ResULTS project: case study , interview 193

Face to face interview with crofter, conducted 22/2/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

R The land is a lot easier. One of the things about when we were on Lewis was that we had quite a lot of livestock at that time, we had a few cows and we had quite a lot of sheep, three-quarters of the land was mainly accessible by boat so as we got older this was getting tougher and tougher. That’s one of the reasons we came over, also it was we were, although we were in our middle-fifties at the time we were about the youngest people left. The level of agricultural activity was just disappearing, as well as other things.

My wife felt it very tough in the winter there, we were right on the west coast and the weather could be quite extreme, just like 15 miles of water between us and the Outer Islands but the difference is enormous. Where here we’re also at the sheltered side of the hill and that makes a huge difference as well, and the soil, we’ve got this wonderful fertile, self-draining volcanic soil here, it’s absolutely fantastic, where we were struggling with soggy peat.

I Do you keep sheep here?

R Since we became pensioners we’ve cut back a lot and we’ve just now got about 35 sheep. We’ve got a small horticultural business as well, partly under plastic and partly in the open. We’ve got a little farm shop with an honesty box and we work that during the season, and we go to various little markets.

I Would that be [area 11]?

R Mainly the [area 11] market, which is once a week from about April to September.

I What do you manage to grow here?

R We can grow anything really. We’ve got two poly tunnels, we grow anything, tomatoes and aubergines, cucumbers, and we’ve got our main winter crop garlic.

I Is that outdoors?

R No, that’s in the tunnels. Then the usual things, brassicas and potatoes and leeks and Carrots. That’s something we’d be doing anyway and gradually we’ll reach the point where we’re only doing it for ourselves.

I Does it help that you do have tourists coming up the road, even if they are lost?

R We have a surprising amount of passing trade, considering we’re at the end of a long winding road.

I This is to explain how we’re thinking about resilience of the food system. It’s not just about crofters and farmers who are producing food, it’s also about the people who are supplying, the vets and ancillary industries, going through to the markets, the marts, the processors through to the consumer. And also looking at the biological material, the animals and the plants, and looking at all the infrastructure that needs to be there, the advisers and training and so on. We’re trying to understand where is that resilience, what’s necessary to make it resilient, where is it vulnerable. What does resilience mean to you?

R To me it means flexibility in supply chains. We’ve reached a situation where we’re all, unless we produce for ourselves, we’re on the end of this enormous and incredibly complex supply chain, and I think people may be about to realise that there’s very little resilience. We had a couple of days heavy snow last February or March and there was no milk in [area C], a ridiculous situation because the milk is supplied from the central belt. Of course when we were in Lewis the shelves of the supermarket would empty if there was one ferry sailing that was missed, whereas I can go back to being on holiday there in 1966 when there was a seafarers strike and there was no panic because most of the food, or the basic food was supplied from within the island. So we’ve actually gone backwards in terms of resilience. I think things should be, everything preferably where possible should be produced to as close as possible to where it’s consumed, because that just makes sense.

I Why do you think that change has happened?

R It’s because of our almost total reliance on supermarkets and the major supermarket chains, which most people would say is great because they can buy strawberries from Morocco in January and to most people that’s seen as a benefit. But, if the worst happens in the next few weeks, I think people are about to come to a sudden and very uncomfortable realisation…

I Because of Brexit?

R Yes, if the worst kind of Brexit happens.

I We’ve come across these three definitions of resilience. The first one is about absorbing, if something changes, the weather’s bad, you absorb it, you have fewer animals or you have less income. The second one is making some minor adaptations, perhaps putting up a poly tunnel rather than having them outdoors. And the third is a transformation, doing something radically different. Do you recognise those?

R Indeed, crofters are very good at these kinds of things because the system in itself has got financial resilience because the vast majority of crofters have other jobs, so they have that financial flexibility. They can, in fact most crofters have at times they’ve stood losses for year on year, so they’ve been subsidising the croft side of the business from whatever else they do. It was the case in, when we were in Lewis land prices were at a terribly low level, in fact they were at the same level for 25 years, so they never went up to compensate for costs. But most people carried on because it was the way of life, and they… The more progressive and business-orientated people reduced the numbers, they went for quality rather than quantity, and they improved their breeding programme, bought in better stock and got better returns from a changing market.

