ResULTS project: case study Ca, interview 215

Face to face interview with agricultural industry, conducted 15/3/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

I When we talk about resilience, what does that mean for you?

R Resilience I guess is the ability to cope with different events, unseen events, being able to either survive or drive through it. Robust businesses I guess.

I Are you primarily thinking about the crofters?

R Yes, basically.

I People trying to understand resilience have come up with three concepts, one’s about buffering or absorbing, so you tighten your belt basically. Or you can do some minor adaptions, you can change the breed of cattle you’ve got or change where you get your seed from or something like that. Right through to transforming, so people cope by transforming what they do, they start tourism businesses or something like that. Do you see those kinds of patterns here?

R To a lesser extent here, specifically here, because we’re quite limited in our options. Something that came out of [person 19] thing as well, we’re [inaudible], I can’t remember which section it was, beef and sheep is basically all that we really do. I guess in a wider sense because crofters tend to have a job alongside the crofting business, the business can suffer a bit more [inaudible] would if it was just relying on the business by itself. So the actual crofters themselves tend to be quite resilient due to that fact.

I How easy is it to get another job that’s complementary?

R I don’t know about easy but everyone who is a crofter has another job, not quite everyone but unless you’re old and retired you have another job alongside the crofting. So they’re not relying on crofting for their survival or livelihood, it’s more an extra income and enjoyment.

I What kind of functions are people trying to maintain? There’s a lot of different functions, whether they’re environmental functions or they’re food production functions or keeping the family going sort of functions. We’re trying to identify what are the main ones that are absolutely critical to keeping. I would imagine some kind of reasonable profit might be quite important.

R It’s surprisingly less important I think for quite a few folk up here. I think there’s a great deal of pride in history, which tends to overall maybe a more modern profit-driven attitude.

I Is that family history or island history?

R Primarily family but the general culture of the place I guess, crofting is what they do so that tends to overrule a number of things, which makes it a challenge for a consultancy [inaudible] to increase money that people earn and that’s not necessarily the main driver for some folk.

I What about people who are not crofting who are on the island, do they value the crofters as well?

R I have no idea.

I Are there other things there which are driving it, or others not driving it, which are important to maintain?

R Particularly the more environmental side of things, whilst I wouldn’t say it’s a primary driver a lot of folk up here realise there’s an important role crofting plays in maintaining unique landscapes and biodiversity that they have up here. So I would say that does play quite a role.

I When you say you as a consultancy it’s a bit of a challenge to get people to do things to give themselves more profit, what kinds of barriers do you come across?

R Not barriers *per se*, it’s just they’re not necessarily profit motivated. So if you could suggest an idea that would increase their profit margin but would necessitate them making changes to the way they normally do things it can be a little difficult.

I Is that a time thing or a capital thing?

R I partly think it’s related to the fact that they’re not reliant on crofting for their livelihood, it doesn’t really matter if they maximise their opportunities, they maximise their profit making because they’re not dependent on it, they have their full-time jobs so they can manage it more how they want to rather than what might be the most efficient way of doing it.

I Can you give me an example of that?

R Some of the basic agricultural advice which is drain and lime, which is the most basic stuff you could naturally do, tends to get ignored for reasons that I was never entirely sure of. There’s generous grants that support that type of thing but it doesn’t really happen.

I Is that draining where you put in proper draining rather than digging ditches?

R Either/or, both are valuable and supported under grants, it just doesn’t happen for some reason.

I Nobody says I like this kind of thing or they can’t afford the lime, even with the grant?

R There will be issues of that, particularly with the grant schemes they have to pay all the money up-front, so there definitely are issues for some people.

I What about the environmental schemes, are people happy to adopt those?

R Generally. I think they can be a little unhappy about some of the particular requirements that are imposed upon them through the environmental schemes but in general I think they’re quite happy to take part in them. A lot of it is what they would be doing anyway, a lot of the crofting is quite environmentally friendly so it tends to not involve huge changes, it can be little bits here and there that can be annoying for them.

One of the options is crop machair, which you plough and grow local seed. Recently there’s a date of 1 September cutting, so you’re not allowed to cut before that, and this is quite annoying for a number of folk given the rise in geese numbers etc which cause damage to the corn crop at that time of year, so they can be quite inflexible if they want to go a bit earlier to save the crop.

