owner motivations. As well, participant suggestions for landowners becoming involved in community speak to the trustworthiness desired.



Ruano-Chamorro et al. also describe three aspects of agency (voice, decision control, and capabilities) The workshop may have gone some way to facilitating participants building or understanding their collective voice, but from survey feedback it was clear that although they were eager to take their concerns forward, they didn't feel like they have the capacity or the fora through which to share their voice and have influence.

Participant Suggestions:

While not all participants agreed on each of these suggestions, they are presented for consideration.

For Investor-Owners:

- Transparency about ownership and the ability to contact owners is needed.
- Communities should be involved in a masterplan or vision for the area .
- Landowners should use many diverse methods to reach community: online, onsite, via local organisations and events , engaging personally
- Be aware of local culture and value local knowledge
- Commit to community partnership to ensure community share of returns

For Policy Makers:

- Set rules for landowners and managers buying land, setting out standards of engagement
- Enlarge consultation scope when necessary and consider cumulative impacts of land use change
- Have one place where all proposed plans for change of land use can be brought together for communities to see
- Regulate natural capital markets to benefit communities
- Give communities more opportunity to shape government policy and be heard on local needs
- Have checks and balances for land use change, like in housing development
- Create certainty through policy to provide security for planning for the future

For Communities:

- Communities need to be proactive rather than responsive
- Develop community vision for the future
- Put together a representative forum with presence to talk to landowners, a 'go-to' representing local people, business, wildlife
- Regeneration and restoration should be by the community for the community. Climate emergency response can not be separated from community action
- Have hope; don't disengage because you feel you won't make a difference



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