I would say that crofters are pretty good at all these things because your third one here, radical changes, organic farming, agri-tourism, as you see going around [area C] you can see the outbreak of camping pods on crofts. This is a form of adaptation, exploiting a market and giving the croft business resilience and new income streams. That’s particularly in [area C] but also in the West Highlands generally, you see that tourists are there to be farmed, you might as well get some benefit.

I One of the older crofters said that it used to be much easier to get a job so that you could croft and have a job, so the government was putting a lot of money into road building and fish farms and things, and with those there were more jobs. Now that things are centralised there are fewer of those jobs around.

R That’s certainly so. There was a time, in the 60s and 70s there was a big drive to improve roads in the Highlands and that led to a boom in employment. But as your man was probably saying, even where roads are being built you’ll get a centrally based company, probably based in the Central Belt of Scotland or in England or in Ireland, will win the contract and bring the labour force with them, and they’ll stay in caravans or whatever. So he’s right in that sense, there used to be casual work to be had of that kind, and also fish farms, from what I can see they tend very largely to employ East Europeans, whether that will change with Brexit, it might well do.

I think in [area C], I don’t on the whole think there’s that much of a lack of ancillary employment for anyone of working age. In fact most people in the tourism sector, they complain of labour shortage, and the reason that there’s labour shortage is that there’s housing shortage but if you’re already here and you’re housed you can usually get a job.

I I presume they tend to be seasonal work?

R Yes, predominantly. Although the tourist season in [area C] is getting longer every year, we actually see Chinese now all through winter, it’s very noticeable.

I One of the things about resilience is that you have different functions that you’re trying to maintain as a resilience, it’s financial resilience and it’s environmental resilience. We’ve got this list of functions, is there anything that particularly resonates and you think that’s a really important thing to maintain?

R Yes, all of these things. Adding value, this is something that is engaging a lot more crofters but the main stumbling block to that in [area C is the lack of an abattoir. I’ve been involved in the working group for years trying to get an abattoir for [area C] and we’ve come up against a wall at the moment. When it comes to adding value I think it’s a pre-requisite for the beef and lamb sector.

Profit margins, again in crofting people can’t afford indefinitely to make a loss, although an awful lot of crofters do make a loss and that depends on what level of support continues because it’s not just crofters but in fact this is more… I was reading about a Mull hill farmer with something like 6000 hectares and it was himself, his wife and one worker, and his entire income was subsidy. That’s the sort of extreme case.

I What happens if the subsidy goes or changes radically?

R That guy obviously can’t continue. I don’t know if he was an owner or a tenant, if he was a tenant then he’s got no future at all, if he owns I suppose he can put it down to forestry. Crofters have a lot more flexibility. My barometer is the young man at the end of the road who has a number of crofts, he has I think 19 breeding cows, which is probably too many for the land he has. He is also self-employed in the building trade, his partner has a job and they are gradually developing tourist accommodation in different places. So he can carry on with his 19 cows, he can reduce, he can concentrate more on his other business interests or whatever, so he’s watching to see what the future regime looks like.

The other, the store livestock trade, it could either carry on much as it is now or it could collapse entirely in three weeks’ time, it’s on a knife edge. The agricultural part of his business is entirely depending on the store livestock trade and the demand for weaned calves in the autumn. Similarly, and you’ll see this a lot more when you go to Uist, that’s their bread and butter and they’re very good at it.

I If you did manage to get an abattoir in [town 3], how would that change what people do?

R It would reduce stock numbers overall, there would be more finishing, more value added and it would close the production and distribution chain largely, and it would also give a brand to [area C] produce. I think it would be win:win. Whether it would be enough to balance the potential loss of the store livestock trade I don’t know, it probably wouldn’t, but a lot of quite big producers in [area C] of store calves and lambs are looking at this very closely.

I Presumably they have to find some way of finishing?

R They would have to. Or they might change to the slow-maturing breeds, the Highland cattle, the Hebridean sheep which we have a number of here, there’s various ways that it could pan out.

I When you talked about the quality of the [area C] lamb and [area C] beef, do you see that as being separate from the Scotch lamb Scotch beef?

R It would be an additional, just like having Shetland lamb has got its own PDO, in a similar way.

I But [area C] itself has got a brand?

R Yes, and it should do because everybody’s heard of [area C], which is why all the tourists come here. It’s an additional marketing tool but very much still feeding into the Scotch beef and lamb label as well.

Food security, as we’ve talked about, in resilience terms I don’t think we are particularly secure.

I Is that particularly in [area C] or are you thinking in the UK more broadly?