I Do you find there’s lots of young people wanting to get into crofting?

R Yes.

I Do you have one yourself?

R I actually just got a croft a couple of months ago. Yes, there is. It’s difficult to gauge exactly how many because there’s no tally kept of that sort of thing, but I think there is quite a few.

I How difficult was it to get hold of a croft?

R Incredibly difficult. You either pay a heck of a lot of money, which is a massive barrier for local younger people, or you’re quite lucky and might get a family assignation. Access to croft land is a huge issue up here.

I Is the older croft land used?

R No, it doesn’t have to be, as long as the tenant is not an absentee the Commission don’t care, so they can just sit there, which is quite a frustrating aspect for a lot of local people.

I So there are people who want to croft and can’t? What sort of sum of money would people expect to pay for a croft?

R Massively variable. I was dealing with a chap who spent £50,000 on his croft, that’s not an unheard of figure, so from £20-£70 odd perhaps, depending on what type of croft etc. That’s without a house, with a house you can imagine.

I Coming back from [area C] the big issue there is people want to sell crofts for building for incomers, is that an issue here?

R It is but nowhere near the extent it is in [area C] I don’t think. I think part of, not a problem but the crofters grant scheme gives you a grant of £38,000 to help towards building a house, which in some people’s mind puts a minimum on a croft price, so the grant gets converted into the capital value of the croft to an extent, which is clearly not what it’s meant to do but it can have a big effect.

I In terms of people taking on crofts, do the people have skills to do it?

R Yes, up here it tends… We have a range of folk, the young new entrants we get tend to be local who’ve experience of crofting anyway, either through courses in the school or just family experience, but we tend to get a few older people who move to the islands later in their life who maybe don’t have the skills. There can be a variety of skill levels when they take over crofts.

I When you talked about finance that economics not being the biggest thing for crofters, does that vary depending on whether you’re a new entrant or an older person coming back or somebody who’s been doing it all their lives?

R I don’t know really. It is quite an individual thing, so I wouldn’t make any generalisations about that.

I If we think about some of the challenges or opportunities, again we’ve looked at some of the things you might see as a challenge to the resilience. Looking at whether that’s gradual changes or severe weather or more severe weather events, looking at is there competition for the land for other uses. Is there anything in there that you think that’s a real big threat?

R Our remoteness, transport links are quite a major, I wouldn’t say it’s an issue but certainly it’s an extra cost and they’ve been getting increasingly unreliable over the years, particularly our ferries. Our [inaudible] cancelled [inaudible] four times due to, I would say the weather. It’s little things like that that have a big impact, obviously puts a lot of money on anything you buy in, the transport costs. That’s definitely a big issue. I don’t know if it fits in here but there’s actually a bit of a conflict between [inaudible] croft for the house, to be able to get their grant and have no intention of using it. The folk that would like to develop an agricultural business. So I think there’s a bit of tension there. I wouldn’t say it was a little unfair but basically it would be the croft, you’re very lucky to get that massive grant to build a house which other folk don’t get, so there’s a bit of conflict there that causes people to lie and say they’re going to be a crofter just to get the grant.

I So there’s no grant for a remote area in the sense of council housing?

R I don’t know, not beyond [inaudible] available nationally. Basically weather and climate, obviously a massive issue out here but it always has been. Increasing storminess as affects the transport, erosion is a big issue in places due to stormy weather, so it does have a fair impact.

I How are the ways in which people are responding to make themselves more resilient?

R Not particularly. We’ve already got quite simple and resilient systems here anyway, they’re low-cost, the stock tend to be outwintered, there’s very little bought on. Efforts have been made over the time anyway to have quite a simple system that there’s not much fat on it really.

I Do you have to bring lime in?

R Shell sand is normally used.

I So it’s a fairly resilient system with its fairly self-sufficient…

R To an extent, yes.

I Buildings or anything like that, are they having to be built in different ways because of the storms?

R Not particularly, we’ve always had to expect to cope with strong winds anyway. We’re lucky we don’t get much snow so snow loading isn’t an issue, takes buildings down as it is in some parts of the world. There’s possibly, there seems to be a lot more agricultural buildings going up recently, which I don’t know, is it partly due to changing weather, I’m not entirely sure why.

