Challenging dominant narratives to enable effective responses to pandemics and other crises in rural and island communities

Thomas Fisher & Theona Morrison

This article strongly evidences the need to transform narratives and perspectives on rural, island and indigenous communities, and the many elements for such transformation that are already in place. We start by summarising extensive research conducted during COVID-19 on communities across the Northern Periphery and Arctic that turned what are often regarded as the challenges of peripherality to their advantage as resilience factors. In the process, they challenged many economic frameworks that have long dominated development policy for 'remote' regions. We then examine emerging research on dominant paradigms that are driving responses to the climate and biodiversity emergencies. Once again, these paradigms are often not rooted in the lived experience and (inherited) knowledge of local peoples and communities, who manage the vast majority of our natural assets. This leads to the wrong 'solutions' which can directly threaten rural, island and indigenous communities while not delivering positive outcomes for the climate and biodiversity. The call to "redefine peripherality" is backed by extensive evidence, and makes a series of recommendations for a more integrated, holistic and sustainable approach to peripheral communities, building on their many assets, strengths and resources. Likewise, many voices, from local communities to international bodies, are calling for more effective responses to the climate and biodiversity emergencies that incorporate the worldviews of indigenous peoples and local communities who have so much to contribute.

Transforming dominant narratives cannot happen until we genuinely listen and respond to the voices of rural, island and indigenous peoples within the Arctic and beyond.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic along with the twin climate and biodiversity emergencies are demanding urgent responses and actions, not least within the Arctic region. Why then spend time focusing on narratives and the lenses through which powerful outsiders often understand, frame, analyse and prescribe for Arctic and other so-called 'peripheral' communities? The answer is simple. If the narratives are wrong, if perspectives, policies and decisions are based on a misunderstanding of the actual conditions and characteristics of Arctic and other so-called 'peripheral' communities, then such policies and decisions will not achieve their desired outcomes. This came strongly to the fore during COVID-19 when many peripheral communities across the Northern Periphery and Arctic (NPA)[1] turned what are often regarded as the challenges of peripherality to their advantage as resilience factors. In the process, they challenged many of the economic narratives and frameworks that have long dominated economic development policy for 'remote' regions and communities, showing just how unsustainable such policies have often been.

Reframing dominant narratives has become all the more urgent amidst the highly visible impacts of the twin climate and biodiversity emergencies. Again, by listening to the voices of local, rural and island communities, we are discovering that dominant narratives that are not rooted in the lived experience and knowledge of such communities are generating the wrong 'solutions' that may be doing more harm than good. This is not least the case because the vast majority of natural assets are located in rural and island areas. According to the UN, 80% of the world's biodiversity is stewarded by indigenous peoples who make up just 5% of the world's population (United Nations, 2021).[2] And the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) states very clearly, "Despite the diversity of nature's values, most policymaking approaches have prioritized a narrow set of values at the expense of both nature and society, as well as of future generations, and have often ignored values associated with indigenous peoples' and local communities' worldviews" (IPBES, 2022)

This article therefore seeks to challenge dominant narratives that are undermining communities across the NPA, first around so-called 'peripherality' itself, for which we summarise extensive research conducted during the pandemic. This research covered Atlantic Canada,[3] Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, rural Sweden, Finland, Scotland and Ireland. Next, drawing insight and inspiration from the call to "redefine peripherality", we turn to emerging research on the dominant narratives that are driving responses tothe twin climate and biodiversity emergencies, often undermining peripheral communities in the process. This emerging research is so far primarily rooted in rural and island voices in Scotland, which is keenly seeking to build collaborative relationships across the Arctic region as the most northerly non-Arctic country with a strong sense of commonality with its Arctic neighbours.[4] But it is very clear that the emerging findings are

[1] For the research reflected in this article, the "Northern Periphery and Arctic" is delineated by the EU's Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme (www.interreg-npa.eu), involving EU member states Finland, Ireland, Sweden and, until recently, the UK (Scotland and Northern Ireland), in cooperation with the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and Norway, as well as enabling partnership working with Canada (and Russia).

[2] Other sources say indigenous peoples make up 6% of the world's population.

[3] Atlantic Canada is made up of four provinces - Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador, with a population of almost 2.5 million.

[4] "For centuries, Scotland and the Arctic have enjoyed close links that have had a lasting impact on our cultural, economic and social fabric. ... Scotland is among the Arctic region's closest neighbours; we share

relevant across the NPA as our on-going engagement with diverse partners across the region demonstrates. A key conclusion of this emerging research is: "The insights, whether from rural and island communities in Scotland to the international IPBES, all indicate that top-down frameworks, strategies and policies based on a narrow set of values, including those reflected in the dominant Natural Capital frameworks, will not just fail to deliver justice and community wealth for our rural and island communities, but will also fail to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies or to restore nature."

Seeking a just transition for rural and island communities across the NPA is hugely important. And these communities also have so much to offer that transition. Both our extensive research during the pandemic and our emerging research responding to the climate and biodiversity emergencies demonstrate that, when viewed through fresh lenses, peripheral regions are in fact at the forefront of innovation, with significant experience and wisdom, including among indigenous peoples, of how to live well, sustainably and more lightly on the earth. This places innovation in the periphery at the very heart and centre of solutions to societies' most pressing challenges, especially the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

Redefining peripherality

In the past, most common features of so-called 'peripheral' regions have been regarded as challenges: demographic imbalances and outmigration, dispersed populations, remoteness and low accessibility, fragile local economies distant from major markets and with low diversity and being the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate emergencies. So-called 'peripheral' regions, defined primarily by their vulnerability and disadvantage, need to 'catch up' with more 'developed' and 'central' regions.

