

## What is Needed to Achieve a Just Transition to Net Zero for Rural and Island Scotland?

*Reflections by Theona Morrison, Director of CoDeL and Acting Chair of Scottish Rural Action at COP26, November 2021*

### Part 1: Summary blog post by Scottish Rural Action (see [here](#))



## What is Needed to Achieve a Just Transition to Net Zero for Rural and Island Scotland?

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Drawing on thirty years of experience in community development and her work with young people in remote and isolated areas, our Acting Chair, Theona Morrison reflects on what a net zero Scotland might look like and how this might be achieved.

Three key questions to consider might be:

- Would Scotland want and be able to feed itself as part of a journey to net zero?
- Would Scotland want to be able to generate all Scotland's energy from renewables?
- Should Scotland own its natural assets of land, fresh water, renewable energy, coastal assets?

Assuming the answer to all these questions is yes, then the key areas to look at the skills agenda and land ownership.

How do we equip our young people, with the right knowledge, understanding and skills to work in a net zero economy? It is no longer considered essential to live in a city in order to progress but young people need to be offered accredited, industry standard courses, such as crofting, local food

production and renewable energy that mean they can remain in rural and island locations. This is starting to happen in some areas but needs to be developed across the country.

Who owns Scotland and how can we empower communities to take control of their assets? There is legislation in place to assist communities and many successful projects in operation round Scotland as a result of this. Eigg is an example of a rural and island community who, struggling with poor housing, high unemployment and poor infrastructure, bought the island in 1997 and have created jobs, a renewable electricity grid and have an increasing population.

Communities in rural and island Scotland are leading the way on developing and managing renewable energy projects and applying greener solutions to local issues but do not seem to have meaningful influence on government policy.

Some of this is down to perception, rural and island Scotland is still seen as beautiful mountains, lochs and glens. This may sell calendars and portray what many think is the landscape of Scotland, but these images show a degraded stripped landscape, denuded of growth of anything and people. How can we change this to a more realistic view?

82% of the world's land is rural and has 30% of the population living on it<sup>1</sup>, in Scotland, it is 98% land and 17% population.<sup>2</sup> Arguably as the world is still focused on how it will tackle the climate emergency, rurality should be centre stage because it is the rural areas which will have to feed, power and manage the lands in a more volatile climate.

The Food and Global Security Network have just reported that soil should be politically recognised as a strategic asset, as its ability to produce food underpins peace and civil stability<sup>3</sup>.

Scotland's birth rate is the lowest since the 1800s<sup>4</sup>, we are not alone, Italy has the lowest birth rate in Europe<sup>5</sup> and Germany's birth rate has been falling too, although it's seen a small rise during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>6</sup>. So, for a skilled population that can sustain a country and its people at Net Zero, we need to make sure our rural communities are thriving.

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**Context:** On Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> November at COP26, SEFARI Gateway hosted a panel debate, chaired by their Director Charles Bestwick, on 'Achieving a Just Transition for Rural Scotland'. The panel consisted of experts from across rural and island Scotland:

- Jane Atterton, Rural Policy Centre Manager, Scotland's Rural College
- Theona Morrison, Acting Chair, Scottish Rural Action
- Jim Hume, Director of Policy & Public Affairs, Support in Mind Scotland
- Jane Craigie, Director and Co-founder, Rural Youth Project
- Jackie Brierton, Chief Executive Officer, GrowBiz Scotland
- Mags Currie, Senior Social Scientist, James Hutton Institute

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/regional/rural-development/Rural-Agenda-for-Climate-Action.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/rural-scotland-key-facts-2021/pages/2/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.foodandsecurity.net/news-release-soil>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-57651135>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57396969>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/demography-german-birthrate-down-in-coronavirus-pandemic/a-54395345>

Tasked with considering what a just transition would look like for those living and working in rural and island Scotland, each panellist brought their own knowledge and expertise, offering different insights that also aligned with each other.

A recording of the event can be found here: [COP26 | Achieving a Just Transition for Rural Scotland | Scotland Climate Ambition Zone - YouTube](#)



## Part 2: Contributions from Theona at the COP26 event

### Contributions to COP26 – Achieving a Just Transition for Rural and Island Scotland

*Glasgow November 6<sup>th</sup> 2021, The Lighthouse 2-4pm*

Theona Morrison, Acting Chair, Scottish Rural Action, Director of CoDeL Community Development Lens. We were the first to recognise a younger working age demographic were returning, settling and staying in the chain of islands which make up Uist, from Berneray to Eriskay in the Outer Hebrides, despite the population projections which predict we will be almost turning out the lights by 2040. This led to a SEFARI funded piece of work resulting in the Islands Revival Declaration. We have worked with young adults, that is under the age of 40, in Irish and Scottish islands and reported on research from across the Northern Periphery and Arctic regions out of which has emerged ***Redefining Peripherality***.