R The further you are from basically the supermarkets’ distribution warehouse, which is all Central Belt in Scotland, the further away you get the less resilient, and not only that but the further the food has to come to go into that distribution chain again the potential for disruption is increased.

I concur with all these things. Pest disease, the more intensive your system the more vulnerable you are to pests and diseases. The heather moorlands and the viability of grazing these, if these things are not managed eventually you get rank vegetation, and sooner or later it goes on fire. That means it goes on fire, you then get shrinkage of the peat, you get erosion and I’m sure [person 7] would go on at great length about this very thing.

I Thinking about the pests and diseases, two things I think of are liver fluke and ticks, how important are those?

R They’re important but they’re manageable. We certainly have some problem with ticks but I think you’ll find asking people in [area C] that their both sheep and cattle have got an immunity to tick-borne diseases, so that’s not much of a problem. The problem of ticks is really more one of human health. I’m sure they’ll tell you this in Uist because there’s been a surge in lyme disease cases in Uist and that’s because the deer population’s a bit out of control, and that’s obviously not helping and the climate change effect as well. Fluke is just a management issue, and a treatment programme and rotational grazing it can be managed.

Actually the worst animal disease issue that we have is probably sheep scab because of open hill grazing and a few people not being as careful about it as they should be. We’ve had a couple of outbreaks in the last few years. But if everybody does their bit then there’s no reason that it shouldn’t be there.

I This is thinking about what are the pressures, what are the drivers that you see as being particularly important in the next 5, 10, 15, 20 years. What are the key ones, are there some which are opportunities, it’s easy to see them all as threats?

R The weather patterns. We’re already, we’ve had a succession of extremely wet winters, this doesn’t trouble us too much but over the last 20 years or so people have moved to out-wintering cattle rather than housing them, and the main driver of that’s been cost, cost of feeding, cost of bedding. But because of the kind of winters we’re getting now, the ground is getting into a terrible state where cattle are out-wintered and fed in particular ways. So that’s an issue that I think would need to be addressed.

I’m not sure what the answer to that is because with this winter particular, with hay and straw being in very short supply and very expensive, I don’t see there being any move back to housing cattle in the winter. That would concern me very much if I still had any cattle. Similarly, because of these very wet winters, I notice in places there is much more of a problem with erosion and lost soil.

Drought, we had drought in the spring last year. You don’t associate [area C] with drought but we had prolonged drought from something like the end of April to the beginning of July, and in fact our domestic water supply was being supplied by tanker because the local source hadn’t dried up but there wasn’t enough pressure in it to fill the tank that supplies all this side of the hill.

I You’re on the mains?

R Yes, we’re on the mains. That amazingly enough, drought is an issue in [area C]. Then of course with that you get fire, and there were some quite serious fires in [area C], some of which lasted several days.

I Is that linked to not quite so much grazing and build-up of combustible material?

R Yes, indeed. In fact even before we left Lewis there was a moor fire that burnt for the best part of a week on the Barvas Moor which is north of Stornoway which used to be full of sheep, and now you hardly see a sheep, it all went on fire. So that is undoubtedly an issue. [inaudible] supply chains, this is why we need different supply chains, we need to invent our own. Competition for alternative land uses, it’s not so much that it’s competition but it’s something that could become a default position. Where hill grazings are abandoned or no longer viable I think people will move over to forestry.

I Forestry rather than wind energy?

R Both. Wind energy of course is perfectly compatible with grazing, forestry not so much so. Brexit, don’t even need to go there.

I We’re planning to do some workshops at the end of the summer, and try and invite people to come and discuss issues then, so it’s not a one-off process at all.

R The main issue for the whole of the Highlands land is the store livestock market, which could literally just shut down.

I Talking about the supermarket chain, are any of them engaged with the crofters or with the store market in any way?

R Not at our kind of level, much further along in the store market. In fact I would say, to my knowledge not at all because the supermarkets’ buyers will go out to farms where the animals are being finished, maybe not even that, they might just deal entirely with wholesalers operating very large abattoirs which are close to the supermarkets’ distribution warehouses. That’s my impression of it but other people might have a lot more knowledge.

We have at different times tried to interest supermarkets in crofting produce and the outputs of crofting, and the only very minor success that I’m aware of of that was for a number of years the Co-Op in Stornoway was buying local Lewis lamb, but that has come to an end because the Stornoway abattoir is now open for such a short season that it doesn’t work.

I So the people haven’t got their animals ready in time?