But the picture that emerged from extensive evidence gathered across the NPA during the pandemic demonstrated peripheral communities often showed remarkable resilience, drawing on many local assets and strengths, demonstrating significant flexibility and adaptation, generating much innovation and creativity (from technology to sustainable living) and many localised solutions. Often borne out of necessity, peripheral communities tapped into their long history, rooted in generations of experience, of having to respond and adapt to changes and crises. They turned what are often regarded as the challenges of peripherality to their advantage during COVID-19 as resilience factors, including:

- their **geography**, including remote dispersed populations where self-reliance is the norm, and **access to nature**, e.g., opportunities for outdoor experiences and growing local food;
- **close knit small communities**, e.g., supporting vulnerable individuals and suppressing local outbreaks quickly, supporting local businesses, as well strong vision and energy for imagining positive futures beyond the pandemic;
- **collaborative services**, including across sectors;
- the relative importance of **public sector employment** in many peripheral regions and their ability to access **government support**;

many features and outlooks and have long looked to each other for inspiration, solutions and ideas." Foreward to the Scottish Government's Arctic policy framework, *Arctic Connections*.

- **diversified economies** created by the dense and diverse web of micro- and small enterprises and their **flexibility and adaptation; and**
- **innovation and digitalisation**, including digital technologies to deliver health services.

Even with regards to the critical **demographic challenges**, there is growing evidence from many different peripheral regions or localities that long-term demographic decline may be turning, trends which started even before COVID, but which COVID-19 accelerated (see further below).

Changing paradigms

COVID-19 not only disrupted people's lives, health care and economic activity; it also disrupted accepted paradigms, not just on peripherality but also on economics. Our COVID-19 research:

- demonstrated significantly increased direct intervention of public authorities in the economy, which will have long-term effects on public spending and on the relationship between public authorities and private enterprise and ownership.
- presented a fundamental challenge to the common view that saving lives and saving the economy are in conflict with each other (CoDeL, 2021: Part 2). The economic analysis by Kostarakos and O'Toole (2021) suggested that the sharp rise of COVID-related deaths in three NPA countries led to a sharp deterioration of economic sentiment, which was reversed once the number of deaths stabilised, demonstrating the strong economic impacts of health outcomes via their effect on economic expectations. The human rights report by Svanberg (2021) also argued against health and economy objectives being in conflict.
- challenged standard economic development prescriptions for prosperity and wellbeing, by revealing how unsustainable for long-term, and even for short-term prosperity and wellbeing, traditional economic frameworks are.

It is therefore imperative to look for alternative frameworks that put people and the planet first. This shift in economic thinking was already happening before COVID-19, but was hugely accelerated by the pandemic and has now entered into mainstream economic thinking, not least in response to the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

The COVID-19 research (CoDeL, 2021: Part 2) highlighted two well-established paradigms of new economic thinking: Wellbeing Economics (www.weall.org) and the Doughnut Economy (www.doughnuteconomics.org). The Governments of Iceland, Scotland and Finland, as well as New Zealand and Wales, are all members of the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership (WEGo). The research also illustrated that innovation and practice to deliver on new economic thinking were already taking place on the ground in many peripheral regions. This makes the new economic thinking deeply relevant to such regions.

Introduction to the research on the economic impacts of COVID-19

The call to "Redefine Peripherality" emerged from extensive and detailed analysis of the experiences and lessons learned from COVID-19 across the NPA. The research, focused primarily on the economic impacts of COVID-19, looked at regions both within and without the Arctic, including Ireland and Scotland. The way in which the diverse evidence across different countries, territories and sectors reinforced each other is striking. Funded by the EU's Northern Periphery

and Arctic Programme, under the NPA's COVID-19 Response Project, the research was delivered by 12 partners as well as independent researchers[5] across the area, with CoDeL (Community Development Lens) as Lead Partner. The research was conducted during the pandemic itself, specifically late 2020 to early 2021.

The extensive findings were captured in 10 reports, all available on the web.[6] The reports cover economic impacts on different regions, sectors and businesses in Atlantic Canada, in Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, in Sweden, and on Finnish regional health care services. Two of the reports were cross-cutting, analysing comparative macro-economic data as well as extensive Nordic research on regional development, emerging sectors and demographics. One of the reports focused on how human rights perspectives can be introduced, assessing adherence to human rights during the pandemic and seeking to reconcile human rights and the economy.

Insights from this large body of evidence, based on extensive desk research, 80 interviews and almost 30 case-studies, were gathered into a main report that challenged many traditional perspectives on NPA regions and on so-called 'peripherality' in general. The diverse body of research is significant for two reasons:

1. the weight of evidence it delivers across many different regions, from Finland to Canada, and across many different sectors: economics, enterprise, tourism and regional development, health care, culture and human rights; and
2. it is rooted in lived experience in peripheral areas during the pandemic, drawing on many different voices within peripheral communities and conducted, evaluated and written by researchers, many of whom themselves live in peripheral regions.

It is the strong focus on the experiences, knowledge and lessons at local and/or community levels that led to such a profound challenge to the dominant narratives that have determined perspectives, policies and decision-making towards peripheral areas. Instead of defining so-called peripheral areas as 'backward', needing to 'catch up' with more 'developed' and 'central' regions, the research demonstrated the need for a fresh perspective which *redefines peripherality* and properly assesses the assets, strengths and opportunities of peripheral regions, and their many resilience factors in times of crises, like COVID-19.

> *"While rural places are not without their challenges, they are also unquestionably places of opportunity."* (OECD)

Reflections on the experience of indigenous peoples during the pandemic are included in our research, especially in the reports from Canada and on human rights. However, our COVID-19

[5] Including research commissioned by the project partners from others, in total 8 universities/research institutes, 2 public agencies, 6 social or private enterprises, and 3 independent researchers contributed to the research on the economic impacts of COVID-19. The research, and the insights it delivered, would not have been possible without these partners and researchers, and without the funding and support from the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme under their special COVID-19 Response Project.

