

# **Sustainable development on the periphery: responding to problems of socio-economic marginalisation**

E. McDowell

*School of Law and Social Sciences, Glasgow Caledonian University,  
Scotland, U.K.*

## **Abstract**

With the increasing emphasis on sustainable development as central elements of government programmes, this study examines the challenge of achieving sustainable development within peripheral locations. Lack of research, specifically into island locations, leads to a focus on Islay, with a population of 3,457. Islay is distinct in its attempt to co-ordinate various aspects of the island along sustainable lines (renewable energy; green transport; solar heating; Scotland's first sustainable development company; plans for a wind farm and an Islay energy centre). This is significant, as examples of best practice could potentially facilitate progress in other communities in Scotland, and beyond. However, empirical data (from a resident survey and in-depth interviews with key project leaders on the island) reveal a more complex picture as aspects of peripherality impact upon Islay residents' general quality of life. This study priorities local knowledge and reflects on current concerns, aspirations and priorities for the island.

*Keywords: island, communities, local, sustainability, core, peripheral, environment.*

## **1 Introduction**

Many commentators now recognise the importance of sustainable development as an adaptable paradigm, which accommodates basic needs (Church et al, [1]; Mitlin [2]; Carley and Christie [3]). This study considers the pursuit and practice of sustainable development within the context of Islay, a small Hebridean island off the West coast of Scotland. In many instances, sustainable development is



shaped by forces and decision making by other people, in other places. In the case of remote or island environments, there is the added problem of feeling cut off or isolated from wider society. It is important therefore, to explore the heterogeneity and complexity of different community structures, and to assess the needs of those who live in peripheral locations. Islay was chosen for this study for a number of important reasons: Of particular interest were the specific needs and views of the islanders who live on the periphery from the mainland. The opportunity to open a window into the islanders' social reality, to identify some of their personal views, expectations, aspirations and collective interests was very important. Islay also boasts a number of distinctive sustainable initiatives (discussed in more detail below). This raised questions regarding Islay as a pioneering force for sustainability in other local communities. This study is also important due to the general neglect of academic attention specifically into aspects of 'island' sustainability. In general, there is a significant lack of theoretical and empirical exploration in this field, despite the recognition from the European Union that:

*'It is an undeniable fact that the islands of the European Union (EU) are among the less-developed of its regions, to such a degree that, the Community itself classifies them as disadvantaged and the Economic and Social Committee as less-favoured'. Muir [4]*

There is a growing literature illustrating the structural challenges and pressures associated with peripheral locations (Dawson [5]; Copus [6]; Roberts and Thomson [7]). Thus any analysis of the socio-economic sustainability of peripheral locations must acknowledge the spatial diversity and disparities existing between peripheral locations and core regions. Although precise definitions of peripheral environments are difficult to quantify, the obvious characteristic is a spatial one - distance from the periphery to the core (Owen et al [8]; Gould [9]). However, other aspects of peripherality are very often economic, political and social in character, reflecting elements of power and influence at the core and a lack of power /influence at the periphery. In many respects, an 'asymmetrical' relationship between core and peripheral locations are typically one of dependence Portnow and Pearlmutter [10]. Yet in reality, this is a crude dichotomy, which does not adequately reflect the complexity of core/peripheral locations. In many instances, problems exist in terms of knowledge transfer from the periphery towards the core, as locally driven forms of expertise are not sufficiently acknowledged or addressed, in order to identify problems, clarify aims and assess priorities for action McDowell and Chalmers [11].

## 2 Islay

Islay, situated off the West coast of Scotland, measures 25 miles from North to South and 20 miles across. The island is widely recognised for its outstanding scenic beauty with fresh water lochs, sandy beaches, rocky shores and coniferous woodland. The considerably higher population (estimated at over 15,000 in



1825) was more dispersed, as can be seen from the ruined buildings in remote areas IDC [12]. Because its geology is a mosaic of various rock types, its aspect ranges from good arable land, to peat bog, the latter being an essential ingredient in Islay's world famous whisky industry. The malt whiskies of Islay are integral to the culture of the island (there are currently seven malt whisky distilleries on Islay and one on Islay's 'sister' Isle of Jura). The other main economic activities are farming, crofting, fishing, and tourism and work in the public sector.

## 2.1 Demographic change

The demographic strength of Islay, in relation to Scotland as a whole, significantly decreased in the latter half of the twentieth century. The most recent Census Data [13] indicates that Islay has now only 3,457 inhabitants. Comparisons with census data for 1991 indicate figures of 3,538 showing a reduction in population of 1% over the past decade. As this research demonstrates, certain aspects of living in Islay are problematic for its inhabitants, not only because the population is sparse, but also because local people have a limited range of employment opportunities.