I have a background in public health, a multinational corporation, education in the local authority, the cultural economy and I have run my own business. I live on an island on a working croft which has sheep and a couple of head of cattle.

I chair the Locality Planning group for health and social care and sit on the strategic planning group for the Integrated Joint Board. I also sit on the University of the Highlands and Islands post-graduate group for nursing with a particular focus on recruitment and retention in a sector where there are significant recruitment challenges, and Community Land Scotland's working group to introduce community land ownership into the curriculum.

### **1. How important is a Just transition for Rural and Island Scotland and why do we need to address it?**

The OECD say rural regions account for approximately 80 percent of the territory and are home to 30 percent of the population. These lands, and the people who live on them, are the source of almost all the food, fresh water, energy, minerals and other resources that make our way of life possible. Many rural regions are rich in natural resources, contain great environmental biodiversity, are important tourism locations and are home to a rich variety of indigenous traditions and cultures. Rural places are, in short, vital to the prosperity and well-being of all people and our society.

Scotland's birth rate is the lowest since the 1800s. We are not alone, Italy has the lowest birth rate in Europe and Germany's birth rate is falling too. So when I speak about a skilled population that can sustain a country and its people at Net Zero, we need to make sure our rural communities are thriving.

Now, if we think about where Scotland's people live – 98% of its land mass including 96 inhabited islands are defined as rural with just 17% of the population.

Scotland has quite literally a wealth of natural assets with swathes of land, fresh water, coastal water, wind, rain and skilled people. Assuming that Scotland wants to keep its people...

#### **We need a vision for rural and island Scotland**

If we want Scotland to develop its full potential, given that so much of what we will need to enable us to thrive sustainably is in rural and island places, we should enable and facilitate Scotland's people to live in these rural and island places all year round, to be able to deliver on Scotland's potential.

#### **The questions are:**

1. Do we want to be able to feed ourselves and not be dependent on imported food? We import 40% of our food in the UK.
2. I think we know we want to be self sufficient in green energy – we're on that road
3. Do we want to own our assets of land, water, power, food?

Assuming the answer is yes, then all of these things emanate not from our cities but from our rural and island communities, so we need people to live there.

I heard someone say the other day, *'people in cities are too far way from the harvest, so they don't know how good or bad the harvest was'*. Years ago I worked with someone who when delivering health education to children, she said they thought chocolate milk comes from brown cows!

At the Northern Periphery and Arctic Annual Conference last week, its theme was indeed our phrase ***Redefining Peripherality***. It was hosted in Sligo, Ireland. As the host nation introduced the theme: knowing as we do that rural, peripheral and island areas for years have been painted as being

backward, always needing to catch-up, they have now found themselves so far behind, they are actually ahead!

## **2. What are the priorities and needs for a Just Transition in rural Scotland?**

So, as I alluded to before, Scotland has a lot of land, and as it has been said, it is not so much about who owns the land but what you do with it. However, whoever owns huge tracts of land really does have an enormous influence on what happens on it.

If a fair and sustainable Scotland is to be achieved in practice, then what happens in the rural and island places affects us all. At the moment land is an unregulated market.

We need education which provides an understanding, literacy and vision of the opportunities in rural and island Scotland. Accredited Progression pathways that link into employability within the sectors that will enable us to fulfil that which is in our Vision for rural and island Scotland.

I'm involved with Community Land Scotland who are already developing and delivering curriculum materials that will enable young people to identify the huge range of opportunities within community owned land.

**Import substitution**, whether it is renewable energy, food production, locally rooted enterprises, the like of which we saw during covid, sustained life, should be part of the calculation.

Evidence had shown that a younger, able working demographic if supported see the opportunities through an informed lens. We must enable them to be appropriately skilled. Enable them to be able to afford to live in rural and island places

### **Food production – how will we feed ourselves?**

Now, each Local Authority has to develop its own local food plan outlining how it is going to feed its people.

I must take my hat off to Edinburgh, who were encouraged to realise this was not just about releasing more land for allotments but to create a city farm to feed its people. But that's not rural is it!