I Is that for housing?

R Some for housing stock, yes. Some are more like temporary housing for welfare issues. Partly due to, I think folk were, vets and crofters were used to dealing with gates tied together with twine and torchlights, and I think they’re getting less keen on that now and looking for better facilities to work in. That’s possibly a part of it.

I How are you off for vets here?

R Very good, we’ve got the local vet practice in [area [34]. Two new vets started quite recently, both from the islands originally.

I Sounds like a lot of people want to come back, if not everybody?

R It’s all relative I guess because 90% of the folk move away, that’s a guess but a lot of youngsters move away to further education etc so when anyone moves back it feels quite nice.

I What’s attractive about living here?

R Both of our vets are now crofters as well, so that’s potentially part of it. I guess it’s probably a good place to raise a family compared to some. The islands are beautiful occasionally when you get right weather, and it’s a nice way of life.

I What is it that is so attractive about crofting?

R I think it’s partly, as I mentioned at the start, most folk like animals and you get to play with animals basically, and machinery, and it’s not the end of the world if you don’t make any money because you’ve got your job. So it’s quite a nice way of living, it’s quite a nice sort of hobby, a bit more than an actual agricultural business.

I But it’s a hobby that takes you out when it’s freezing cold?

R That can be very satisfying. It can be satisfying when you’re stuck in an office like I am here all day it’s nice to get outside, even if it is a bit horrible, it gets you connected to the world again I think.

I It clearly is, both here and in [area C] there’s a very strong desire to work a croft, which is great. What about animal diseases, are those an issue here?

R Not particularly. The islands are one of the first places to embrace the cattle health scheme, so we’ve got quite a healthy cattle stock, we’ve got low stocking densities so we don’t get too much diseases, very few stock cows so we don’t get problems with housing. There just tends to be normal, run of the mill issues with worms and lice and scab and that type of thing but nothing, very little interesting.

I So you don’t have a lot of cattle coming on to the island from elsewhere?

R There are a few but quite limited. Most folk tend to breed their own. It’s mainly just bulls that get moved on.

I One thing that surprises me both here and in [area C] is that when you talk to veterinary researchers they’re concerned about flukicides and the resistance that’s building up to flukicides, I’ve yet to find anybody who sees that as a risk or something that might need addressing. Why do you think that is?

R Unfortunately with wormer resistance and flukicide resistance, no-one feels there’s an issue until it becomes an issue. It’s one of these things that can build up over time and then it only becomes an issue when sheep start dying. I don’t know locally what the situation is in terms of resistance but I don’t imagine it’s as bad as it is in other parts of the world, just because we’re quite low stocking densities and treatments are relatively infrequent. It’s potentially not as big an issue here as it is in other places. That’s not based on any particular…

I Would people do egg counts?

R Very rarely. There was one of the animal health and welfare options under one of the subsidy schemes which paid for getting fluke eggs counted and worm eggs, to base your dosing on, but I think that’s quite rare, tends to only get anything done if there’s a problem.

I Anything else, any other challenges, or opportunities?

R Locally the viability of local auction marts is a worry for me, because there’s a lot of stock that are getting sent direct to the mainland to be sold, so the numbers getting sold here are quite low for some sales, which threatens the viability of them. I think it would be quite a loss to the islands if we lost these sales and we had to send all our stock to the mainland.

I In what way.

R Because we have a bit of flexibility at the moment. Basically you can take your stock home if you’re not happy with the price, which is the only power you really have as a crofter or farmer, which you can’t do if they’re in Dingwall or Thainstone or wherever [inaudible] waiting to be sold. It takes away your power. That’s a bit of a concern for me.

I Is that a fairly general concern?

R I don’t know.

I It sounds a bit like your local shops that if you don’t use it then you lose it [inaudible] number of people using it specifically because they want to make sure that it was maintained.

R Notwithstanding what I said earlier about not being profit-driven, if folk see another couple of penny a kilo getting them sold in Dingwall as opposed to [area 22] they tend to ship them out and take it.

I Even taking into account the transport costs?

R It would be interesting to know how much better they would do because I don’t particularly see very much profit in it, just due to transport costs and weight loss and lairage etc. The prices at local sales here tend to be quite good. For some reason there’s quite a few folk [inaudible] particularly cattle.

