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Rural Development: Supporting the 'third leg' for sustainable upland farming

Abstract

Introduction

Upland landscapes in Europe are products of the interrelationship between farming and the environment over the last five millennia (European Environmental Agency, 2010). In the last century these areas have become havens of biodiversity as the lowlands have undergone agricultural intensification, as well as centres of recreation and tourism for the general public, valued for their intrinsic landscape qualities (Bonn *et al.*, 2009). The farms operating in these areas are labour-intensive, extensive agricultural systems, and until recently were perceived as an anachronism and in need of modernisation. As the century progressed changes in geopolitics and economics gradually altered the economic environment in which farming operated undermining the profitability of many businesses. In response, farmers had various business options available to them: intensify production, reduce costs of production, pull out of farming altogether or diversify the business. Adopting any of the first three of these has had unwanted repercussions within the wider upland landscape in terms of the environment, economics and society. In response various national governments and the European Union have embarked on diverse forms of rural development (Mansfield, 2011). However, the focus has often been on economic and environmental schemes which have more tangible, measurable outputs and outcomes, leaving the social 'leg' to fend for itself with a view that if the other two areas are directly addressed the third will automatically materialise in response.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the importance and value of the social leg and to demonstrate that it is possible to support initiatives with a social bias in order sustain upland farming as a system. To explore this, the case study of Cumbria, northern England will be used to explore four themes: first, a description of the upland farming system and the issues facing the sector; second; the responses of various political bodies to these challenges; third, the character and value of the social 'leg' and finally, some examples of some real projects that aim to support the social 'leg' of rural development within the Cumbrian upland farming community.

The Upland Farming System of Cumbria

Character & operation

Upland farmers farm for a number of reasons. Key is their focus to produce high quality meat (lamb or beef) and/or milk. They are stockmen first and foremost, something which is often overlooked by policy makers. Of secondary importance are: to make an economic profit from the business either from farming activities or diversification options (non-farming); to ensure the sustainability of the land resource whether it be the soil, forage

(foodstuff for livestock) or water; and to maintain the traditions and cultural heritage of upland farming (sometimes referred to as social capital – see below). It is however, important to note from the outset that every upland is different and thus farmers' goals can vary. The combination of physical, historical, economic, social and political factors operating on even a single fell in a single valley, can produce different farming responses to that of the neighbouring valley. It is perhaps this single factor that has led to most of the challenges we now face in society when trying to address what has become known as the 'hill farming problem' (Stapeldon, 1937; Attwood & Evans, 1961; Grigg, 1989). Those people that understand this variation and its management vagaries the best, are the people and communities that work these landscapes. Unfortunately not the government expert, who with the best will in the world, only observes a snapshot of the farming system operating thereon (Stenseke, 2008).

The actual Cumbrian upland farm system comprises three distinct land types: inbye, intake and fell (Figure 1), a pattern of use repeated in variation across all uplands of Britain and Europe .

[Figure 1 near here – with plate 1 adjacent aligned]

Inbye land is by far the best land, close to the farm buildings and used for the production of hay or silage for the winter, grazing land in winter months and lambing areas in spring. At the other extreme are the *fells* at the highest altitudes (usually 300m ASL or more). These are areas typically of heather moorland or rough unimproved grass pasture highly prized in terms of nature conservation in the UK and Europe (English Nature, 2001; Thompson *et al*, 1995). Indeed, it is the agricultural management of land in the past that has allowed these ecological communities to develop through extensive grazing regimes and periodic burning of the heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) to re-invigorate growth (Backshall *et al.*, 2001). In between the fells and the inbye lies the *intake*, sometimes referred to as *allotment* in Cumbria. This is land that has been literally taken in from the fell and enclosed commonly using drystone walls made of locally field cleared stone. This system of walls, enclosed fields and fell areas give the Cumbrian uplands their intrinsic high quality landscape so desired by the public (Ratcliffe, 2002).

Farmers run mainly two enterprises in the core of the Cumbrian uplands- sheep and/or beef; on the valley bottoms and upland margins some environments are sheltered enough to run a dairy herd. Occasionally farms even run a dairy herd and a fell sheep flock, although this is labour intensive. Upland farms, themselves, are divided into two types; true *upland farms* containing inbye, intake and fell and the *hill farm*, which contains intake and fell with little or no inbye. This tends to restrict hill farms to traditionally running just sheep, whereas the true upland farms have historically run sheep flocks and cattle herds in combination.

