Changing ‘dependency’ culture of rural communities through developing community empowerment and enhancing their resilience

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Increasingly, UK policies encourage a movement towards community empowerment and enhanced community resilience. Current policies herald that when communities actively engage, it helps to deliver more responsive services, increase local democratic participation as well as numbers of volunteers and quality of life. As such, development policy and practice increasingly focus on community-driven strategies seeking to manage risk and facilitate change at the local level with minimal state intervention. Despite the positive policy climate, it is not clear how this socio-cultural shift from ‘state-depended’ to empowered and resilient communities can happen. Policies exclude the possibility of existing less-capable communities that ‘do not engage’, and those, that might not be able to facilitate positive changes and develop community resilience. The latter can lead to some communities being disadvantaged and, to avoid this, policies need to recognise that sustainable development requires well-tailored interventions supporting a positive transition of those ‘less-capable’ communities. In our paper we present the innovative EU-LEADER community programme Capacity for Change (C4C) which through the process of community engagement, aimed to empower communities that do not engage. A specific focus of the discussion is on identification of governance structures and decision-making approaches which maximise inclusion and increase community readiness. We test the extent to which community intervention help to change ‘dependency’ culture and contribute to developing empowered and resilient communities. Findings are based on the direct engagement with seven rural communities in Scotland and 345 face-to-face interviews collected in a longitudinal study between 2011 and 2013. Conclusions of the study identify implications for researchers and policymakers contributing to the current debate about empowerment processes and sustainable community development.

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