When I was in education, in the local authority it was recognised that crofting was an important sector in the economy, worth several million £s. And yet if a pupil went home and said they wanted to do crofting, you could hear the parents say, 'get a proper job'. But crofting roots people in communities and usually sits alongside something else in a pluralistic economy. We commissioned the writing and accreditation of a qualification in crofting, so that it was on a par with other mainstream subjects like history and physics. The course was delivered by both a teacher and a Gaelic speaking crofter, and still is. The teacher grew up on a farm in Wiltshire. One day the pupils asked the crofter, when was the last time he put fuel in his tractor; he scratched his head and said, oh I don't know, August I think. The teacher recalled how many times a week he had to refuel his tractor. The crofter's output was just about 5 tonnes per acre, the farmer's yield was 8 tonnes, but the important thing to note is that the inputs to be able to extract the 8 in ratio are far greater. If the farming community is represented here I can hear you saying, but we can't afford to go to that level. However this is just to illustrate a point and you don't need me to tell you that all the inputs, fertiliser are becoming not only a high financial price but soil price too. I am on your side, I believe passionately that rural skills are crucial. The average age of farmers is 59 and yet

**The Food and Global Security Network have just reported that soil should be politically recognised as a strategic asset, as its ability to produce food underpins peace and civil stability.**

Community Land Scotland's manifesto has 22 proposals, one of which is *'controlling land monopolies to protect the public interest, that is our interest, to empower communities to build their own local resilience across, economic, environmental and I would add cultural assets'*.

Every day there are 90,000 vessels on the oceans of the sea, which includes cruise vessels and ferries. 90% of world trade arrives by sea. Some of the freight ships are 300m long, 30m wide and can weigh over 14,000 tonnes, primarily using dirty 'heavy engine oil'. 50 ships, each way, every day through the Suez Canal. So who counts the carbon in the food miles in the beef that comes from Brazil, almond milk from California or lamb from New Zealand. Given what I said before about peace and civil stability and given what we have just seen recently with the gas flows from Russia, I would suggest producing our own food should be a no brainer. If one calculates the true carbon emissions of imported food, as well as the provenance and quality of 'home produced food', we have a great opportunity.

### **Photographs of barren straths will sell many calendars this Christmas.**

The sparse degraded landscape of our upland and Highland areas has become accepted as the norm. Photographs of barren straths will sell many calendars this Christmas. The natural tree line should be 2.5 thousand feet, instead we see straths and glens stripped and bare. 200 years ago and more recently than that these areas were populated.

If a country wants to be able to feed itself in the most carbon neutral way, especially when it has the land to do just that, we need to consider what the land is used for as well as who owns it.

So community and sustainability literacy skills that are linked to a rural and island economy should be embedded into the curriculum.

### **3. What are the distinct opportunities and challenges for rural Scotland?**

We know that a younger demographic do want to return, settle or stay in rural communities. Increased IT connectivity, and indeed perhaps having been 'at home' during Covid but even before then, there was a move to rural and island communities. Again at the OECD conference on **Rural Innovation** held in Edinburgh in 2019, in the final summary, the chair said, *'no longer do you young people need to live on the 10 floor of an expensive block of flats in a city because that's where the jobs are, because they can work from where they want to be now'*. And that was well before Covid.

Many young people will leave their rural and island places for HE or FE but crucially what is important is that they know there is something to return for. Equally those who stay must not feel second rate and should also be given the accredited industry standard qualifications that enable them to work in their own area. Those qualifications must have the journey to net zero embedded within them.

Scotgem are training young people to be rural GPs, accredited by St Andrews University, because if we want to keep the lights on, renewable energy lights, we need all the services of a functioning community – GPs, health and social care, teachers, etc.

Undoubtedly the housing market is a nightmare. 40% of the housing stock in Tiree and West Harris is in holiday accommodation and second properties. In May 2019, some 1.2% of homes in Scotland were listed on Airbnb (as home sharing, home letting or secondary letting). However, in Skye this rose to 18.6% (the highest penetration rate by ward in Scotland). For context, the penetration rate in Edinburgh City Centre Ward was 16.2%.

The impact of the 'lights being out' for at least half a year affects housing availability across all sectors of employment, e.g. health and social care recruitment and delivery, and severely impacts

schools. But, last week a house in South Uist went on the market and the advert says that it will not be sold as a holiday let or second home – some progress!

The Scottish Government has committed to a £30m rural housing fund and there is also the social housing fund, but the *existing* housing market is like a runaway train. Smart Clachans are planned for Comrie Croft in rural Perthshire and in South Uist, which will be eco living and working villages, all great initiatives. So many properties which are more than the stones they are built from and often bear the social history of where they are located, and it is the local people which can retell those stories, are lost when sold to the highest bidder whose lens is more familiar with the London stock market.