[6] All the 10 reports, including a detailed Main Report (CoDeL, 2021), are available on CoDeL's website: www.codel.scot (click on Redefining Peripherality tab). The main report includes six parts summarising the findings on economic impacts; small and micro-enterprises; sustainable tourism; resilience factors; and demographic trends; as well as the recommendations. Some of the individual reports are also listed in the references at the end of this article.

research conducted over a very short timeframe (end of 2020 to early 2021) does not directly reflect indigenous voices. The "Covid-19 in the Arctic - Briefing document for Senior Arctic Officials" prepared for the Arctic Council in June 2020 and the article by Jennifer Spence and Sai Sneha Venkata Krishnan in this special issue of the Arctic Yearbook include much more analysis of indigenous issues during the pandemic.

The sections that now follow, on economic impacts, resilience, demographic challenges and recommendations, draw on key findings from our COVID-19 research that are summarized in different parts of the Main Report (CoDeL, 2021).

Economic impacts of COVID-19

The severe economic disruption caused by COVID-19 in peripheral regions across the NPA is undeniable. As examples from three of the 10 research reports demonstrate:

1. In the Nordic countries, from April to June 2020, international tourism to Norway dropped by 95%, by 66% in Sweden and by 61% in Finland (CoDeL, 2021: Part 4). Northern Norway is particularly dependent on tourism.
2. In Canada, exports accounted for 29% of the Atlantic region's GDP, supporting over 118,000 jobs. These exports were down 50% in May 2020 from 12 months earlier (Chapman *et al,* 2021). Based on several indicators, Newfoundland and Labrador was the Atlantic province hit hardest.
3. Of 1,200 business owners and the self-employed surveyed in the Highland region of Scotland, 54% were closed (45% by law and 9% voluntarily), 35% were struggling to stay afloat, and a further 33% experienced a fall in sales and profits. Almost half were concerned about their ability to survive for the next few months (Westbrook and Golding, 2021).

The macro-economic data confirmed significant declines in economic activity across the NPA, although different regions and different sectors fared very differently (CoDeL, 2021, Part 2; Karlsdóttir and Cuadrado, 2021; Kostarakos and O'Toole, 2021). The impact of sudden falls in output and jobs, consumption and investment should not be underestimated, dramatically increasing the already significant impact of the pandemic on citizens and households. There was also clear evidence of sharply increased inequality, with severe impacts, for example, on low-paid workers, young people, women, indigenous communities and gig economy workers (CoDeL, 2021: Part 2).

The economic impacts of COVID-19 also extended to the delivery of health care services, as seen in small hospital districts in East Finland (Mankki *et al*, 2021). The Finnish report reflects how COVID-19 increased health care costs and exacerbated shortages of health personnel. The report argued that this will continue to have significant impacts with lower tax revenues for municipalities leading to further retrenchment in services and further expansion of digital and tele-health services. Above all, there was an accumulating 'care debt' during the pandemic, with the postponement of non-urgent health services and a reduction in services for some of the most vulnerable groups.

Resilience

Nevertheless, a clear pattern emerged from the research and its diverse sources: on balance so-called peripheral areas performed relatively well during COVID-19, even though there were significant variations across different regions and sectors, and across different waves of the pandemic over time (CoDeL, 2021: Part 5).

The researchers pointed to the low infection and death rates in many, although not all, peripheral regions, especially in the first wave of COVID-19. Peripheral areas benefitted from their geography, including their remote and sparsely populated regions; and islands, with their well-defined geographic boundaries, were able to limit and control access. Peripheral areas often developed and/or used testing and tracing systems very quickly and effectively and shut down community transmission swiftly, based on cohesive communities, responsive governance and the ability to create local solutions. There was rapid community engagement and participation, volunteering and generosity expressed in practical action to help the most vulnerable and at-risk in particular.

Micro- and small businesses form the bedrock of local economies in many peripheral regions, and research suggests that small businesses tend to be more flexible and are able to change faster during a crisis. Over half of 62 entrepreneurs surveyed in Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands indicated that COVID-19 had brought about new business opportunities (Voluntās, 2021), and similar findings came from surveys in Greenland and Atlantic Canada. Community and social enterprises are also critical in sustaining communities and local economies across peripheral regions.[7]

Economic responses in peripheral regions to COVID-19 were characterised most by flexibility and adaptation, innovation and creativity, and not least collaboration (CoDeL, 2021, Part 3). The micro- and small business sector acts as a seedbed for new businesses, developments and innovations, including in a wide range of innovative sectors, from the bio-economy in Nordic countries (Karlsdóttir and Cuadrado, 2021) to the exponential growth in traditional music in Scotland (Morrison, 2021). Another NPA COVID-19 project, this one focusing on technology solutions (TechSolns, 2021), surveyed 35 technology companies across the NPA that had engaged in significant innovation, adaptation or market expansion in response to health needs during COVID-19. Of these, three-quarters were small and micro-enterprises, and almost half had 10 or fewer employees. The many examples of innovation across all these reports paint the picture of an enterprise sector that not only showcases ingenuity, but one that is motivated by a sense of community and generosity.

The pivot to local markets was one of the most prevalent adaptations that micro- and small businesses made in response to COVID-19, not least within the tourism sector (CoDeL, 2021, Part 4). They often benefitted from strong support from local costumers. North Iceland had a good tourist season in 2020 based entirely on domestic tourists. COVID-19 also sharply accelerated the growth of web-based activity, with many enterprises moving on-line to reach new markets.