R It’s very rare anyway to get that kind of flexibility from a supermarket, and it’s very difficult for them, for the local manager of a store, even though the Stornoway Co-Op is probably the biggest one in Scotland, but that manager has got to deal with a very inflexible system which is dictated by algorithms from Manchester. Having managed to negotiate that and then being told, instead of doing it from August through to January, we can only do it now from October to December, would be inclined to say this isn’t worthwhile, too difficult to organise. That was the definite [inaudible]

I If you had an abattoir in [town 3], how might that work in terms of small suppliers, variable breeds, variable quantities?

R I think we would be dealing with the restaurant and hotel trade initially as well as individual consumers. If it developed in the way that we would hope it might then be worth trying to negotiate with the Co-Op, but that just might be too difficult. There isn’t even a manager any more in the [town 1] Co-Op, it’s managed by an algorithm, they don’t even have any say in ordering, it’s all done by their system, what goes through the till and what’s crunched up in their computer in Manchester and sent down to their warehouse in Bellshill or wherever it is, and that goes on the lorry, that’s how it appears to work.

I was contrasting, my wife and I had a holiday in Mull in the autumn, Mull has an abattoir, and the difference is so amazing because you could go into the little village shop in Mull and you found in the chill cabinet there would be Mull lamb, Mull beef, Mull pork, venison, sausages, even Mull bacon and ham. The potential is enormous because Mull has a much smaller population than [area C] so quite intensive tourism, but not to the same scale as [area C]. So if they can do that there, the potential is huge for [area C].

I Do you think people will start producing pigs as well?

R There are quite a lot of pigs in [area C] but it’s mainly for people’s own consumption, and that’s got potential to increase, certainly. The people that I know at the moment that do finishing and direct marketing of their own beef and lamb, there are those that use the Lochmaddy abattoir in Uist, and the logistics of that are, it’s only 15 miles away but getting there, getting the product back again. Dingwall is an off putting experience, both the distance and the kind of attitude of the company, they can’t really be bothered with small producers, and they’re busy enough with their own wholesale business. Also, they go into, they block out a large part of the autumn for halal slaughter because that’s where they can make a lot of money and a good throughput, so at the peak time of year that excludes any small producers.

I Why do small producers get excluded from halal?

R Because the purchasing and marketing of halal is done on a big scale by quite substantial traders.

I So it’s not an opportunity at all?

R Not really. In fact you’re just told we’re full up.

I This is trying to think about what are the mitigating strategies.

R Reduce stocking rates, obviously this is something that is in the minds of a lot of people, including the young man I was talking about, he’s seriously thinking about that. Removing livestock entirely and away wintering, a few people do that already and that, given if hay and straw continue to be in short supply as it has been this winter then probably people will consider that.

I Is it fairly easy to find people who will take them?

R It’s advertised in the Scottish Farmer, away wintering for stock. In fact people do it, even from the Outer Isles people send stock away for the winter, probably not so much Uist because they’ve got the machair which if you’ve got the right kind of stock they do very well in the machair in winter. I used to know a lot more about that than I do now, I haven’t been out there for quite a few years.

Most of these things are more probably applicable to larger scale people and farms and so on rather than crofts. On-farm and off-farm activities, most crofters already do that. Diversify inputs, there’s limited opportunity in crofting, in this part of the world I would say there is limited opportunity for that. Share resources, something that crofters tend to do anyway. Modify [inaudible] reliance on subsidies, I suppose… For example, our horticulture business is not subsidised at all, it’s outwith the CAP, in fact the part of the croft that does have subsidy subsidises the horticultural part of the business. That’s just us and we’re not at all typical. Geographical distribution, back to abattoirs or facilities, markets and assets, that’s back to things like abattoirs.

I A lot of it does come back to the abattoirs.

R It does. The Scottish Government have embarked on yet another study on the practicability and viability of mobile abattoirs. We’ve already done that in [area C], we did it in 2005 and it was ruled out but we’ve already got most of the answers to that one. Scottish Government is insisting on going down this road again so we’ve got to go along with it and we’ve got to have our input to that study and see if there’s anything that can come out of it that benefits us.

I Why did they rule it out?