For an island with such a low population, a fear of out-migration (especially of young people) is an issue of real concern for many residents. Young people typically leave Islay in search of opportunities in employment and education. Thus migration attractiveness – the ability to attract newcomers and retain current residents is something the island has to grapple with. According to a study by the Corrum Trust [14] 90% of students who left Islay High School for further education, did not return to Islay on completion of their studies. However, a more detailed, longitudinal analysis is necessary to get a clearer insight into patterns of youth migration on and off the island.

Although Islay has regular connections to the mainland by air and sea, issues regarding the cost of fuel, cost of transport, availability and accessibility were raised repeatedly in the survey. Although transport is a major issue of concern for residents, Islay has been increasingly recognised for its progress in a range of sustainable development initiatives.

### 2.1.1 Islay: sustainable credentials

The Islay Development Company IDC was formed in 1998 to regenerate Islay through the implementation of an agreed sustainable development strategy IDC [15]. Developments in social, environmental, and economic enterprise; communications and information technology; infrastructure and tourist development; and heritage and culture are indicative of the company's work on the island. The most pioneering project to date is the energy project, which promotes the concept of renewable energy by means of wind power, wave power, electric vehicles and various energy saving methods. The west-facing Atlantic coast of Islay provides the ideal location for the development of wind and wave power. Following on from an energy study by the UK government's executive agency for energy technologies, the world's first commercial wave power station, 'the Limpet' was located on Islay and connected to the UK National Grid in November 2000. Although small in scale the IDC is trying to



tackle the multi-dimensional and complex nature of sustainable development and has contributed to projects of local, national and inter-national significance.

### 3 Methodology

The methodological approach of this study was based on a postal survey, administered to a one in five sample of Islay's adult population. The sample was drawn from the Islay electoral register, from a population of 3,457 during the summer of 2001. The main focus of this analysis is based on feedback from the residents' survey and interviews key project leaders on the island during March 2001 with follow up interviews in September 2003. Following on from a pilot study, the findings discussed here are based on the first wave response of (29%) from the survey, which rose to 34% as a result of reminder techniques.

### 4 Islay: The Heachs speak out!

*'Islay – it's a heaven on earth' (Female, age 45-54, Port Ellen).*

*'I fear for Islay's future. If urgent action isn't taken Islay will become another St Kilda' (Male, age 65-74, Portnahaven).*

The above quotes highlight the complexity of views surrounding the island. One is a current positive view; the other is a more pessimistic view of the future (based on fears of isolation and a declining population). The reference to St Kilda was raised, unprompted by a number of Islay residents in the course of this study. The St Kilda community in the Scottish Hebrides lived completely isolated from mainstream civilisation for over 2000 years. The island experienced complete depopulation during the 1930s, due largely to contact with the mainland. (McLean [16]; Steel [17]). Various aspects of isolation (not specifically geographical) are raised in the context of this discussion. For now, the main sections in the survey are categorised around the following broad themes outlined in table 1 below:

Table 1: Main sections of the Islay survey.

- *Quality of life*
- *Environment/Sustainable Development*
- *Priorities for Action*
- *A Vision for the future*

#### 4.1 Quality of life

While many residents expressed a range of positive attitudes towards the island (safety and security; community spirit; the natural beauty of the island and the peace and quiet) they nonetheless, had some important concerns that impacted their everyday lives - the high cost of living; distance from services; poor service provision and infrastructure; the cost and accessibility of travel; inadequate



mobile phone coverage/internet links; a declining population; increased winter isolation; seasonal work; and problems of isolation for more vulnerable groups, including (the disabled, the old, young children, single parents and farm workers) all add to an increasing sense of frustration and isolation:

*'The elderly are more isolated, yet so are the young – there is nothing for them to do' (Male, age 25-34, Bridgend).*

There was also a distinction between a sense of civic engagement among Islay residents, in sharp contrast to feelings of neglect from local and central government:

*'Islay is good at supporting families, there are strong family ties and a lot of self generated community effort – but service provision is non-existent or poor compared to the mainland' (Male, age 55-64, Bridged).*

#### 4.1.1 Transport

It is notable that in *every* response respondents spontaneously listed transport as an issue for improvement:

*'Petrol prices are ridiculously high they are an unnecessary rip-off, on average 20 pence more per litre compared with the mainland – WHY?' (Female, age 35-44, Rinns of Islay).*

*'If the cost of transport was acceptable and fuel prices were the cheapest in Scotland (rather than the dearest in the world) more people would come to Islay, making more sailings and flights viable' (Female, age 45-54, Bridgend).*

The island of Islay offers the opportunity for the development of sustainable tourism, which could bring more visitors to Islay and significantly improve the service provision on the island. However, this requires further development of the infrastructure for an integrated transport strategy and an improved network of tourist sites. Recent studies of transport policy in Scotland, argue for an emphasis on mobility and accessibility Gray et al. [18] and a decentralized approach to transport, Begg [19] to give life to the principles of subsidiarity and sustainability.