The flexibility and adaption of micro- and small enterprises, and pluralistic lifestyles where individuals engage in multiple economic activities (including employment, self-employment and

[7] See, e.g., the brochure on Social Enterprise Place Uist (Social Enterprise Scotland, 2021).

volunteering) proved critical resilience factors for many local economies in peripheral regions. And their ability to innovate new products and services, including in response to a crisis, highlighted significant dynamism and resilience (CoDeL, 2021, Part 3). Evidence for this came from across many regions and sectors, from the primary and manufacturing sectors, as well as diverse services, from tourism (Voluntās, 2021) to traditional music and culture (Morrison, 2021). The evidence also ranged from traditional activities like forestry (Bogren *et al,* 2021: 10) to emerging sectors like the bio-economy (Karlsdóttir and Cuadrado, 2021). By the end of 2020, the bioscience sector in Prince Edward Island had added 200 jobs since the pandemic began and seven of its companies were planning expansions (Chapman *et al,* 2021). These characteristics were also common among community and social enterprises within peripheral communities, as well as among small public service providers, as the research on the smallest hospital district in Finland demonstrated (Mankki *et al*, 2021). In this case, public services engaged effectively with collaborative local networks involving public, private and community actors. And Nordic regions have been at the forefront of tele and digital health service provision, which accelerated during COVID-19 and provided significant protection and resilience during the pandemic.

In summary, the research found significant evidence from across the NPA, reflected in all 10 reports, that many peripheral regions and communities proved significantly resilient and relatively effective in responding to COVID-19. This does not mean every peripheral area did relatively well. Some regions, like northern Norway, which was so highly dependent on tourism, were particularly hard hit economically. The picture in Sweden was more mixed because of its very different response nationally to COVID-19. And the pandemic's second and third waves often impacted peripheral areas more than the first, although the rates were often still low in comparison to other regions, and some of the peripheral areas responded well with fast roll-outs of vaccination programmes.

A key focus of the research was therefore on identifying the many factors, *often existing before the pandemic*, that helped peripheral and rural communities to respond well: such as low population density; cohesive, engaged and personalised communities; effective local governance, strong networking and partnerships across sectors; flexible and innovative businesses; and social enterprises rooted in their communities and local economies. All of these preconditions helped peripheral communities in their response to COVID-19, in terms of both health and economic outcomes.

Demographic challenges

As stated earlier, the research also found growing evidence from many different peripheral regions that long-term demographic decline may be turning; trends which often started even before COVID. The research cites examples from the Nordic countries, Scotland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Atlantic Canada (CoDeL, 2021, Part 6). The rapid expansion of remote working and on-line business opened up significant opportunities for peripheral areas in attracting population, as well as challenges, especially around housing. And many regions, e.g. in Canada, Iceland and Scotland, are now taking a pro-active approach to attract people to settle or return in order to reverse demographic decline.

Box 1: COVID-19 and the impact on older people in peripheral areas

Our research project did not look in detail at the impact of COVID-19 on the elderly because the core focus of the research was on the *economic* impacts of the pandemic. The pandemic overall had a disproportionate impact on older people, and populations in many peripheral areas are, for historical reasons, skewed towards a more elderly demographic. It is a fair assumption then that COVID-19 would have had a particularly negative impact on peripheral areas.

While we do not wish to underplay the impact of the pandemic on the elderly in peripheral areas, it is nonetheless true that many of the resilience factors we have cited acted as protective factors for the elderly in some peripheral areas: lower infection rates, effective test and trace mechanisms, already well advanced tele and digital health service provision with further innovation among local businesses in response to the pandemic, significant community engagement and generosity, active community enterprises, and quick and high uptake of vaccines.

The report on Finnish regional health services (Mankki *et al,* 2021) looked at the East Savo Hospital District (in east Finland) which has an aging population. "Exceptional times have certainly called for exceptional measures, but … the peripheral regions have also relied on already established innovations such as integrated models in health care, training and education, a strong public sector and its co-operation between regional and national level actors, and strong regional infrastructure. The strong effort to digitalise health care throughout the 21st century has also eased the transition to on-line, remote service provision during the pandemic." (, Mankki *et al*, 2021: Section 5.1)

Measures adopted within East Savo specifically relating to the elderly ranged from contracting out selected services to private service providers to community-based nurse training "in a way", as one interviewee explained, "that everyone has the opportunity to take part in the training for an assistant nurse and from there to proceed to a community-based nurse, i.e. to see that people who have not studied for a while would have the lowest possible threshold. And in recruitment we have tried to take into account the educated people in sparsely populated areas who currently work in agriculture, so that they'd be able to work part-time, even in home care, around their own residential area. … We have not been able to recruit a significant number of people through this, but these measures are constantly being considered and we have a good cooperation with our educational institutions in the area." (Mankki *et al*, 2021: Section 4.2)

As examples, the NGO Ungt Austurland (Young East Iceland) and the municipality of Klakksvík in the Faroe Islands are both trying to attract young people (back) to their regions by raising awareness of local opportunities and the visibility of local companies and businesses, enhancing networks among young people in and from their areas, engaging with former students who are studying elsewhere, and getting young people in their area involved in development and local politics.

In direct response to COVID-19, Tourism Nova Scotia and Nova Scotia Business Inc. launched a marketing campaign to attract people working from home to move to Nova Scotia. It includes a website (www.workfromnovascotia.com) with relevant information and innovative advertisements like, "Not all breakout rooms are created equal. Work where you want to live" and "You always wanted an office with a view". The campaign's goal was to attract 15,000 to the province within one year.