I Do you have a good number of buyers coming to the sales?

R Nope, so that could be part of the issue. The averages here are quite good over the year but you can get a bad sale because of harvest on the mainland or any number of reasons the buyers don’t turn up, which can obviously affect prices quite considerably.

I Do they ever get affected by the ferries?

R Not directly because if the ferries don’t sail there’s no sale at all, so it’s not particularly the buyers. But certainly if sales are cancelled quite repeatedly it must have an impact on them I would imagine.

I Thinking about what people are doing in response to some of those challenges…

R There is a few folk who are keen to diversify. You were talking to [interviewee name] yesterday, so herself and her husband are a great example, but there’s quite a few folk who have camping pods and B&Bs and various other types of tourism related diversifications [inaudible] on the crofts.

I Is it mostly tourism rather than other activities?

R It tends to be, yes.

I I’ve seen advertised there’s a sort of food trail.

R There is, yes. It was a Council initiative to launch this food trail but I don’t know how much follow-up there’s ever been to it.

I Do people supply things to it?

R No, not particularly, not as far as I’m aware. It’s just a couple of local producers that are highlighted.

I So it hasn’t really worked yet?

R I don’t think it has but I could be wrong.

I But you’ve got a baker who’s using the cold meat, is that…

R To an extent, yes. The majority is bought in from Dingwall but they do use little bits.

I How much meat is actually bought in here?

R The vast majority is bought in.

I Where’s the supermarket?

R Just down the road. The [inaudible] supermarket is just down the road there.

I Is that where most people would do their shopping?

R Yes, we’ve got three Co-ops on each island. Most crofters probably kill their own mutton I suppose, certainly we do at home, that’s probably about the extent of it. The vast majority of people [inaudible] still bought in.

I Renewable energy?

R Yes. There are a few crofter-scale turbines tend to be dotted about the place, but it’s more at a community level now as opposed to an individual. A local community landlord on [area 23] has their own windfarm and they’re trying to develop one on [area 20] as well currently. So it is happening but not necessarily at the crofter or individual level any more, it’s more a community or estate type level.

I How is that working?

R Reasonably well. We have a couple of challenges over here in that, the interconnector between here and the mainland to export the power, which we don’t have currently so that’s an issue. We also have a rocket range here and radar base, which impacts on size and position of the turbines. That’s been a major issue as well for folk wanting to get more sizeable turbines, so that’s been a challenge I think.

I Is there any conflict between turbines and the birds?

R Not to a huge extent, no. Part of the planning process you have to do your surveys to ensure you’re not going to be chopping up any corncrakes or whatever with your turbines. I don’t think it has a major impact.

I Areas where there are…

R There’s nowhere that isn’t full of birdlife here but less important areas it tends to be.

I I’m surprised you didn’t mention geese in your challenge.

R Geese are a funny one. They’re quite easy to deal with, it’s just a lack of local will to do anything about it.

I Why do you think there’s a lack of local will to deal with it if it’s such a big problem?

R I have no idea. It’s an interesting facet of the crofting community where they wait for someone else to do something about it, they’re quite happy to moan but less keen to actually take stuff into their own hands and deal with it. I used to work for SNH and I was involved in management geese scheme, so it is a challenge for them. They have a community owned estate in [area 23] run by a board of directors, some of whom are farmers and crofters, all their tenants are crofters so the will to do something should be there but we seem to be waiting for funding from central government rather than actually doing something about it ourselves.

I Presumably there will be shooting and…

R Basically, yes. There’s no barriers. I’m a little jaded about the geese I’m afraid.

I Have you had a bad experience of them?

R Not a bad experience, it’s just people should do more to help themselves.

I From your SNH background, what about other wildlife and their farming interactions?

R Probably one which is growing in importance at the moment is conflict with sea eagles, we get a number of reports now of a number of lambs believed to be taken by sea eagles. That’s a growing problem in some areas.

I Is that just individual farms that they seem to be targeting rather than across the piece?

R Yes, it can vary. There’s not very many sheep on the east side now where the eagles basically nest, I think there’s, so there’s only a few folk that actually go over there noticing it in a major way. If you have your sheep on your in bye croft, beside the croft house you tend not to lose them.