From the farmer's point of view the landscape they have developed has a number of functions. Walls keep livestock from straying, they keep rams away from ewes at the wrong time of year and they allow stock to be grazed in winter on a rotational basis to ensure sustainable grassland management. The fell areas are summer pasturage, when the enclosed land's productivity has been exhausted or allocated for the production of grass and hay crops for winter feed. In order to support the same number of sheep on the fell as in the inbye, the lower productive land needs a substantially larger area over which the sheep

disperse. This grazing area has developed over many generations of farmers, who originally shepherded the sheep keeping them to land that the farm had common rights over. Over time the sheep get to know the land that they can graze on and gradually the intensive shepherding can be withdrawn so that the flock manage themselves geographically. This instinct of the sheep to keep to a certain land area is known as *hefting* or *heafing*, the operation of which can vary from upland to upland (Hart, 2004). The ewes pass the knowledge of the area (heft) on to their lambs, who in turn pass it on in turn to their lambs. In this way it is important that the farmer maintains a multi-generational flock. Typically a common in Cumbria can be many thousands of hectares of land and thus can contain enumerable of hefts (Figure 2) isolated from the main farm unit. Over time the *virtual* boundaries between hefts have developed keeping stock from straying into another heft, thus developing a self-policing of grazing pressure. Another important characteristic of upland sheep is the way in which specific breeds have been bred to survive certain upland environments. For example in Cumbria, Herdwick sheep have been bred for the Lake District Fells, whereas further east on the Howgills, Rough Fell sheep are more typical (Figure 3).

[Figures 2 & 3 near here]

Key to operations is the *gather*. Sheep are collected and gathered together from the open fell at various times of year and brought down to the farm for shearing, worming, winter grazing, sales and lambing. (Few farmers lamb their sheep out on the fell now for management reasons). Because hefts are geographically extensive, over difficult terrain, the labour requirements for gathering are high (as many as 25 people for a single gather). This is exacerbated by precipitous landscapes that do not lend themselves to modern All-Terrain Vehicles, thus pedestrian access is often the only means reaching the spread out stock using highly trained sheep dogs.

Traditionally, farmers, their families, staff and sheep dogs worked together over an entire common (several hefts) to gather several flocks in one day. In this way a large number of people worked co-operatively to clear all sheep from the common in an efficient manner (Burton *et al.*, 2005). Upland commons in Cumbria can be extensive, the common shown in Figure 2 is around 8,850 hectares with the heft indicated being about 150ha and thus co-operation between people is essential if all sheep are to be brought down safely. The sheep are then divided into the distinctly owned flocks down at the fell wall either there and then, or through the *Shepherds Meet*, a separate event when mis-gathered sheep are exchanged between farmers. Given the labour intensive nature of the gather, any losses in farm labour are difficult to manage as short term contractors do not have an intimate local knowledge of each unique fell nor an understanding sheep behaviour. Furthermore, experience accrued over years also enables the farmer to recognise where sheep will be in times of adverse weather conditions.

The Issues

Whilst this farming system has emerged to take effective use of the upland environment and the resources it can offer, changes in economic and political circumstances increasingly marginalised hill farming throughout the 20th Century. Unable to reduce production costs to maintain profits and working on the margins of cultivation meant upland farms could not

respond quickly enough (Mansfield, 2011). As profits declined farmers had to make some tough decisions as to how they could continue to operate. In general, farmers respond to financial crisis in one of four ways by restructuring their business (Lobley *et al.*, 2002) : intensifying production (produce more); cutting the cost of production (saving money); withdrawing from farming altogether or diversifying into other non-farming activities either on or off the farm. Each of these options does however, create further challenges. For the upland farmer, intensification of production is unwise, as quite simply, the carrying capacity of the land can be quickly exceeded and damage occur to the very resources they depend upon. This has been admirably demonstrated with the overgrazing of uplands in Britain from the mid 1970s to 2000 as farmers responded to livestock subsidies supplied by successive EU and UK Governments (Winter *et al.*, 1998).