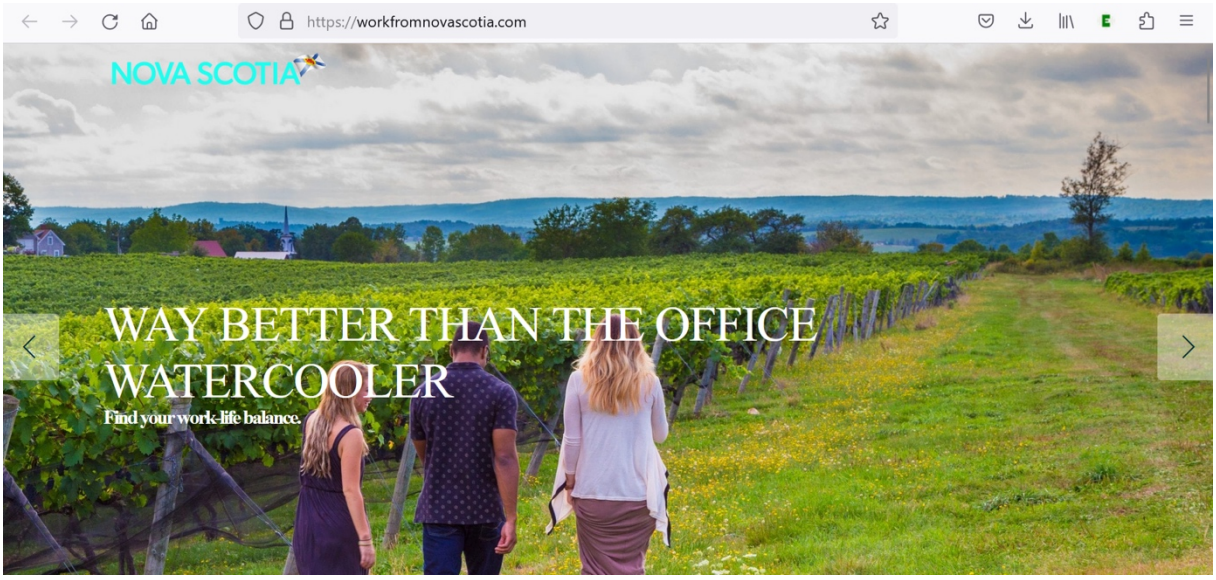

Figure 1: Image on the work from Nova Scotia website

The digital platform Uist Beò also emerged during COVID-19, initially through social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter). The Uist Beò website (www.uist.co) was launched in March 2022, and has already attracted over 3000 visitors. The platform is run by a team of young islanders to reflect the realities of the vibrant and dynamic island life in Uist in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, instead of perpetuating the romanticised views of islands "lost in the mists of time" with empty beaches, ruined blackhouses and sheep as traffic jams. A key aim is to attract younger people and families to return or settle in the islands full of community and culture, activities and opportunities. So the platform features many stories of young people returning or settling and setting up dynamic enterprises, as well as weekly posts on activities and job opportunities, Gaelic language and culture, etc.

Figure 2: Image representing vibrant and young island living in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland

Recommendations from the COVID-19 research

In the past, policies for so-called 'peripheral' regions have been framed by an (often condescending) mindset that peripheral regions are 'backward' and need to 'catch up'. Policy prescriptions focused, for example, on growth enterprises, linking regions to large more prosperous markets (e.g. tourists from urban centres and abroad), and attracting inward investments by large businesses and corporations.

This policy framework often did not help peripheral regions and communities to respond effectively to emergencies like the pandemic because it ignored many of the realities and strengths of peripheral areas set out above. The main project report set out 18 recommendations for a new, integrated, more holistic and appropriate approach to peripheral regions (CoDeL, 2021, Part 1). These recommendations recognise that peripheral economies look very different from urban or 'central' economies.

The recommendations include the need to **redefine peripherality**; **adopt new economic paradigms**; **address inequalities** and, in the light of experience during the pandemic, **focus on enhancing protective and resilience factors rather than growth**, not least by **building on the many assets and strengths to be found in peripheral regions**, which COVID-19 brought into strong focus.

There are also recommendations to **invest in new emerging sectors**, like the green economy and clean technologies, the bioeconomy, bioscience, technology and the digital economy; **build circular and local economies**; **diversify regional and local economies**, including by **investing more in micro and small enterprises, in community and social enterprise, and in young entrepreneurs**, rather than prioritising large-scale inward investments.

Other recommendations focus on the need to**:**

- **develop local food production, local supply chains and value addition**, to reduce transport emissions and support greater self-sufficiency and resilience, especially in times of crises.

> *"Seventy percent of the world's population is fed by food produced on small farms, many less than 2 acres in size. This one statistic illustrates that 70% of the world's population has a much closer connection to how and where their food is grown. That leaves 30% of the world's population in a dependency culture, dependent on food being produced by someone else, somewhere else ... fed predominantly by industrial farming methods, a myriad of monocropping production in the name of efficiency, but ... this single-focus production is destroying the earth that supports its production.* (CoDeL, Draft report on "Community conversations on nature")

More local food will also require significant changes in legislation around food production.

> *The Faroe Islands support* Heimablídni*, a local concept that allows family businesses to start serving food in their own home without the prior sanitary approvals normally required when starting a cafe or restaurant. In Greenland, the innovative Foodlab Nuuk is offering access to public kitchen facilities, allowing people to rent a protocol and sanitation-approved kitchen to cook, invite paying guests and share their life story in a home away from home. And addressing the obstacles to more localised and home slaughtering is critical. Greenland has a concept called "Kalaaliaraq", establishing designated local slaughtering and trading areas where farmers*

> *themselves can use the facility to slaughter and process their meat in a food and safety-approved environment.* (Voluntās, 2021)

- **value the role of government, and of public expenditure and investment.** Securing continued access to schools and health care locally, for example, is a critical strategy to support resilience and to retain and attract families and others in peripheral regions. Investment in education, social and health care also provides employment and income to individuals, and enhanced tax revenues to national, regional and local government.

- **build and invest in effective, empowered and resourced regional and local governance, and cross-sectoral collaboration, including community-based organisations**. Individual regions and localities must be given the ability and support to develop their own local solutions to key challenges, in line with local people's aspirations and available assets, strengths and skills.