R Because it’s almost as expensive, a mobile abattoir has to have fixed facilities, what they call a docking station, and that’s got to consist of lairage at one end of the process and chill facilities at the other end because you can’t haul these things around with your mobile abattoir. Basically the only part of an abattoir that can be mobile is the slaughter hall, everything else that happens you’ve got to have fixed facilities in place for, so it’s nearly as expensive to build that for your part-time mobile facility as it is to have the all-singing all-dancing proper continuously operating facility in place. I think this is something that the Scottish Government will find in this study. But if that’s the way they’re going we’ll just have to try and go along with it and make as good a case as we can.

The main thing being the chill, no meat can be released into the food chain until it’s been chilled down to at least 5oC, and then it’s got to be matured. If the customer has got the facilities to take it away and hang it for 14, 28 days, whatever, in a chilled environment then that’s ok, but who has. Some butchers will have obviously, the average crofter or farmer certainly doesn’t and part of the unique selling point of our abattoir was going to be that people could get a carcass hung for as long as they wanted, and that’s obviously going to be a selling point because in general the longer you hang it for the better it is. With Dingwall and you try and say to them can you hang it for two weeks they’ll say yes, and then after a week they’ll phone and say when are you coming to take this away. Facilities, markets and assets, back to abattoirs. One point shop market, we’ve talked about that.

I You said you saw crofting as a social system as much as an agricultural system, could you unpick that a little?

R It’s because it’s a means of retaining population. If you for example take the north end of Lewis, long strung-out rows of houses, and why would people be there, if they didn’t have a bit of a foothold on the land that crofting gives. Contrasting Mull and [area C] again, because [area C]’s got a permanent population of round about 10,000 and Mull has about 2,500, part of the reason for that is, similar size, there’s only 120 crofts in Mull and there’s 2000 crofts in [area C]. Mull is big hill farms, big estates with a handful of people running a big area.

That’s the point, it gives people a reason to remain in some of these remote places, and a foothold in the land, opportunity to have a diversified business and a number of possibly different income streams, and working an active rural communities can self-generate economic activity because at some point you’re going to need a plumber or someone to fix the roof or you’re going to need a mechanic. In the best working and active crofting communities you find all these things, and it comes down again to what I was saying about producing things or providing services as close as possible to where they’re consumed or needed. I guess that’s what I mean, and kids at the school, the post office still open, shop maybe still open, it’s all these usual kind of things that people look at and say is this community thriving or isn’t it, or is it struggling.

I How would you recognise a thriving community?

R Age profile, diversified age profile, land worked and in good order, school open functioning, reasonable facilities, skills, social capital, village hall, things functioning, entertainment, all of that really. Undoubtedly there’s many places where this is the case, there’s plenty of places where it’s not.

I You mentioned that the lad up the road has several crofts, somebody told me that the only way to make a living is to have more than one croft and to have a bigger area, is that the way things are going?

R If crofting is your, if you’re going to make a living from crofting *per se* then yes you would need to acquire more land, and become more of a farmer than a crofter. That is the case in [area C] in quite a lot of places where a small number of people have maybe the majority of the croft and the hill shares as well. There are full-time crofters and they’re more or less indistinguishable from farmers.

I How do you see the interaction between tourists, you mentioned pods, but tourists in terms of producing food and producing energy for example or doing environmental diversification of some description or other, whether forestry or wildlife tours, what do you see as those interactions?

R I actually once drew a chart with a load of arrows going across and all the possible forms of crofting diversification and how they could interrelate, and it’s an almost infinite possibility. It depends on your ability to, whether the individual has the interest, whether they’ve got the money to invest and whether they’ve got the time to do all these things, as well as possibly having another part-time or full-time job or whatever else they do. It’s as diverse as crofters themselves, the possibilities are as diverse as the 18,000 crofts, they’re all very different, and the people are all very different.

I I guess they’re in different physical locations as well.

R Yes, Uist 15 miles over there, completely different systems to [area C] because totally different land, different geology, different soil, tourism yes but a very different kind of tourism. It’s because it’s not been fully discovered and the ferry is still offputting to some people. [area C] don’t get the right kind of tourist, it’s a bit of a bucket list, we get a lot of daytrippers from Inverness that come in a hired car and they want to see five things and tick them off, but they don’t really see anything.

Whereas, Uist attracts a lot of camper van tourists because you can park up on the machair and camper van tourists don’t like to spend money, so that’s very much a mixed benefit. People will have a different impression of tourism in Uist I’m quite sure. We get camper vans here as well, and some of them are absolutely huge, they come up here, of course they’re lost and they have to turn round at the end.

I That could be quite dramatic. Do you cut your own peat?

