

Land reform: Journey or destination?

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Land reform is, to use the Land Reform Review Group's definition, 'measures that modify or change the arrangements governing the possession and use of land in Scotland in the public interest'.

Before looking at what outcomes land reform should seek to achieve, we should acknowledge the developments which have occurred over the last 25 years: several pieces of Scottish Parliamentary legislation (some directly focussed on land reform, others having partial impact), several rounds of funding through the Scottish Land Fund (both National Lottery and Scottish Government money), significant numbers (if not acreages) of acquisitions of land and property by communities.

But despite these steps forward, land reform outcomes appear modest. Communities own only about 3% of the Scottish land area, and recent research indicates that ownership of land in Scotland is getting more concentrated, not less, despite long held Scottish Government aspirations for a more diversified ownership pattern.

In the land reform debate, there are those who see no need to significantly adjust the status quo, that the current structure of ownership and management is optimal for producing the goods and services which land can provide. Others seek change but towards a 'completion' of land reform, an identifiable 'destination, a 'job done'. And yet others believe land reform is a process, continually changing, adapting to wider economic, political and environmental conditions, like cost-of-living challenges, national security, changing resource needs and climate change in an increasingly turbulent world. I find myself in this last camp.

While there are many factors at play, it is hard to disassociate current land ownership and management patterns from major issues facing communities including housing shortages, poverty, environmental degradation, urban dereliction, biodiversity decline, out-migration from rural areas, failing infrastructure.

In the community land ownership sector, where innovative ownership patterns have been introduced, there is now sufficient experience and evidence to show that this particular approach to land reform has had positive local outcomes such as job creation, population growth, house building, renewable energy provision, enhanced amenity and improved services, as well as contributions to the national economy.

But all journeys should have a goal and outcomes or milestones, by which to measure progress towards it. I believe that land reform should result in resilient, sustainable rural and urban communities, contributing to local and national wellbeing and economic prosperity in environmentally sustainable ways.

Land reform is the relationship between people and the land. Land reform can be seen to have progressed significantly in Scotland when more people:

- own more land: communities, private individuals, charities, hybrid partnership ownership models
- have affordable access to land to rent: more tenants, more crofters
- know who owns land and what those owners intend to do with it
- who intend to purchase land are subject to public interest tests, in the same way as communities are
- are resident on the land and not absent
- have more opportunities to contribute to how land is managed
- develop a link and sense of belonging to land they feel is theirs not somebody else's
- share in the wealth that land creates, in, for example, carbon sequestration and the production of renewable energy.

And land reform can be seen also be seen to have progressed when the land:

- is less concentrated in its ownership pattern
- builds wealth, more of which is which retained and reinvested for local benefit and not extracted or expropriated to other places, including abroad
- sustains more affordable housing and larger populations
- is financially accessible for new entrants and particularly young people
- supports new, innovative and sustainable uses
- is used to increase biodiversity and where appropriate absorb carbon
- is increasingly managed for public not private benefit.

The challenge for Scotland is to continue to introduce the radical legislation, policies, fiscal arrangements and funding required to ensure progress is made in achieving the milestones listed above. There are fewer more important priorities.