- **implement human rights.** Human rights obligations provide critical frameworks for protecting the rights of individuals and groups, not least during crises. Understanding, practice and adherence to human rights needs to be enhanced.[8]

- **address demographic trends proactively** to showcase peripheral areas as great places to live and work, and to run sustainable businesses, focusing on assets and strengths, enterprising opportunities and quality of life. Attracting young economically active people is an essential target group, building on the significant shifts in aspirations among young people around wellbeing, balanced lifestyles, family and community, and the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

- **support transnational partnerships**. The COVID-19 project itself demonstrated the value of bringing together experience from diverse peripheral regions across the NPA, to amplify peripheral voices to the extent of redefining dominant narratives and perspectives.

Relevant to all these recommendations was the analysis showing the similarities and differences in regional impacts of COVID-19, demonstrating how critical it is to adapt policies and actions to be appropriate and effective for each different peripheral region. There is no "one size fits all".

Finally, the main report developed recommendations on **genuinely sustainable tourism** to illustrate the radical shifts that are needed in economic and regional policy. Tourism was one of the sectors that was most deeply affected by COVID-19. This shock also deeply challenged most economic development and regional policies for peripheral regions, which often have tourism development at its core, with success measured by ever growing visitor numbers multiplied by estimates of visitor spend. *Over dependence* on tourism was one of the greatest factors undermining economic resilience in peripheral communities during the pandemic, demonstrating how risky, economically and socially, an excessive dependence on tourism can be.

While tourism development has brought some undoubted economic benefits to peripheral regions, the employment opportunities within the tourist sector are often limited, poorly distributed, low-

[8] The report on human rights (Svanberg, 2021) suggested e.g. (on-line) learning for diverse actors, developing appropriate Codes of Ethics, and human rights ombudsmen / councellors who can both support implementation of human rights and conduct audits of policies and actions against human rights criteria.

skilled and seasonal. Seasonality can overwhelm communities in the often short tourist seasons, and leave them essentially 'closed' out of season and bereft of meaningful activity. Tourism has been hugely destructive to the environment, and often to cultural identity and the sustainability of communities as well. At worst, there are reports of last chance tourism within the NPA, to visit ecologically fragile environments before they disappear, thereby contributing to hastening ecological collapse in these places.

A radical shift in tourism development is called for, including significant decarbonising of tourism impacts. What is striking about the COVID-19 project's research is just how many entrepreneurs on the ground in the NPA are looking for alternatives too, and just how many good practices there already are, from cozy outdoor dining huts that will be repurposed as greenhouses in the spring, through entrepreneurs going on-line to sustain their businesses virtually, to a massive shift across the NPA to the opportunities of local and domestic tourism. Tourist providers in Iceland reported that domestic visitors often stayed for longer, engaged in sustainable activities like hiking, and enjoyed exploring their own national and regional culinary and cultural traditions.

Tourism needs to:

- be one part of the local economy, not the dominant one;
- be embedded in a local circular economy that primarily benefits local people, producers and enterprises, including through sustainable year-round job opportunities and buying and eating local food;
- benefit local communities, their culture and society;
- radically reduce its contributions to the climate emergency with slow and more local tourism and sustainable activities; and
- reimagine its focus from satisfying the needs and wants of external visitors to addressing critical demographic challenges to attract permanent residents, especially young adults and families.

Pilot project responding to the climate and biodiversity emergencies

The COVID-19 research clearly demonstrated the need to challenge dominant narratives and paradigms, and to redefine peripherality. As the focus of public attention has shifted from the pandemic to the twin climate and biodiversity emergencies, the same need for challenging dominant narratives and paradigms emerges. Recent exploratory research by CoDeL was triggered by engagement with communities and key policy-making institutions across Scotland. It reflects that rural and island communities are often excluded by the frameworks and processes adopted by policy-makers which determine the interactions between nature and people. This is in spite of the critical roles that rural and island communities play as stewards and guardians of the vast majority of natural assets. We have seen this globablly in terms of indigenous peoples and biodiversity. And in Scotland, 98% of the country's area is defined as rural, but with only 17% of its population who are critical to sustaining Scotland's natural assets.

Despite extensive community consultations and engagement, local communities are among the most disempowered stakeholders when it comes to influencing land use and other solutions to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies. Based on community engagement around land

use in Scotland, the Social Enterprise Academy reports that *"communities are frustrated that their highly informed voices are not being heard .... There is a strong sense that the key stakeholders were consulting but not listening and not ready to change their actions as a result of what they have heard. ... Land use needs to ensure that the value is retained locally and facilitates Community Wealth Building. The Glenkens vision* [see Box 2] *is that everyone who takes value from the land, returns value to it."*

And so there often remains a significant disconnect between grassroot, rural development priorities and actions and the large-scale policy initiatives to restore nature. CoDeL's small pilot project, funded by the Scottish Government's Scottish Rural Network and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, is seeking to explore this disconnect by building up knowledge *from the local perspective*: rooted in rural and island voices, in communities' own experience of nature. CoDeL is working with potential partners in Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Canada, who are also engaging with rural communities and voices, to explore the relevance of these issues across the Northern Periphery and Arctic. We hope to build on this research to develop frameworks and processes that can genuinely incorporate the understanding, perspectives and values of local communities and indigenous communities, and empower them to deliver, contribute to and influence relevant actions and policies.

Box 2: Land use in the Glenkens – 2023 context

from a draft Vision for Land Use in Glenkens, Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland (see www.gcat.scot)

- We are a forested area, a farming area, an energy generation area. We are a watery area, given life by our rivers and lochs. Our natural environment is so special that we are part of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere. Our landscapes attract visitors from all over the world. We are a peaty area and our soil stores some of Scotland's best carbon. It is our home, where we work, live and play. All of these land uses are intertwined and affected by influences within and without our control.
- We are an organised and coherent community which has sought and achieved balance in land use over many years through partnership working and effective engagement. However, we are now overwhelmed by the speed and intent of land use change in the area and by the lack of power that we hold to effect change. ... The disconnect between national and regional policy intent and what is actually happening in the Glenkens feels absolute.
- Some of the land use developments in our area appear purely extractive. Most profits and benefits are realised elsewhere, jobs are created elsewhere. Community Wealth Building principles are not embedded or mandated and so the impact of these developments on our communities is not a catalyst for more jobs, a circular local economy and thriving and sustainable communities. Opportunities are being missed.