If, however, the farmer chooses to continue to farm in a similar way, they must seek mechanisms to reduce costs. The easiest way to do this has been to reduce paid farm labour. Many farms now rely solely on the farmer and the partner for labour, with older children helping out when they can. For some upland farmers, they cannot cut the wage bill as they are not married, do not have children or their partner already works off-farm. Whilst cutting labour saves money in the short term, in the long run it can cause problems for certain aspects of farm management. One particular issue is the lack of people at gathering times to control the behaviour of flocks as they come off the fell. One farm on Ousby Fell used to have 22 people going out for the gather, they are now down to nine (Burton *et al.*, 2005). From a practical management point of view there are simply not enough people to close off the escape routes for the sheep leading away from the main flock. Another problem of this lack of labour is that it limits strategic investment in new non-farm enterprises. The bigger issue is however, that the loss of jobs means that the local wider community suffers as there are fewer people to support service provision such as schools, shops, doctors and public transport. A downwards spiral can thus be triggered leading to mass rural depopulation (Figure 4; Newby, 1985).

[Insert Figure 4 near here]

The third option open to the hill farmer is withdraw from farming altogether, which for many is already 'on the cards', due to lack of succession, an aging population structure (the average age of farmers is now 58) or as a result of crises, such as Foot and Mouth in 2001 (Franks *et al.*, 2003). Some have sold up altogether, others sold off the land only. Either situation has multiplier effects into the external farm environment of the landscape and wider community. In some cases, other farmers take on adjacent hefts, leading to fewer, bigger farm units. Those that have sold up altogether have often split house and land. This happened in south Cumbria in around the Howgills where 45% (17 out of 36) of the farm units were no longer farming (pers. comm., H Wilson). The effect is two-fold, first is that the household becomes disenfranchised from the farming community and second the land can be abandoned. If the latter happens on the heft the associated de-stocking affects surrounding hefts, whose sheep move into the new unclaimed territory. On large fells like the one shown in Figure 2, the ripple effect of heft abandonment can affect tens of farms and their management of the flocks, particularly at gathering times. The abandonment of the hefts also leads to problems for the semi-natural vegetation. Because pressure for grazing has been lessened, sheep can graze more selectively, eating out the sweeter and

more nutritious species at the expense of the less desirable. Plants such as gorse (*Ulex europaea*,) bracken (*Pteridium agustifolium*) and mat grass (*Nardus stricta*) have increased leading to a deterioration in the semi-natural vegetation on open fells when not managed (Backshall, 1999).

The final route available is to diversify their enterprise base away from farming. However it often requires capital and spare labour, both of which as discussed above, are in short supply on Cumbrian farms. Furthermore, it requires a certain amount of risk taking by the farmer and the business, which is not characteristic of many farmers (Mansfield, 2011). Nevertheless, diversification can be the one form of restructuring that does provide sustainability to the farm business, which we will return to below.

Political responses to the plight of upland farming systems

Given such dire circumstances successive national and European governments have responded by providing various forms of support to upland farmers. Governments intervene in agriculture for a number of reasons and in a number of different ways (see Table 1) each have had differing levels of success, some have been arguably short sighted and poor, others maintain the *status quo* at best. Analysis of the problem over the years suggests agricultural policy is too sectoral in approach; rural areas are more complex, an interwoven pattern of economic sectors, social processes and environmental considerations (eg. Stenseke, 2008). As a result, there has been a drift since the 1980s towards more multifunctional support mechanisms based on the concept of rural development.

Rural development as a policy tool came to prominence with the publication of '*Our Common Future*' (Bruntland, 1987). Rural development is essentially a three pronged solution to rural issues encompassing economic, environmental and social structures and processes. It is often described as a top-down approach (referred to sometimes as *exogenous*) led by government institutions imposing schemes, initiatives and grants on various parts of the rural community in a hope that people will use the funds. For farming communities the lack of real consultation, misunderstanding of what they stand for and are trying to achieve, and expectation they will blindly adopt these initiatives has led to resentment, feelings of marginalisation and excessive interference in their lives.