R Yes, we don’t get too hot so we burn the wood for heat and the peat to keep the fire going.

I Do many people still use peat?

R Very few on [area C].

I It’s a big job to cut it and dry it and ? it.

R It’s not too bad. The secret of it is to be early and catch the dry spell before mid-summer, which we certainly had last year, we got them home by the end of June.

I What could somebody else do that would help the resilience of crofters?

R You mean in terms of government or?

I Governments or neighbours or, what do other people do that either benefit you or dis-benefit you?

R The main thing that the government agency, the Crofting Commission, would be to do its job, which really is to make sure that crofts are used and that young people get access to crofts so that you get this age diverse community that I’m talking about, and you also have people that are fit and active enough to do the tasks that need to be done in the community, like gather sheep off the hill or put up fences or fix your house, fix your car, all these sorts of things. One thing that the government agency could do would be simply to do what it’s supposed to be doing.

If you look out here, our croft runs down to the sea and we’ve got another piece at the end of the road, but to the right and to the left are two basically abandoned crofts. You can’t see it at this time of year but we’re fighting bracken coming in from both sides and pretty soon I’ll be out there cutting bracken every year.

I Why is it that young people aren’t able to take them on?

R There’s a guy that lives in Inverness that has this one, he’s not prepared to let it go and he’s not being made to let it go by the regulatory authority. The one on the left here that’s the house that goes with it, they’re Germans and they stay there for about a couple of weeks a year. It’s a case of a lack of effective regulation of the system.

I People have said to me that young people don’t want to croft.

R I think there’s plenty that do if they can, and if they could get affordable access. The Scottish Crofting Federation has got a long list of young people that are looking for crofts. People often ask me how do I get a croft in [area C] and what I usually say is get on the ferry to Lewis. You can get a croft in [area C] but the price for housing development, but if you want a croft that you can afford there’s plenty out in the Western Isles, in Lewis anyway, probably not so much in Uist because the land is so much better, it’s in much greater local demand.

I That tells me that there’s something that somebody could do but there’s also something that people do that aren’t so helpful, which is to hang on to crofts when they’re not working them. Are there other things that are not so helpful?

R There’s a general lack of policy proofing for the Highlands and Islands. I know that every piece of Scottish Government legislation now is supposed to be Island-proofed, and I don’t know whether that’s being effective or not, and whether [area C] is considered to be an island in this context. We’re not finding this, it’s very frustrating, things like, and this is more a local government than a national or Scottish Government issue but not necessarily, is that we don’t have any effective local government because we have the Highland Council, which is totally centralised in Inverness, and that’s 130 miles away so this is not local government.

This is why you come up this road and you see what the condition of it is and… We’re in a state of neglect and out of sight out of mind. That certainly in mainland Highlands is a big issue because it’s about health and wellbeing of communities, health being another thing of course, again totally centralised in Inverness. You could be summoned to a hospital appointment in Inverness and you make your way to Inverness and sit in front of a consultant for five minutes and be told I’ll see you in six months, when you’ve gone 130 miles to Inverness and 130 miles back for that five minute appointment. That is undoubtedly a major issue round the west coast, from Cape Wrath down to Ardnamurchan Point you’ll hear the same thing.

I Is there any prospect of using video or?

R You would have thought so, even for meetings. I’m on the local community council here and we were again summoned to a meeting in Inverness on a Saturday to talk about the future of community councils. We declined to go because we found it insulting, but that I’m afraid is, these are the attitudes that we’re up against, certainly in local government and to quite an extent in Scottish Government as well, of total centralisation.

I Do you find that the community councils work quite effectively?

R No, we’re not able to because we’ve got no money and we’re volunteers. We do quite a bit of voluntary work and doing things that the council should be doing in our own time, but we’re not effective because we’re largely ignored and patronised. You get very tired fighting these things. It’s the same with things like the abattoir, things like agricultural support which is entirely geared to major big-scale farming in the east of the country, and the small producer in the west is an afterthought.

I What do you think would be a good subsidy?

R I can’t even begin to think. We’ve come up at different times and we’ve put forward different schemes that were both production related and paying for public goods, environment, landscape and so on, but every time talk about these things as [inaudible] and the politicians say that’s great but when the thing finally comes out you’re shoehorned into something that’s not as an afterthought, something that’s not appropriate and not designed for either the size of unit or the type of land or the type of business, it just doesn’t work, it’s not appropriate. Really you’re stretching a point to get into any of these schemes at all.