In my own island of Grimsay we had the opportunity to lease out a house and we framed its allocation in favour of young families and preferably with island connections. There were a number of applications and we were able to allocate to a family with Grimsay connections with 3 children. Seven years ago there were just two children of primary school age, today there are 17 of primary school age and under. Transformational change can happen with the right steps.

Here is the outcome of an unregulated land market in the Highlands of Scotland. Just 3 people own more than 400,000 acres in the Highlands. Some work done by St Andrew's University identified 67% of land is privately owned by just 0.025% of the population – I'm not entirely sure if they all even live in Scotland.

Work has shown that there is a fear of 'going against the landlord' which in 2021 is almost hard to believe, but I was in Strath Farrar, Strath Conon and Glen Affric the other week. Many of the estates in these straths and glens exhibit what has become the normalised view of Highland Scotland, a stripped bare degraded landscape with hardly any people. I found myself excited when we came to the village in Strath Conon because it had a school.

To quote Calum MacLeod, Policy Director at Community Land Scotland, '*Where does Scotland's public benefit?*' 'The Rural Agency at Savills with the corporate governance agenda report buyers of all shapes and sizes from small Scottish businesses and charities as a result the land and forest market is booming, competing aggressively alongside more established investors from across Europe and beyond'.

Forestry now has to have 20% native woodland and the Scottish Government is heading the right way. There are 4 community rights to buy legislation in Scotland which are for rural and urban and that support has £10m funding to help enable communities to buy their own land, including the Scottish Land Fund and Community Asset Transfer.

### **Repeopling and Repurposing land**

Now before we all get enthusiastic around rewilding, remember we have said we want to produce our own food, and should produce our own food. This degraded landscape is a product of 200 years ago when glens were cleared for sheep and deer. These straths and glens were lived and worked and could be again. They are not as fertile as the east and further south, but it would support a population. Magnus Davidson, at the University of the Highlands and Islands UHI in Thurso, is doing work and speaks a lot about *Repeopling* these places.

This would be an opportunity to produce food in a sustainable biodiverse rich way. Increasingly we see farmers such as the English upland farmer and author James Rebanks who is powerfully making the case to educate people on where our food comes from and is producing food in a sustainably biodiverse model of farming rooted in his grandfather's legacy of farming, i.e. missing out the last generation or two which has literally upset the apple cart.

#### 4. How can rural communities influence the Just Transition and Net-Zero agendas?

Building on what the host at *Redefining Peripherality* said, rural and island communities have lived experience and informed cultural knowledge.

**Rural areas and particularly island areas are already leading the way.**

**Own your land and your energy ...** Eigg has been in community ownership since 1997, its population is increasing, but as an illustration of being ahead after being so called behind, Eigg was not on the National Grid, however since 2008 they have a mixed model of renewable energy, wind, water and solar.

With the development of green jobs in the renewable energy sector we are already being led by island communities with the Orian project in Shetland which harnesses wind and tide, which by 2025 will provide green power for the local community, Scotland and beyond. Isle of Raasay Community Renewables is a Hydro Electric scheme which supports the local community and reduces CO2 emissions.

In some ways the way communities lived a good couple of generations or more ago now, was lighter touch and more sustainable on the world around us. It is the globalised GDP capitalist model which is threatening our very existence, it is extractive in its drive for cheaper and cheaper, faster and faster, more and more food, energy, stuff and more stuff. Working rural communities live closer to the weather, the seasons, they know how to be flexible, agile and responsive because they have to be.

Their voices have to be heard – because they know. We should respect their knowledge and listen to them. We coined the phrase lived experience because rural and island areas are researched up one side and down the other, but so often from afar and the results are interpreted through an urban lens. Pluralism would be an example. Recent research indicated that having more than one job is a data set of poverty, but rural and island people have had more than one source income for generations. It can be economically appropriate by not ‘having all your eggs in one basket’, flexible and adaptable in response to individual changes in fortune and external market shocks – such as responses to Covid illustrated. In an urban context this would be called a career portfolio, great for the wellbeing of individuals, so why not in a rural and island context? One reason will be because equivalent income levels may be less, but if you’re producing a lot of our own food, maybe that’s not how it should be measured. Clearly if you need six jobs because you’re on the brink of poverty, then that would be different.