I So it’s only when they’re out on the hill?

R Yes. Not all the time…

I What about golden eagles?

R They’re not believed particularly to take any lambs.

I Do you believe that?

R I have no experience to be able to say either way. Certainly there was one or two people who had issues with them, particularly on the east side of [area 24] but it’s not a widespread concern.

I Is there interactions between the fishing folk and the crofting folk, is it the same people doing the fishing?

R It tends to be the same people, a lot of times you’re a fisherman and a crofter quite often.

I Is that your second job, the fishing?

R It can be, yes.

I Do those complement each other?

R They can do, yes. It obviously depends on the balance because a lot of these folk are out fishing quite a lot of the time but it doesn’t leave a great deal of time for crofting, so it depends what balance they have individually really.

I What about predation by other beasties?

R Ravens perhaps, that’s probably about the only thing that really annoys folks.

I I’m intrigued because crofters will tell me that the sort of farming that we’re doing here is critical to keeping the bird population going that if the crofters went and the cattle went, particularly the cattle, you’d lose the birdlife pretty quickly. With you as a former SNH person, would you agree with that?

R You would certainly lose what’s the current system you definitely would. But the impact that would have I don’t know because they might be replaced with something else.

I Different birds you mean?

R I don’t know. Certainly the [inaudible] of the current crofting, particularly in cropping system on the machairs is very important to maintain quite a bit of biodiversity.

I Is that tied up to the crop silage or just the grazing *per se*?

R A bit of both. Some of the waders nest on the ploughed ground, so that’s quite an important thing, and it tends to be grazed in the winter/autumn time, which is ideal because in the spring and summer it’s left bare for birds to nest and fledge, so it tends to work quite well. The cattle, with the grazing in the winter bearing it all down and leave it in quite good nick for waders in particular.

I That sounds good. What would happen if people decided to intensify, which I guess is the alternative if you started being very economics focused?

R I’m not sure what intensification would look like here. Crofting suits the land that we have at the moment. The issue of concern to RSPB and SNH I guess is early cutting, so that has had they say a negative impact on certain bird species, corncrakes in particular if you’re cutting your field earlier so I guess that is intensification of sorts, so that could have a negative impact. Currently under the agri-environment schemes you get paid to cut that a bit later.

I And you can still feed the cattle?

R Yes.

I Technologies, do you see any technology being helpful here? You talk about people putting buildings up and wanting better conditions.

R Potentially, yes. There’s a number of folk who’ve got Moocall calving monitors for example, so that could be quite helpful. I think something along those lines would be good because cattle calve on the common grazing, it’s a couple of hundred hectares so finding your cows can be quite tricky, so if you know she’s calving it would be a massive help. I think stuff like that.

I So people have actually [inaudible] Do they need a base station or something like that?

R No, it’s done via the mobile network, you get a text to your phone telling you your cow’s calving. Then you’ve got to go and find it. Stuff like that could be very useful. Even a bit further would [inaudible] get a workable natural fencing type thing, that could be quite useful as well. At the moment the east side is basically abandoned, so I think if we were able to use that a bit better would be tremendously useful.

I How would that work?

R There’s a few systems in development, basically they have a collar…

I How would that work to help the east side back into…

R Currently the individual fields are a few thousand hectares, if you put your sheep out there you’d be very lucky to see them again. Which is ok if there was a few thousand sheep and there was work communally, but when it’s just one person and 50 sheep there’s no point putting them out there. If you could actually control them into a ten hectare field or whatever field, it might…

I So it would compensate for the lack of people putting sheep on the hill?

R Yes, I think there’s potential for that to work. If it ever came [inaudible]

I What about any sensors or [inaudible] or things like that?

R I don’t particularly see any direct relevance to what the crofting that currently happens right now.

I What about breeding, genetics, you said they bring in bulls, are those department bulls?

R Yes, it tends to be department bulls.

I So those would have EBVs with them of some sort?

R Potentially, yes. It depends if you’re a bull buyer that was keen on EBVs.

I So not necessarily, and you wouldn’t have a say on how the make-up of that EBV ?

R We don’t use the scheme at the moment so I’m not entirely sure how it works, you pick your breed and that’s about it. You just have to take what they give you I’m afraid.

