

The Contribution of the Community Cooperatives of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to the Development of the Social Economy

by

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Journal of Rural Cooperation, 30(2), 2002: 95-117

Abstract

The article considers the “pragmatic reform” versus “radical utopia” duality within the social economy and, in that context, evaluates the contribution of the community cooperatives of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to the development of the modern UK social economy. The assessment is based on recent research, including interviews with representatives of several cooperatives and others involved in the initiative undertaken by the former Highlands and Islands Development Board, or in related activities. The origins of the Scottish social economy lie in the “Highland Problem”, arising from the processes of depopulation of the Highlands and Islands as a result of the clearances, the need for local employment opportunities, the exploitation of Scotland as a British colony, the cultural dimension, and the profound importance of the land question. The initiative has been very successful, on a number of different levels: it created new jobs, services and enterprises; very importantly, it built asset bases and revenue income to underpin development; it changed people’s lives, was genuinely bottom-up, raised consciousness, reinforced the mutual cooperation tradition of the area, and inspired people elsewhere to do similar things. It can claim a degree of radicalism and the achievement of some significant social change.