Designing sustainable pathways: the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in transition. The case of the Western Isles

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Introduction

• Rural peripheries in Europe for long have been regarded backward, underdeveloped, thus „losing areas“

• However, at present significant processes of change

• More diverse picture of rural peripheries emerging

• Highlands and Islands of Scotland (H & I) provide out-standing example of recent restructuring, yet not fully recognized outside Britain

• Fundamental debate over future pathways

• Case of Western Isles of particular interest

• Presentation based on data gained from own empirical studies funded by DFG since 2002
The Scottish Highlands and Islands: a classic periphery of Europe?

• For long H & I have been regarded a classic periphery

• No distinct definition of the area
  – So called crofting counties of 1886
  – Highland Council created in 1975
  – Working area of H & I Enterprise since 1991
• Accumulation of distinct characteristics:
  – Vulnerable mountain-seascape
  – Limited accessibility
  – Socio-economic disparities
  – Marginalized Celtic culture: experience of „internal colonialism“ (*Hechter 1980*)

• Great deal of neglect until 1950s

• Image of a „problem region“ (*Turnock 1974*)
The regional policy debate: conceptual dispute over future pathways

• Since 1965 installation of systematic regional policy: Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB)

• Strategic approach with focus on industrial growth and employment: e.g. hydro-power, oil, whisky, tourism
• Significant adjustments of regional policies since 1990s:
  – **Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) as a regional development agency** 1991
  – Land Reform Bill 2001: enabling communities to buy-out private land for communal use
• Substantial effects, not least due to European co-financing
• Obvious reversal of population decline since 1980s
• Measurable economic takeoff in terms of employment and income
• However, distinct regional exceptions, esp. Western Isles
• Recent culmination of regional policy debate
• Competing interpretations of „community“ and „sustainability“ (Mackenzie 2002)
• Example: dispute over Lingerbay Quarry project (1991/2004)
• Growing awareness of vulnerability of both environment and society
Designing sustainable pathways: the case of the Western Isles

- Enormous challenges particularly reflected by case of the Western Isles
- Visible lack of socio-economic regeneration and population recovery
- Targeted Scottish government intervention, including EU resources (e.g. LEADER)
• Recent development driven by bottom-up and multi-sectoral initiatives run by community groups (networks)

• Common vision of initiatives:
  – Use of endogenous potentials
  – Participatory planning
  – Focus on sustainability

• Special importance of community buy-outs (according to Land Reform Bill of 2001)
• North Harris Trust supplies various examples for illustration:
  • Creating new housing opportunities
  • Use of renewable energies
  • Developing nature oriented tourism
• Thus Trust activities help to create new jobs and income
• Accordingly, high acceptance in the area
**Synthesis**

- H & I of Scotland provide outstanding example of rural periphery in transition
- Surprising recovery of a once „lost place“ in terms of employment, population and self-confidence
- Controversial debate over pros and cons of large scale industrial development
- Accordingly, rising awareness for sustainable pathways: natural assets and cultural traditions
- Development of new forms of rural governance, involving strong community initiatives resp. networks
- Exciting case for further scientific observation and analysis
Thank you very much!
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