The analogy of a three-legged stool is often applied to the three themes of rural development to demonstrate that effective rural development can only occur if all three are addressed equally. If one theme, for example, social, is not, then the three legged stool becomes two, and falls over – ie. policy will (and does) fail to achieve its objectives. It is argued here, that despite this clear guidance, many rural development initiatives at present, directed at supporting and sustaining upland farming, focus too much on economic and environmental themes with a blind hope that the social 'leg' will miraculously appear and flourish if the other two are addressed (see Table 1).

As a result, there has been a move to replace rural development with *rural regeneration*. Selman (2004) argued that top-down government intervention is not enough to engender social development in rural areas, and instead a more community-led system needs to take

place where local people make decisions about local issues; what is known as a bottom-up (sometimes referred to as *endogenous*) approach. In this way the farming community feel properly consulted, valued and understood; after all, it is an environment about which they have intimate knowledge (Stenseke, 2008; Mansfield, 2012). Such initiatives do exist, a good example of which is LEADER (*Liaisons Entre Actions de developpement de l'economie Rurale*) and its associated LAGS (Local Action Groups). The LAGs, particularly, are a useful tool, as their membership cuts across the dominance of government agencies and quangos in decision-making found top-down activities. Instead, LAGs draw on both private and public bodies to form its membership; in this way a private farmer has as much say on how money is allocated and spent as a DEFRA official.

The Character and Value of the Social 'leg' in upland farming

Concepts such as the three-legged stool, bottom-up rural regeneration and LEADER direct attention for us to understand more about social structures and processes operating in and around hill farming, if we are to be successful in sustaining it. A particularly pertinent social structure is *social capital*, which can simply be described as '*the glue that holds society together*' (Burton *et al.*, 2005). Pretty & Ward (2001) suggested it has four elements: relations of trust; reciprocity and exchange; common rules and norms; and connectedness, networks and groups. How these ideas relate to upland farming are shown in Table 2, a mix of processes (for example, hefting) and structures (breed associations).

[Insert Table 2 near here]

The value of understanding social structures and processes operating in upland farming is that it helps us identify those elements on which support should be focused, irrespective as to whether it comes from exogenous or endogenous sources. Without these types of social capital the very fabric holding upland farming communities together becomes unravelled and no matter how much money is thrown at economic and environmental solutions, they will fail (Figure 5). This is the lesson of the three-legged stool concept. Being able to demonstrate social structures and processes have been helped is difficult, as they are relatively intangible and, as a result, un-measurable as achieved; probably why centralised top-down initiatives do not tackle them and leave them to programmes such as LEADER. Further tensions exist due to the devolution of power away from institutions of the state, the spurious call for the 'Big Society' (self-help locally) by David Cameron, and recent reductions in social service support (for example, press concerns in Cumbria regarding the withdrawal of subsidised rural bus services, ref here).

[Insert Figure 5 near here]

A second challenge is the changing nature of upland farming. With fewer people operating hefts, less labour available and in some cases fewer farmers, can or should essential features of social capital such as fell gathering, hay making, shearing rings, Shepherds Meets, Livestock Auction socials and so on, be maintained or has upland farming society moved away from these structures for them to be replaced with others? It could be argued

that hefts are disappearing and merging, hay making has been replaced by silaging (see XYZ in this Proceeding), shearing rings replaced by external contractors, and auction mart attendance a luxury rather than the norm. Instead, perhaps other social structures are emerging borne out of necessity, such as farmers markets and bed & breakfast, or others becoming more central, such as Breed Associations or farmer discussion groups to maintain social networks which previously were more on the fringe. Whatever the reason, new social capital phenomena are emerging and it is perhaps to these that funds should be directed to, to support, rather than looking to maintain previous social structures and processes which seem to be failing. Once again perhaps the question is rhetorical and we should be concentrating our efforts on both, and as in the nature of all our unique uplands, some will work better in some areas than in others, re-iterating that local action by local people for local communities is more effective than top-down homogenous intervention.

Examples of projects with social value and support

It seems self-evident, so far, that projects directly tackling the production of new or maintenance of existing social capital are a fundamental plank of sustaining upland farming. Whilst there is still reticence to mainstream such initiatives for the reasons suggested above, this is no reason to not forge ahead and support these forms of activity. In this final section, a number of projects will be explored which address various aspects of the third 'leg' which have been supported.