It’s hard to say, I think certainly there’s a case for going back to some sort of headage payment but without the perverse incentives that there were in previous schemes which resulted in serious overstocking and very poor welfare standards in some cases. It’s a bit beyond me, I’ve talked about this with so many people and I can’t get my head around it because we’ve been around this so often. I think the actual best thing for crofting and for crofting communities would be a start-up scheme and a holistic package of croft entrants for young people.

I The people who enter, the young people, do they tend to stay or is there a high drop-out rate?

R I think on the whole they tend to stay, especially if there’s ancillary employment. The other issue we have is digital connectivity, and if that was sorted out and people could literally do what we’ve been told for the last 30 years is the future, which is that you could work anywhere in the world and do anything from anywhere, then that would also allow young people to make a living both on a croft and from mainstream work. You might get one partner of a couple that does the outside work and the other either goes to work or works from home. This should be happening as a matter of course, or at least the opportunity should be there.

I How do you feel, if instead of subsidising croft you subsidise the infrastructure, be it the abattoir or the internet, how would that influence things?

R If things like infrastructure were sorted out then I don’t think you’d need that much extra support. If the penalties of remoteness were removed, and the difficulties such as if we had a decent road, if we had a bus service, if we had good broadband speed and we had an abattoir, I think that’s probably all we need for community wellbeing. Bus service, a family with teenage children is going to spend a lot of their time driving around so that the kids can have a social life, so that they can go to things after school, so they can play sports, they’re going to spend a lot of their week driving to and from [town 1], or at least to and from [area 1] because we don’t have a bus service.

These are all aspects of community wellbeing that at the moment are completely neglected, that’s going the opposite way with council cuts of all sorts. It’s like we’ve got a little kids’ playpark in [area 11], and basically we’re having to maintain it, insure it, and we’re having to take it over and run it because otherwise the council would take it away. It’s a small thing but if you’ve got toddlers or pre-school children it’s a great boon, it’s a great thing to have. There’s no school over there, the nearest school is in [area 1] so the kids are bused to [area 1] until they’re 12 and then thereafter to [town 1]. But if the road’s icy they don’t get to school because the council has cut back the gritting of the road, it’s crazy. All these things you think, what’s this to do with agriculture, it’s everything, it’s about a holistic view of a community and its wellbeing and its future.

I How much do you think crofting is tied up to Gaelic culture?

R To quite a small extent in [area C] I would say, but in Uist you’ll find that it’s almost totally. Because in [area C] only something like 40% of the population is indigenous and, I’m not indigenous to [area C], indigenous [inaudible] certainly don’t have Gaelic, my mother is Gaelic, all my grandparents are Gaelic but I guess the time that I was growing up there wasn’t seen to be that much future for Gaelic so it was never passed on to me. I have a smattering of the basics. In [area C] you will hear Gaelic spoken at the auction mart for example, people are selling lambs, but in a gathering of crofters in a township then probably not because only a small minority of the crofters will have Gaelic, whereas in Uist it will be the reverse, the great majority will have Gaelic and will speak in Gaelic, that will be their default position for people who speak Gaelic.

I If 40% are indigenous, how does that affect in terms of community cohesion, does it matter?

R I can only speak for this community here, and I would say it doesn’t matter. We’ve got a good and proactive grazings committee that consists of both indigenous and incoming people and we work very well together. The active crofters tend to work well together.

I Do you have a sheep stock club here?

R No, we don’t have a stock club here. We’ve thought about the possibility of establishing one but we don’t. Obviously you’ll find in a lot of parts of [area C] there’s some very good and active stock clubs, it’s a model that works very well but of course it very much would be threatened by the future or otherwise of the store livestock trade.

I How do they work?

R It’s a shareholding system, and quite often it’s enshrined within the grazing regulations of a township. In a township common grazings will operate in the form of a stock club in which all the crofters will have a share, so that the hill flock of sheep will be managed cooperatively and where necessary people will be paid to do the work, whether it’s the gathering or the shearing or the dosing or whatever, they will be paid for the work and any profit thereafter is distributed as a dividend. That’s kind of how it works.

I So it’s grazing committee ?

R Yes, and in most cases the stock club will have exclusive use of the grazings.

I Would they share facilities as well for the sheep handling facilities and so on?

R Yes.

I Is anybody investing, [person 7] runs the hill farming research station, and they have all these fancy weigh crates and things, are you aware of any?