**4.1.1.1 Political isolation?** From the survey, a sense of isolation from government policy and decision-making was also apparent, unprompted, in several responses:

*'There is a policy of isolation by successive governments, the economy is marginalized and the population is driven away' (Female, age 55-64, near Port Askaig).*

Many respondents challenged the government to act on these concerns, voicing a sense of external neglect coupled with a belief that Islay contributes more than its fair share in taxes to the treasury (in particular excise duty from whisky). Hence, there is a call for greater fiscal devolution, with Islay retaining more of the income it generates:



*'There needs to be better feedback from central government funds recognizing the huge contribution the island makes to the Exchequer via the sale of whisky/duties -£ 250 million per annum' (Male, age 55-65, Bridgend).* Despite devolution in Scotland, comments such as:

*'You can see what needs to be done, but know it won't be done. I have written to ministers in government but I have never had any replies' (Male, age 45-54, Bridgend)* - suggests some residents feel politically marginalized.

## 5 Local expertise

Sustainable development depends to a large extent on the ability of local people to participate in decisions relative to the needs, aspirations, and circumstances of their own communities. In the course of this study, various suggestions were given by respondents as a means to tackle issues and problems. With respect to transport, suggestions such as 'isolation rebates' using smart-card technology were raised as possible ways forward. Others ideas included having 'water miles' for ferry use, in the same way as 'air miles'; a 'road equivalent tariff' for ferries and sea travel; a summer timetable to run all year; subsidised fuel for residents; better overland routes; and more imaginative approaches from service providers, such as cheap, mid-week air travel for island residents.

For an island with such a low population, it is significant that it boasts over 300 local voluntary, charitable and community groups. A number of influential projects have also been established on Islay including (a cyber-café for socially excluded young people; a healthy living centre and an award winning disabled access project). Theorists such as (Putman [20]; Brown and Ashman [21]) suggest that strong networks of active local organisation indicate high levels of social capital, important for the economic and social development of communities. But although Islay is well placed to build upon the initiatives it has developed, the reality is that many key projects need core funding to sustain them in the long-term.

### 5.1 Young people

Another key issue, which emerged throughout the survey, concerned the future of young people on Islay. There was a strong feeling among respondents that the retention of young people, following education and training, was crucial to the future of the island. However, many believed the 'sad fact' was that there were little or no openings for them to come back to: *'The employment situation for our young people is in crisis' (Female, age 55-6,4 Bruichladdich.)*. There is a distinct lack of opportunities for career development, further /higher education and training, resulting in youth out-migration. Respondents were aware of the importance of computing, information technology, email and Internet facilities as a means of enhancing skills and promoting communication on and off the island, as well as the need for: *'Business and economic guidance to encourage the development of local ideas and stimulate investment on the island' (Male, aged 25-34, Bowmore)*. Interestingly, suggestions such as these reflected some of the



proposals and strategies for peripheral development among key thinkers in this field (Copus [22]; Dawson [23]; Smallbone et al. [24]).

At the other end of the demographic divide, concern was also raised for the high proportion of unemployed men aged 50 plus (34%) and the higher than average rates of male long-term unemployment on Islay (48%). Analysis of recent census data (2001) show that almost twice as many males were in professional occupations (11%) and associate professional and technical occupations (14%) on the mainland, than males in Islay, (5%) and (8%) respectively. However, more males were found in skilled trade occupations in Islay (34%) compared to the rest of Scotland (21%). A recent report by the World Wildlife Fund [25] claims that nearly 50,000 new jobs could be created in Scotland in sectors such as wave and wind energy. This report is highly significant as it highlights the potential of Scotland's existing industrial and technical base for generating new sustainable industries. In addition, Visit Scotland's [26] annual report, reveal that visitors to Scotland rose by 5% from 2002 along with an 8% rise in tourist expenditure, bringing an additional £4.5 billion to the Scottish economy. The importance of tourism was not lost on some residents, who believed it played a vital part in resolving some of Islay's main problems, particularly in relation to the Island's major export - whisky: *'Tourism is vital (linked to whisky) otherwise Islay will join St Kilda' (Male age, 35-44, Port Ellen).*