Example 1 – Farmers' Markets

Farmers markets are probably the most mainstream diversification activity a farmer can undertake that has quantifiable outcomes and outputs to satisfy traditional support initiatives for farmers. Instead of putting food into the conventional retail sector (supermarkets), many farmers are exploiting what Ilbery & Maye (2006) call 'individual retail perspectives'. These systems of sale typically minimise the number of stages between producer and consumer so that goods pass through only one or two 'pairs of hands'. Farm produce is sold unadulterated but semi-processed, as with meat or milk, or else it is processed to add value, as in cheese, butter or pies, or to sell EU premium products labelled as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) - an example being Herdwick Lamb; Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) - Cumberland Sausage or that of Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) or the recent introduction of Product of Mountain Origin (PMO) which is still under discussion in the UK. These goods are then sold through Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs), of which farmers markets are one typical route. In the UK they are a recent revival of an old phenomenon, the first being in Bath in 1997.

[Insert Plate 2 here – steadmans signage]

Much has been written about their character, function, distribution and role (e.g. Ilbery *et al.* 2004; Holloway & Kneafsey 2000), but less about their effectiveness for upland farmers, who face issues that lowland farmers are less likely to encounter. For example, lowland studies have focused on Bath, Ashford and Stratford upon Avon, but all these farmers'

markets are in urban areas with large pools of customers and good turnover. These factors encourage competition and keep prices down to a point where people can buy as part of the week's shopping, rather than the occasional treat. In contrast, farmers' markets in small towns and villages in an upland area like south-east Cumbria have been successful despite the small local population; probably as a result of locations in or near biodiverse rich landscapes, national parks or areas of outstanding natural beauty. People are more likely to buy premium products as a treat while on holiday or short visit. Second, since many market locations in Cumbria have few permanent shops, stallholders benefit from an influx of market shoppers on the day.

Whilst such sales outlets obviously put more of the profit margin into the farmer's pockets there is a more subtle process going on at the same time. Originally, the stalls were the domain of the farmer's wife, often the driver behind the initial idea. However, as time has gone by, the wife is supported and then on occasion replaced by the farmer their self. They meet the public, greet their fellow farmers and develop new social networks to replace those that have vanished, such as the Shepherd's Meet.

Example 2 – Connecting with the Public: Lambing Live.

A particular feature of social capital is the ability to network with others beyond your own local community. It is important as it allows groups of individuals to represent their concerns and challenges to a wider audience becoming a powerful lobbying tool. In the case of upland farmers, whilst they work closely with their neighbours in relation to heft and fell management, and their wider rural community in various social settings, there is also particular benefit to network with those dis-connected with where their food comes from. These bed & breakfast (B&B) facilities are also a common way in which farm families generate additional income for the farm business. Upland farms are particularly well disposed to exploit this, once again because of their location in tourist destinations.

[Insert Plate 3 here]

One B&B is of particular note in Cumbria (Plate 3). A few years ago the BBC ran a live programme from an upland farm in SE Cumbria. In *Lambing Live* viewers were able to step into the world of the hill farmer at one point in the year when they were lambing, and as with all reality TV, people began to see the human side of the farm family and the daily struggles hill farmers face. Building on the success of the programmes, the family decided to renovate a redundant barn on their property and let it as a high specification B & B to be enjoyed alongside participating in daily farm tasks. In this way, the family have brought the general public into the farming world on their terms and within their control, rather than that of the general public. Even before the building work was completed, bookings were coming in.

The social capital benefits of such singular projects cannot be underestimated, although they are hard to quantify and as a result the positive multiplier effects across the sector are impossible to articulate. However, such activities help to dispel some of the inaccuracies

portrayed by other areas of the media (for example, XXXX). Nevertheless, they do reconnect the general public with where their food comes from and why upland farming is the way it is.

Example 3 – Connecting to the Community: Archaeological Distinctiveness and Tebay

As labour levels have reduced on farms the potential to develop diversification decreases and disconnection from the local community occurs. Seventy years ago, the majority of people lived and worked in rural areas most on farms. By the end of the 20th Century only 1.9% of population work directly in farming (Grigg, 1989). Villages are no longer dominated by farming families, many are incomers working away during the day and certainly not in farming. People actually do not know everyone that lives in the village, and as a result, the shared social capital has all but disappeared. Simple things like working together in bad weather or helping with the harvest are events of the past.