R Yes, some larger scale crofters will have these things. Nobody over here, I can’t think of anyone here that has them.

I Would they be a shared thing with the stock club?

R Yes, they very likely would be.

I Looking at the proposed new legislation in the Westminster Government, they very much want to go down the route of paying for environmental social benefits. I think the Scottish Government is thinking something different, but as a thought exercise and if you were being paid to keep sheep to manage grassland in a certain way, why would you continue lambing?

R It’s more or less what we’re doing now, it’s just producing enough to replace the stock and not surplus.

I And you think people would [inaudible]

R That could well be so. Then what would we do, we would import all our lamb from New Zealand I guess. More or less, this is because of our semi-retired status, yes that is more or less what we do or have done for the last couple of years. Maintain the land in good order and produce the odd, we have a few lambs for sale and we supply wool to [area C] Weavers. So far it’s only been the Hebridean, they use the black wool, and that’s a small example of closing a production and consumption chain.

I It will make a change from seeing wool as a waste product?

R Indeed, and it was because the Wool Marketing Board did not want black wool, or any coloured wool at all, because it couldn’t be dyed.

I But the [area C] Weavers will make a local product from Hebridean wool, very good. Do they process it for you as well?

R They do, they take it away as fleece and they give us a very fair price for it, and then they do all the rest, process and so on. It’s a small example of a niche product and a niche market. I see it as a feature.

I Do they have a good market for their product?

R Very much so, yes. They have beautiful products and they mainly, they’ve got a tourist market and they’ve got online sales so they’re working flat out and doing very well.

I Is there anything else you wanted to say that you’ve not had the chance to say?

R No, I think we’ve probably… Sorry, I couldn’t produce an ideal support scheme. A few years ago we had a conference in, it was the last CAP Reform, we had a conference at Plockton of crofters and crofters’ representatives and civil servants and politicians, and it was about our ideal crofting support scheme. We produced a paper that everybody, civil servants, the politicians said yes great this will be it now but in the end it was completely ignored. If I can find that I’ll email it to you because it might be quite interesting. It was a very useful day and I think everything that came out of that day is still just as valid now as it was then.

The other thing, have you come across [person 8]? He produced a paper for the Crofting Commission on future crofting support, I think you’ll get that on the Crofting Commission website, and that I think there was some pretty good stuff in there as well. He’s got long experience of, he was an SRUC or SAC as it then was, consultant in [town 1], so it might be worth having a chat with him as well. We had a very similar, he sat where you are a few months ago.

I I’m concerned that there’s too many people trying to research [area C] and I’m wondering how we can all fit it all together somehow. We all have to meet our publication requirements but it should be to the benefit of the people and the crofters in [area C] whatever we get.

R What you’re doing is absolutely massive, especially when it’s the whole of the UK in effect, it’s hill farming everywhere.

I That’s why we’re trying to do case studies because we obviously can’t study the whole system so we’re just trying to look at a few places in a bit more depth. But hopefully they will represent a range of different sorts of systems, although abattoir seems to be quite a big, it’s not just [area C].

R I think you’ll hear this wherever you go. In North Uist, they have an abattoir but it always seems to hang by a thread.

I I think they’re expensive things that’s the trouble because meat hygiene rules are so strict. Would you have to have a vet to inspect as well if you have an abattoir?

R Yes, we’re lucky that there are three veterinary practices in [area C], and all three have said that they’re willing and they’re qualified to take on the work on an ad hoc basis. That’s the thing, is to find a vet that’s willing to be flexible about the work and the timing of it, and the workload. It’s like, there’s a small abattoir in Barra and he works with the vets in Uist and they’ll do slaughtering days on the days that the Uist vets are doing their Barra surgery and visits, so it fits together, it can be done. People regard it as an insurmountable cost but if you’re vet’s on-side and believes in what you’re trying to do then they’ll do it for you. So I think it wouldn’t be an insurmountable problem in [area C] with the vets that we have.

I This is phase 1 that I’m trying to talk to people and understand a bit how things go round. The plan is then perhaps in September to try and run a couple of workshops in [area C] and invite yourselves and other people who might be interested and just chew away at some of the issues that come out once we’ve had time to put all of this together. Then possibly the following summer or spring to think about doing a scenario workshop, to get people to think about, and that’s when I hope to bring in this storywriter as well so we can try and help people think outside the box. Although I think people are being very creative at the moment. Are there other people you think I should talk to?

End of transcript