### 5.1.1 Sustainable development on Islay

*'Islay people are sympathetic to their surroundings, as their ancestors were 1000 years ago. If every community were as environmentally conscious as Islay, the world wouldn't be in this mess' (Male, age 35-44, Port Ellen).*

With respect to sustainable development, we aimed to gain a greater insight into what respondents felt about environmental issues associated with Islay (which invariably impacts on employment, living conditions and quality of life). There was a strong commitment from respondents to the continued development of alternative sources of energy on Islay - 81% of respondents believed this was 'very important' or 'important' in a ranked question. Possibilities in organic farming, tourism, and renewable energy could be promoted and resourced more fully in Islay and other rural areas, given the appropriate support and conditions. Although Scotland has the highest renewable potential in Europe, only around 10% of Scotland's electricity is currently generated from renewable sources (the majority from old hydro power schemes). In March 2003 the Scottish Executive announced an ambitious target of producing 40% of Scotland's electricity from renewable sources by 2020.

However, for an island recognised for its sustainable credentials, it is regrettable that the demand for basic recycling are not adequately addressed:

*'All recycled things on the island because of transport costs end up in the local waste dump' (Female, age 16-24, Bowmore).*

*'It is a disgrace that the paper bank facility was withdrawn in Port Charlotte (Female, age 65-74, Port Charlotte).*



The persistent problem of transport manifests again in terms of the cost of transportation to recycle waste. Residents were also annoyed about the problem of derelict buildings as a ‘visible sign of decay’, ‘a waste of resources’ and the ‘need for affordable, good quality housing for rent as well as ownership’:

At a UK level the Commission on Sustainable Development identifies sustainable development as: ‘the organizing principle for all democratic societies. Sustainable development should ‘promote good governance, healthy living, innovation, life-long learning and all forms of economic growth, which secure the natural capital upon which we depend. It reinforces social harmony and seeks to secure each individual’s prospects of leading a fulfilling life’ Porritt [27]. In reality, however, the generality of the concept contradicts the complexity of working out the true costs of implementation. In remote areas many problems overlap including, transport, cost of living, isolation, tourism, service provision. This tends to reinforce the point that issues cannot be dealt with in an isolated or ad-hoc manner. The cumulative impact of inadequate services and facilities, and the general cost of living, negatively impacts upon residents’ quality of life and hampers sustainability. Conversely, the ability of local residents to participate in the general improvement of their communities would be both cost-effective and sustainable.

## 6 Islay: respondents’ priorities for action

In the penultimate section of the survey we wanted to tap into respondents’ main priorities for improving the island. The more significant results, based on almost two-thirds of responses in total, broadly mirror the majority of concerns highlighted elsewhere in the data. The key priorities of residents are listed in table 2 below– ranked in order of priority:

Table 2: Seven steps to improving Islay.

1. Improve job opportunities (including diversity of economy; greater investment in entrepreneurial activity; new business)
2. Improve transport accessibility and cost (including fuel cost)
3. Retain population (especially young people)
4. Improve cost of living on the island
5. Strengthen rural heritage and culture of the island; safeguard traditional industries
6. Foster the sustainable development potential of the island
7. Address feelings of isolation; give a voice to local people.

### 6.1 Islay: a vision for the future

In the concluding part of the survey we asked respondents to describe their vision of Islay over ten years. Throughout aspects of the data there was a range of contrasting and at times extreme views regarding perceptions of Islay. Some feared it would become another St Kilda, or a bird sanctuary with a declining population. Others stressed concerns for the future of young people and





suggested, Islay will have more old people or people with money. To balance this out, others suggested it could be an island with technological investment and pioneering projects linked to sustainable development, particularly renewable energy. Efforts must be made to tip the balance towards a more optimistic scenario by enhancing and building upon the environmental, economic and social sustainability of Islay.

## 7 Conclusion

It is a propitious time for Scotland. The Scottish Executive is committed to place sustainability at the heart of government and unlock the sustainable potential of local communities. Tourism is on the increase along with the added expenditure associated with tourist activity. Recent reports also highlight the potential for sustainable employment in Scotland along with increased support for renewable energy. But, in reality, the practice of achieving sustainability is more difficult than declaring good intentions. Targeting resources to support sustainability in peripheral areas is a major priority in developing inclusive and progressive agendas. In addition, higher levels of environmental monitoring, access to new resources and better use of existing resources (for example, the re-use of derelict buildings, establishing recycling facilities, developing organic produce, and improved information technology) would enhance sustainability and cost-effectiveness. A strategic and integrated framework for policy and practice is urgently required, particularly in key areas such as rural poverty, employment, energy and transport. On reflection, it is very unlikely that Islay will become another St Kilda. The question is not does Islay have a future? But rather, what kind of future wills Islay have and who will contribute to it? On the basis of the findings in this study, the most promising future for the island lies in tourism, whisky, new technology and sustainable development. However, if the potential of the island and the priorities of its residents continue to go largely unrecognised, it will never become the 'heaven on Earth' the islanders so desire.