Their vision for the future sets out how Glenkens seeks to be "an exemplar of sustainable land use practice in building resilience for climate, biodiversity and communities, where learning is valued and all voices are listened to".

Emerging findings

The message coming loud and clear from rural and island communities is that policies designed at the national level to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies are not delivering.

> "*The current massive changes in land use in rural Scotland, although designed to deliver positive climate and biodiversity outcomes, are not actually doing so. This is what we are hearing from local communities at the sharp end of the transformation of land use, who are experiencing consequences like loss of livelihoods, loss of land for growing food locally, and flooding. Positive examples of communities deriving direct benefit, for example from carbon markets, do not compensate for these widespread negative impacts."* (from CoDeL's draft report)

Such policies are instead damaging and threatening many rural and island communities, in some cases threatening their very existence. The emerging carbon markets which enjoy significant government support, are the most obvious example of these policies in the Scottish context (see McIntosh, 2023). From the perspective of communities on the ground, the rapidly evolving carbon markets are leading to large-scale changes in land use, for example extensive tree planting for carbon credits, and soaring land prices. And the current market mechanisms are weighted in favour of powerful interests, like large corporations and private land owners, and against communities.

Soaring land prices will put an end to strategies to grow food locally in sustainable and low intensive ways; risk pushing the most vulnerable farmers (especially tenants) off the land and out of food production; threaten many other rural livelihoods and communities; prevent extending community land ownership; and threaten the cultural inheritance rural and island communities hold around land and nature that are vital sources of knowledge as we confront the climate and biodiversity emergencies. In spite of some positive examples, policy implementation overall will not deliver on emerging policy around a 'Just Transition'. And such policies will fail in the longer term because they are undermining rural and island communities, who are the people who must deliver on a transition to net zero as stewards and guardians of rural Scotland's huge natural assets.

Once again we discover that some of the critical frameworks that underpin policy responses to the climate and biodiversity emergencies, especially frameworks for "natural capital" and "ecosystems services" (see Figure 3), are not fit for purpose and compound the disconnect we have identified.

> *"Natural Capital can be defined as the stocks of natural assets which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things. It is from this Natural Capital that humans derive a wide range of services, often called ecosystem services, which make human life possible" – Scottish Forum on Natural Capital*

These frameworks exclude so much of the lived experience and knowledge of rural and island communities, and barely even recognise the role of home and community, local livelihoods and enterprise, culture and identity, etc. Instead they tend to combine both a narrow focus on economic activity and urban perspectives on rural areas; providing resources for economic activity that make urban living possible, as well as benefits like aesthetics, recreation and education that meet the consumption needs of urban populations.[9] As with urban perceptions of peripherality, such frameworks distort understanding of the realities on the ground, and lead to misguided and harmful policies and actions. With their emphasis on monetising nature as an additional capital for

[9] Figure 3 reflects the typical approach to ecosystem services. The Millenium Assessment (www.millenniumassessment.org) which originally highlighted ecosystem services included spiritual and religious benefits, sense of place and cultural heritage under "cultural services", and some diagrams include some of these. All face the challenge of embracing these elements in holistic ways, rather than compartmentalising them into individual segments. The original Millenium Assessment set out each element as a bullet point in a categorised list!

economic activity, are these frameworks simply an extension of the same economic approaches that led to climate and biodiversity emergencies in the first place?

Communities on the ground are experiencing the impacts of this narrow focus on monetising nature (to support market transactions) as the next example of extracting economic value from their places. Some are comparing this to replicating economically driven clearances of people off their land (as happened massively in highland and island Scotland during the 18th and 19th centuries). This is the message coming from highly informed and knowledgeable rural and island communities across Scotland. It is mirrored across many regions within the Arctic. As an indigenous leader from Alaska said at an Arctic Circle Assembly 2022 session on *A "Just" Energy Transition in the Arctic*, "be careful what you wish for". Tesla is rolling out electric cars as a green alternative for cars, but this has already resulted in the destruction of a mountain in their territory being mined for the minerals needed.

Figure 3: Ecosystem services (IUCN, The International Union for Conservation of Nature)

The limitations of frameworks like natural capital are strongly affirmed by key stakeholder groups, not least by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. Their extremely important report on *The Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature* (IPBES, 2022))sets out why current policies and frameworks "emanating from predominant political and economic decisions based on a narrow set of values (e.g., prioritizing nature's values as traded in markets)" will fail to deliver on climate and biodiversity expectations until they incorporate the understanding, perspectives and values of indigenous peoples and local communities (see quotation from IPBES in the Introduction to this article).

In fact, the IPBES report repeatedly refers to the "worldviews" of indigenous peoples and local communities. This goes so much further than consulting or engaging with local people, and recognises the real insight and value that indigenous peoples and local communities bring to any climate and biodiversity responses. One common aspect of such worldviews is the holistic understanding that indigenous peoples and other communities bring, rather than categorising and separating everything. It is no wonder then that people with holistic worldviews may struggle to identify with diagrams like the one of ecosystem services (see Figure 3), with all its separated segments, even if their designers hope that creating a circle will make it look holistic.