In the New Scientist reviewing COP26 regarding Indigenous peoples it said *'Another constituency with little to celebrate is Indigenous Peoples. They also bear a disproportionate burden of a problem they did little or nothing to create, but to which they hold powerful solutions. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, even though Indigenous Peoples make up just 6 percent of the global population, their lands shelter about 80 percent of remaining biodiversity. In a sane world, they would be lauded as climate and biodiversity heroes and their advice eagerly sought....'*

A local example for me and perhaps for those of you who do live in rural areas. You will recall we had a very dry spring, fires broke out across hills and moorland in Scotland. This led to such a tense debate about whether muirburn, or falasgair, should be allowed, the practice of burning old woody waist-high heather to allow new fresh growth. It is strictly controlled by law outwith bird nesting season etc. At the meeting there was an 81 year old crofter who has the grazing on one of the significant hills in North Uist; Nature Scot, and the Fire service were also there. It had the potential

to be a fiery meeting. The crofter started, he talked about how they had done this practice all his life, how they had considered the wind, made sure there were breaks, and so on. When the fire officer came to speak, he said, I want a job on that man's croft because he has said everything I would advise you to do.

I think it is the job of our politicians and those who will shape policy that affects rural and island Scotland that they visit. In considering this question, and because I watched a cross parliamentary committee take evidence on island policies recently, my recommendation would be to visit and learn from rural and island communities in winter, allow time. Take note of the parts of Scotland that are 'closed' in the winter because they're only open for tourists in the summer time and, at the same time, make a note as to how many houses have lights on in the communities, whether the community has a school, a shop, a church - what is a going concern and not a holiday home, a pub, open in the winter. If they have to travel up the A82 Glencoe, Glenshiel, Kintyre, Invergarry etc, check how many places are open should you get snowbound on the way, or are they 'closed' until summer.

Rural communities do benefit from tourism but only in proportion to the rest of the economy.

### **How can rural communities be supported in achieving a Just Transition?**

Scotland is moving to a more community wellbeing economy, where the outputs are not only judged by GDP and growth, but also by their social and environmental impacts, as is already demonstrated by the Social Enterprise model. Rural and island social enterprises contribute to the communities in which they serve and far away above their financial return. They are often a mixed model addressing the needs of the community, e.g. childcare, recycling, community transport, home care. Social enterprises are run on the back of a real passion for addressing community need. Support for a such models should be enhanced.

Community Navigator type roles can be important and supportive to help communities who have the passion to deliver something, that they receive support and hours to navigate the funding applications and all the bureaucracy, even tackling community asset transfers or community land buyouts.

These roles should be from within communities, culturally sensitive, ideally Gaelic speaker, Doric, Scots etc. Not only does this help contribute to empathy, it also provides a paid role within that community.

### **• What international or Scottish examples can we learn from where rural communities are leading on Just Transition?**

If we look to Ireland, like here, a lot of the medical provision had been centralised. If you combine that with the shortage of GPs, you see the undermining of rural health care. Professor Liam Glynn is a rural GP on the west coast of Ireland with a population of about 250. He is also an academic professor of General Practice at the University of Limerick. He has evidenced that it is more cost effective to deliver some elements of health care in the community rather than asking the patient to travels miles. He can evidence the cost effectiveness of minor surgery delivered locally. He can talk about the political campaign '*No Doctor, no village*'. He has also evidenced the impact of seasonality of some jobs in the tourist sector; the lack of year-round employment means lack of income, unable to secure housing etc. As a result of this work, there is a GP on every district health committee in Ireland.

If we look to a very small district in eastern Finland, during Covid, a deal was done to support home care by the health authority working with the local college, and trained agricultural workers to be able to deliver home care. This reduced travel and gave additional employment to the worker, and provided care in a familiar way culturally.

If I look at my own community, I can think of an elderly gentleman, in his nineties, a widower, who lives on his own, he has carers going in to his home to support him. The carers are Gaelic speakers; they can share his reflections of the world in his own language.

I once met a surgeon from New York many years ago and he asked me if the health and social care workers in the community speak Gaelic to the patients. I said, well yes of course if they are Gaelic speakers. I asked him why, he said he had been working with immigrant Italian communities in New York for over forty years but should they have a stroke or some kind of injury that affect their cognitive ability, they will often revert to their mother tongue, even after speaking American English for a lifetime. I have witnessed that in my own family.

If the NPA research taught us anything it is that rural and island, on balance, fared better, in the time of crisis with Covid evidenced across health and economic outcomes, and are arguably better placed to respond to climate change. Being peripheral, they are literally on the front line. Thinking about why people live in such places, it should make one realise it's not all about the money! Scottish Rural Action's research also demonstrated it is all about community connectedness and cohesion and factors within that are the intangible non-monetised assets such as cultural identity, shared experience, inherited knowledge and so much more which doesn't appear on any balance sheet. We would do well to enable them to share their insights around resilience so that urban society may learn a thing or two.



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