## References

- [1] Church, C. Cade, A. and Grant, A. *An Environment for Everyone: Social Exclusion, Poverty and Environmental Action: Community Development Foundation*, 1998.
- [2] Mitlin, D. *Sustainable development: a guide to the literature. Environment and Urbanisation* 4, pp.11-124. 1992.
- [3] Carley, M. and Christie, I. *Managing Sustainable Development*, Earthscan: London, 1992.
- [4] Muir, C. *Community and Cultural Development Case Study: Promoting health in a remote island community, The Islay and Jura Health Promotion Project*, 1996.
- [5] Dawson, J. *Peripheral cities in the European community: challenges, strategies and prospects. Public Policy and Administration*, 7(1), pp.9-19, 1992.



- [6] Copus. A. K. From core-periphery to polycentric development: concepts of spatial and aspatial development, *European Planning Studies*, 9 (4), pp.539-552, 2001.
- [7] Roberts, D and Thomson, K.J. Sources of structural change in peripheral rural areas: the case of the western isles, 1988/89 to 1997, *Regional Studies* 37 (1). pp. 61-70, 2003.
- [8] Owen et al (1999) Perceptions from the periphery – the experience of Wales, in case Studies of tourism in peripheral areas: proceedings from an international seminar on Bornholm, edited by F. Brown and D. Hall (Bornholms Forskningscenter) pp.15-48. September 1997,
- [9] Gould, P. Spatial Diffusion. Commission on College Geography, Association of American Geographers; Washington DC, 1969.
- [10] Portnow, B. A. and Pearlmutter D. (1999) Sustainable growth in peripheral areas, in *Progress in Planning*, 52(4), pp 239-308.
- [11] McDowell, E. and Chalmers, D. Sustainable Development in Scotland: Responses from the Grassroots, in McDowell, E. and McCormick, J. (editors) *Environment Scotland: Prospects for Sustainability*: Ashgate, Cpt 5 pp.80-98, 1999.
- [12] Islay Development Company Discover Islay and Jura: IDC Publication, 2001.
- [13] Census Data, The General Register Office for Scotland, 2001.
- [14] Corrom Trust Report, Islay and Jura Regeneration Strategy.1997.
- [15] Islay Development Company: Action for Islay: The first four years 1998-2002:IDC Publication, 2002.
- [16] McLean, C. St. Kilda: Islands on the edge of the world, Amazon:UK, 1972.
- [17] Steel, T. The Life and Death of St Kilda: The Moving Story of a Vanished Island Community, Amazon: UK, 1975.
- [18] Gray, D. Farrington, J. Shaw, J. Martin, S. and Roberts, D. Car dependence in rural Scotland: transport policy, devolution and the impact of the fuel duty escalator, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 17 (1), pp.113-125. 2001.
- [19] Begg, D. Creating the Framework for Sustainable Local Transport Strategies for Scotland, in McDowell, E. and McCormick, J. (editors) *Environment Scotland: Prospects for Sustainability*, Ashgate: Cpt 3 pp.99-108, 1999.
- [20] Putman, R. Making Democracy Work. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- [21] Brown, D. and Ashman, P. Participation, social capital and intersectoral problem solving: African and Asian cases. *World Development* 24 (9), pp.1461-1479, 1996.
- [22] Copus. A. K. From core-periphery to polycentric development: concepts of spatial and aspatial development, *European Planning Studies*, 9 (4), pp.539-552, 2001.



- [23] Dawson, J. Peripheral cities in the European community: challenges, strategies and prospects. *Public Policy and Administration*, 7(1), pp.9-19, 1992
- [24] Smallbone, D, North, D. and Kalantaridis, C. Adapting to peripherality: a study of small rural manufacturing firms in northern England, *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 11, pp.109-127, 1999.
- [25] World Wildlife Fund Report. A smart successful Scotland: The potential for enterprise and green job, WWF publications, and 2003.
- [26] Visit Scotland Annual Report, 2003.
- [27] Porritt, J. Sustainable Development the Political Challenge, in *New Economy*, 3 (1), pp.28-2003.