It is into this void that new social capital projects are needed to re-connect the local community together with a common purpose. One example of such is the Low Borrowbridge archaeological community excavation which took place in the Lune gap near Tebay in Cumbria over three years (ACT, 2012). The local history group were looking for a new project to work on and one of its members mentioned a farming relation who had a Roman marching fort on their land. The dig that ensued, funded by LEADER, with archaeological support from Oxford Archaeology North and the Lunesdale Archaeological Society brought the community together to excavate the fort. Not only could the local population actively be involved in the dig, they also ran events for the local primary school children, had demonstrations by the re-enactment society, the *Ermine Street Guard*; as well as eating Roman food, bolstered by the farm kitchen and other locally produced foodstuffs (Plate 4).

[insert Plate 4 here]

Example 4 – Cumbria Post 2013

The purpose of this project was to raise awareness of future changes in the upland landscape as a result of issues such as climate change, food security, peak oil, ecosystem service delivery and the expansion of the EU. The idea was to provide knowledge to land managers and farmers as to the new challenges they would face as part of their land management, and in relation to the public, to explain why the Cumbrian landscape would be changing. This three year project was again funded by LEADER and constituted a series of mini projects including a wandering library exhibition, agricultural show displays, training courses, evening talks, newspaper articles and third party product messages on such items as beer labelling.

[Insert Plate 5 here]

Example 5 – Fell Farming Traineeship Scheme

Running from 2003 to 2006, the purpose of the scheme was to encourage young people to take up hill farming as a career and by doing so, ensuring the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills from one generation to the next. The whole project, was in fact, directed at maintaining social capital within the various Cumbrian uplands of the Lake District, the west Pennines and the Howgill-Orton Fell area. The local farming community were concerned about the lack of farm succession and thus sought out a means to resolve this. Young people between 16 and 25 were given the opportunity to work within a number of farm clusters to gain a range of farm skills to allow them to gain employment in the upland farming sector. The farm-based work was supplemented by a range of certificated training courses at the county's agricultural college. Whilst only a pilot, other areas of the country have learnt from the scheme and since developed similar initiatives in the North York Moors and Dartmoor.

[insert Plate 6]

Concluding remarks

From this brief exploration it is evident that supporting the third social 'leg' of rural development is possible in a variety of ways, but our ability to measure their outputs and outcomes is less feasible, which is probably why social capital projects do not form part of mainstream rural support mechanisms. It is of interest to note that all of the examples described here are products of local recognition to do something, albeit not to promote social capital as a goal but to overcome a local need. With the best will in the world, top-down exogenous initiatives have no chance of solving or even recognising what the issues are for an upland farming community. However, bottom-up local rural regeneration projects can, but they will only succeed within a context where all three 'legs' of the stool are equally supported, but not necessarily in the same way. This is where top-down meets bottom-up!

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Figure 1 – Typical Cumbrian Upland Farm (Taken from: Mansfield, 2011:7, courtesy of Badger Press)

Figure 2 – A Heft on a Cumbrian Common (Taken from: Mansfield, 2011:23, courtesy of Badger Press)

Figure 3 – Variation in upland Sheep Breeds in England and Wales (Taken from: Mansfield, 2011:11, courtesy of Badger Press)

Figure 4 – Declining Rural Populations (Taken from: Mansfield, 2011: 214, courtesy of Badger Press)

Figure 5 – Cascade Collapse as a result of loss of Social capital

Table 1 – Agricultural Policy and Solutions in Uplands

Table 2 – Social Capital in Hill Farming (Taken from: Mansfield, 2011:235, courtesy of Badger Press)

Plate 1 – A Cumbrian Upland Farm © Author

Plate 2 – Selling Pork at a Farmers' Market (© courtesy of A Banford)

Plate 3 – Bed & Breakfast at Lambing Live (© courtesy of R Marston)

Plate 4 – Low Borrowbridge Community Archaeology (© courtesy of ACT)

Plate 5 – Cumbria Post 2013 project work © Author

Plate 6 – Fell Farming Trainee working with Sheep © Author