> *"Our language roots us with our traditions [Inuit]. English phrases such as 'traditional ecological knowledge' put us in a box."* from Arctic Circle Assembly session on *Indigenous Knowledge and Cosmovision in Climate Mitigation.*

Moving forward

As we stated in the introduction to this article, the insights from rural and island communities in Scotland to the international IPBES indicate that top-down frameworks, strategies and policies based on a narrow set of values, including those reflected in the dominant natural capital frameworks, will not just fail to deliver justice and community wealth for our rural and island communities, but will also fail to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

Like many others, we recognise the need for a radical change in approaches to addressing these emergencies, approaches that:

- are rooted in indigenous and local worldviews and voices, building up from the experience, knowledge and expertise of local communities, rather than top-down from policy-making processes that are deeply influenced by powerful interests;
- are nuanced, recognising the complexity of effective action to restore nature at a local level, for example following ecological principles of connection, concerned with the relationships and interactions of life, with diversity and 'patchiness', rather than a mono-cultural one-size-fits-all solution;
- empower local communities, as equal partners with institutions and policy-makers to deliver positive environmental outcomes, giving local communities a critical role in delivering positive change;
- place a just transition for rural and island communities at the core of policy-making.

Many building blocks for such change are already emerging. In redefining peripherality, we were able to point to many new emerging economic frameworks like wellbeing economics and the doughnut economy.[10] Liz Zeidler's Discussion Paper on *The Shared Ingredients for a Wellbeing Economy* (Zeidler, 2022) compares eight different frameworks and tools, from the local to the international, including the Thriving Places Index, the Doughnut Economy, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, the National Performance Framework (Scotland), the OECD Better Life

[10] A recent article about the economist Kate Raworth who created Doughnut Economics reflects on the challenges of growth and degrowth, and not least on the perennial question of how best to generate positive change; see https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jun/08/the-planets-economist-has-kate-raworth-found-a-model-for-sustainable-living.

Index and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Liz concludes that "there is an overwhelming degree of agreement about the ingredients for an equitable and sustainable wellbeing economy".

Within economics therefore there are many emerging frameworks that can help in challenging the dominant paradigm of growth, markets and monetisation. And on the ground there are numerous individuals and communities, businesses, organisations and networks seeking to turn new economic thinking into reality. As just one of many examples we cite "social enterprise as part of a global response to a broken economic system that is increasing inequality and causing a climate emergency" and the goal of the Social Enterprise World Forum "to grow the global social enterprise movement to accelerate our transition to a new global impact economy" (https://sewfonline.com/). Common to all these frameworks and approaches is the desire to make our economies more sustainable for the planet and future generations, so these frameworks contribute significantly towards new thinking and approaches around the climate and biodiversity emergencies also. And there are of course innumerable individuals, communities and organisations working to respond to these emergencies through practical action.

Nevertheless there remain significant challenges. "Contemplating the infinite intricacy of the natural world, botanist Frank Egler observed that 'ecosystems are not only more complex than we think but more complex than we can think'. ... climate change is a wicked problem, resistant to single solutions, its roots woven into economics, cultures, livelihoods and habits. It traverses every sector of society and every level of human relations. Every perspective, from law to agronomy, medicine to oceanography, is relevant in addressing it. ... For too long, the dominant conversation on climate change has included only a tiny range of people, namely a handful of policymakers and valuable scientific sources. This selectivity sidelines the contributions of popular, personal, local and indigenous knowledges, which will be vital if we are to attain any plausible climate safety. ... we are going to need to pull together our collective wisdom, in its plurality of lenses and expressions." (Voskoboynik, 2018: 17-18)This strongly reinforces the call by the IPBES not just to consult but to incorporate the worldviews of indigenous peoples and local communities.

Concluding reflections

This article has strongly evidenced the need to transform narratives and paradigms about rural, island and indigenous communities. To conclude we want to emphasise again that these communities are often asset rich, not poor and backward as they are often seen through an urban lens. We need to move beyond such condescending attitudes to enable and recognise just how much rural and island communities are contributing. Many of them have huge renewable energy and other resources, huge carbon reserves, and much agricultural land suitable for low-intensive sustainable food production and grazing. They have versitile businesses, and multi-skilled individuals engaged in diverse economic activities to provide resilience. They have close-knit communities, dynamic community organisations/social enterprises and rich cultural heritages. They have a stunning environment for livelihoods, wellbeing and recreation. And they have a strong sense of home, identity and place, so critical in a world where loss of identity and sense of belonging, and the associated disconnection, drive so many negative trends as well as over-consumption to "make up" for such losses.

Rural and island communities are often highly informed and knowledgeable, drawing on their lived experience and knowledge, including inherited and indigenous knowledge.[11] From our community conversations we know that their analysis of their local context, local opportunities and threats, and their visions for the future, all point to a depth of knowledge and identification with their place, and more holistic and integrated perspectives and worldviews.

Critical to the sustainable future of rural, island and indigenous communities, and to a just transition to net zero that builds community wealth, is the extent to which these communities can benefit from their many assets, tangible and intangible. Powerful economic interests have ensured that value from these assets, from minerals and renewable energy to culture and knowledge, has been realised far more by external parties extracting those resources than by the communities where these resources are located.[12] To ensure a positive future for rural, island and indigenous communities, the perceptions and lenses which underpin narratives and paradigms for resource allocation and decision-making need to be transformed. And this cannot happen until we genuinely listen and respond to the voices of rural, island and indigenous people. It is their lived experience and inherited knowledge that is perhaps now one of the most precious resources not just for themselves, but also for the global community, because of the contributions they can make to positive ways forward as we collectively address the twin climate and biodiversity emergencies.

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[11] The many statements and excuses that 'communities do not understand' are almost always just that, excuses, and reflect more on the institutional perspectives of those making such statements than on the communities they are apparently reflecting on.

[12] As one example among many, renewable energy pricing in Scotland is structured so that many local communities sell the energy they generate at a fraction of the cost at which households and businesses within those communities buy back that energy, even though it was generated locally.

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