I Movement towards using more native breeds?

R I think there probably is. For replacements there’s quite a lot, more than there used to be, Shorthorn and Angus being used up here than there used to be, it used to just be [inaudible] and Charolais and that would be it. I think there probably is a slow move towards Shorthorn and Angus, the problem is you’re just penalised for the steers.

I Does that affect, because you have got this SNH experience, does that affect the grazing at all, the different breeds?

R It is supposed to. I am a little sceptical. I think if you go to the extreme, like a Highlander versus a Belgian Blue perhaps then you’re going to notice differences but when all our animals here are crossbred anyway I’m a little sceptical. It’s a little debatable.

I You haven’t got people putting in Highlanders just to attract the tourists?

R Not to the best of my knowledge, no.

I Is there anything special about these islands that you think is unique and needs to be preserved?

R I guess any sort of rural island place is slightly different and has its unique characteristics, what they actually are I certainly couldn’t tell you but I do think it is a very interesting way of life up here.

I Is it very communal?

R Probably, yes. I’ve no experience, or very little experience of other, I’ve only been away for uni and that’s been basically it, I’ve lived here my whole life so I don’t particularly know how communal or otherwise other places are. There’s certainly less, although we seem like remote and windswept islands we’re actually quite close to everything you want to be, we’re a 45 minute flight from Glasgow and our next door neighbour’s 20 metres down the road. I don’t think there’s any real sense of isolation for the locals as there might be if you’re up on a glen in the middle of Cairngorms somewhere, it’s a different sort of remoteness that we have.

I Do people fly to Glasgow a lot?

R Yes.

I From [area 24]?

R Yes, it’s 45 minutes to Glasgow.

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

R It just came into my mind, opportunities/threats. What I was going to say with native cattle is that currently we have the Europe grade for grading your stock which rewards Limousins and Charolais etc, so there’s a lot of talk about changing that into one that rewards tastes and texture, tenderness. If something like that were to happen I think that would be of benefit to the islands, cattle farming in Scotland in general as well, because it would naturally achieve what a lot of folk, they’re paid money to introduce native cattle, for example under environmental schemes, but if they’re actually rewarded by the marketplace it would achieve that thing any way. I think that has potential to be an important thing.

I So the perception is that they would have better quality meat?

R That is the perception, yes. Every unsubsidised cattle system in the world has their animals based on Aberdeen Angus and Hereford, you don’t find massive Limousins and Charolais like they have in Europe anywhere else in the world. I think it’s primarily due to the [inaudible] we have, because that’s what farmers get rewarded for, so we produce for what the market wants. So I think if we could change that, that would be beneficial for everyone.

I One of the issues was actually measuring meat quality but it’s not straightforward.

R Yes, not really.

I Do you think they’ve cracked it now?

R They do it in the States, and I think they do it in Australia for beef, so I think there’s potential there. QMS, I know you mentioned it, is, we do have a Scottish premium for our beef, I don’t know why because our beef isn’t any better than anywhere else but they’re tremendous marketing [inaudible] got it, so if something could be built on that to actually have some production or some product quality as well as the system it was produced in quality assured, I think it would be very helpful.

I You don’t see Hebridean beef as being an even better quality mark?

R Finished animals are very difficult to produce up here. That’s the main issue I see. You could but you’re going to spend a lot of money achieving it, and I don’t know if it’s necessarily…

I In order to get the benefit from any kind of quality payment, you’d have to have a link to the person who’s buying your…

R Right now they buy their Limousins and Charolais because that’s what they want, so if it changed to be more native cross or whatever was found to be best then that was people would produce.

I So it would be a change in breed rather than anything else?

R Yes, I think so.

I There are subsidies available for native breeds, but that isn’t enough to counteract the downside of the market? I understand from what you’re saying that people aren’t adopting native breeds because of the cost of what the market wants.

R Partly, I think this is a tricky subsidy to qualify for basically. It has to be part of the bigger plan and you have to have less than 30 hectares of ground, and most of our cattle producers have more than that so they wouldn’t really qualify. It’s a relatively small payment which you see disappear in your stock you’re selling potentially.

I Thank you very much. Anything else?

End of transcript