

Building community resilience: the role of shared community land use

Dated: October 2014

Author: Dr Alex Franklin

Representing: Sustainable Places Research Institute, Cardiff University

Summary

When increasingly, community groups who are taking the lead in attempting to establish more sustainable forms of rural living. Case study examples of local level sustainability initiatives abound, covering a wide range of different sectors, including food, waste, energy and housing. Although the individual characteristics of each initiative are often very place specific, a common determining factor shared by the majority is the need for access to land, particularly green space and the natural resources which it supports. Commonly, planning law acts as the principal regulatory tool for managing land use. Often overlooked, however, is the parallel role of land tenure and the relationship between land owners and their interests in land, in decision making over permissible uses of that land (Franklin & Morgan 2013).

Issue/Problems

In some cases of local sustainability initiatives, communities have been able to maximize their property rights by purchasing land collectively and holding it in trust. Very often, though, the market value and limited availability of (easily accessible) land prohibits community buy-outs; also potentially off-putting are the legal and financial responsibilities associated with land ownership.

More common, therefore, are arrangements whereby the land which supports a community initiative is leased (formally or informally), remaining in the freehold ownership of a third party. Where a willingness exists on the part of land owners to permit new forms and spaces of shared use, this enables a greater range of local level sustainability initiatives to be established.

In parallel, land owners also have the option of making their land available (commercially or altruistically) for various forms of shared- sporting and recreational use. Significantly however, current instances of shared forms of rural community land use commonly appear to occur without (or with only negligible) direct financial return to the landowner.

Background

Shared community land use initiatives are understood here as areas of land which are made newly available to a community group, or a number of individuals, for their active and collaborative use, by way of one or more production, consumption and/ or conservation-based activity. In addition to extending the areas of green space to which groups of users have access, shared land use initiatives commonly permit the 'active use' of land. That is, they support much more than a mere right-to-roam, including enrolling the user into micro-level decision making as to how the land is to be used. As such, they can usefully be understood as 'neo-productivist' forms of land use. The term neo-productivism is used here to conceptualise the growing desire shown by members of civil society to become more

Background (continued)

meaningfully and 'seriously' engaged with green space (and the natural resources it supports), particularly where this also encompasses a strong social dimension (Ravenscroft & Taylor 2009). Whilst an extensive literature exists on traditional and historic spaces and practices of land-share (e.g. indigenous land; commons grazing; allotments; turf cutting etc.), far less is known about the socio-cultural and political relationships surrounding areas of land which have only recently been made available for shared use; or the needs of new user groups, many of whom possess little previous experience of shared community land use.

Existing Policies

Central to achieving sustainable working relationships between existing land owners and potential shared community-based user groups is ensuring that the existing rights of the land owner remain largely unaffected. As yet, however, very few public financial subsidies are available to private landowners as an incentive for making new areas of green space available for collaborative use; nor are they in any way required to do so by regulation or law. In the context of agricultural land, for example, Common Agricultural Policy engagement with issues of social sustainability are limited either to schemes directly targeted at farmers/ landowners, or to the indirect wider societal benefits of agri-environment practice. Consequently, the willingness of a landowner to venture into a shared community land use arrangement is currently restricted to situations such as where there exists a high degree of synergy between land owner and shared-user interests or ideologies which serve to motivate a particular land use activity (e.g. food security), where planned future uses of the land and acceptable 'meanwhile' uses overlap, where there is a shared desire for maintaining traditions, or alternatively, where a perceived need exists on the part of the land owner for improved local community relations and creating a positive public image.

Also of direct relevance here is the role of intermediary bodies (commonly third sector organisations) in bringing together those with land and those in need of land.

Policy Options

Currently relatively little knowledge appears to exist at a national or international scale surrounding the characteristics of new opportunities for collaborative use of green space and the locational settings which they occupy. Where data is available it tends to be limited to micro level studies of single cases or practices, often with the land-share arrangement serving more as background context than the focal point of study.

As yet no purposive research has been undertaken with the aim of exploring the nature, role and potential contributions of new forms and spaces of shared community land use to increasing the sustainable productivity of land. Also currently missing is an understanding of the ways in which different socio-cultural, historical and regulatory contexts serve to structure and shape community land use practice, the spaces which it occupies and its potential spread.

This knowledge gap in turn results in an absence of any widespread reference to the potential opportunities (and challenges) presented by shared land use, within government policy. Currently, acknowledgement of this form of land use practice is primarily limited to the domain of planning regulation.

Recommendations

Whilst the twin-pillars of the Common Agricultural Policy include numerous mechanisms aimed at supporting the economic and (more recently) environment sustainability of rural land practice, as yet support for initiatives aimed at increasing the social productivity of land remains much more limited in scope. By broadening the 'environmental stewardship' dimension of rural land ownership so as to incorporate a direct social return (ie. 'socio-environmental stewardship'), this can help increase the ability of small scale family farmers and other rural land owners to maintain the sustainability of their own enterprises, but also to build more sustainable urban-rural community relationships.

Central to this is the expectation that an increase in shared land use initiatives will not preclude the continuation of existing practices and traditions of agricultural production on the same land holding; rather, these practices can be incorporated within, or accommodated alongside, community land use initiatives.

Where successfully achieved, this bottom-up approach would help to safe-guard and actively utilise the knowledge capital (as well as other more material assets) of traditional family farming. At the same time it would also support the up-skilling of new community user groups in how to practice sustainable resource management.

References

- Brown, K (2007) Understanding the materialities and moralities of property: reworking collective claims to land Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 32 (4) 507-522
- Franklin, A and Morgan, S (2014) 'Exploring the new rural-urban interface: community food practice, land access and farmer entrepreneurialism' in Marsden, T and Morley, A (Eds) Sustainable Food Systems Routledge: London
- McDonagh, J (2013) Rural geography I: Changing expectations and contradictions in the rural Progress in Human Geography 37(5), 712–720
- Ravenscroft, N and Taylor, B. (2009) '[Public engagement in new productivism](#)' In: Winter, M. and Lobley, M., (Eds) [What is land for? The food, fuel and climate change debate. Earthscan, London, UK, pp. 213-232](#)

Contact Details

Dr Alex Franklin

Sustainable Places Research Institute

Cardiff University, 33 Park Place, CF10 3BA, Wales UK

E: Franklina1@cf.ac.uk

This policy recommendation paper has been jointly produced as part of the Rural Alliances project, involving twelve partners from Wales, Ireland, France, Germany, Netherlands and Belgium.

The project is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund through the Interreg IVB North West Europe Programme, to promote strong and prosperous communities.