Regionalising the Scotland Rural Development Programme: decentralisation or recentralisation?¹
Anastasia L. Yang²

**Key Message:** Attempts to decentralise decision-making in the Scotland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 resulted in a number of stakeholders perceiving themselves to be less empowered. Through strict regulatory and financial controls via European and national Government, the perceived ability of regional stakeholders to influence policy and promote effective environmental outcomes was impaired.

**Main Findings**
- This briefing highlights findings from a study that evaluated the 2007-2013 Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) Rural Priorities scheme in achieving the promotion of ‘good governance’ and in prioritising regional environmental needs.
- The study used a mixed method approach, combining stakeholder mapping and qualitative interviews, to assess the interest and influence of policy stakeholders on policy outcomes.
- Findings indicated the importance of institutional frameworks and financial resources on the influence and interest of differing stakeholders and overall policy outcomes. For example, central government remained hugely influential, despite attempts to decentralise, driven by their power over the policy process and budgets. In addition, procedural enforcements and checks, requirements of European Commission audits, were also perceived to dominate the policy process.
- Regional Project Assessment Committees (RPACs) were perceived to have high ‘interest’ in policy outcomes, but their ‘influence’ was mainly in terms of implementing centrally led procedures, with little flexibility in decision-making to adapt to local needs. Additionally, having a centralised budget system meant a disincentive for regional stakeholders and RPACs to refine regional priorities as intended.
- Findings identified further perceived difficulties for certain applicants, i.e. small land managers, rural businesses, and community groups in applying for funding within the Rural Priorities scheme. This related mainly to the complexity of the Scheme’s application processes which served as a means of ensuring accountability. The complex procedures inhibited the ability of smaller land managers, rural businesses, and community groups to apply personally. Consequently, there is now a higher reliance on consultants for external advice and support, with respondents estimating that up to 90% of all Rural Priorities scheme applications were submitted by consultants.

**Introduction**
As a component of the SRDP 2007-2013, the Rural Priorities scheme was introduced as a competitive funding mechanism aiming to deliver both socio-economic and environmental European, national and regional objectives.

The scheme developed institutional arrangements that attempted to embrace ‘good governance’, encouraged by the European Commission as a means for promoting inclusivity in decision-making through decentralisation.

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²Corresponding author: Anastasia Yang, Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Indonesia; Tel: +62 (0)251 8622 622; email: a.yang@cgiar.org.
This was evident through the introduction of RPACs that represented eleven different regions of Scotland. This resulted in changing roles for those responsible for implementing the scheme. However, the increased autonomy also meant increased efforts to ensure accountability. Consequently, each Rural Development Programme was subject to European audits and, if found to be in breach of requirements, financial penalties may have been incurred.

**Methods**

The study adopted a stakeholder mapping approach in combination with semi-structured interviews to assess the role of governance and the influence of stakeholders on policy outcomes. A total of 61 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were completed between August 2011 and May 2012. Respondents included: representatives from each RPAC; national Government; a range of scheme job roles; and the delivery organisations. The stakeholder mapping tool required interviewees to firstly identify Rural Priorities scheme stakeholders and rank their levels of ‘interest’ and ‘influence’, and then to describe their inter-relationships and connections. Figure 1 illustrates the formal and informal connections as perceived by the respondents. Note that not all stakeholders were recognised by every respondent, and the number of observations varies accordingly.

**Policy Implications**

- The majority of identified issues and power imbalances related to the retaining of control and resources at central levels of government, and the desire/need to ensure accountability. Accountability, whilst undoubtedly necessary in any public policy, should also be sensitive to the burden and risks of overly bureaucratic processes on both applicants and SRDP staff. Otherwise there is a risk that resources will be diverted from focusing on the achievement of policy outcomes.
- Establishing a regional budget could be a possible approach to encourage regional stakeholders to further prioritise regional needs as opposed to competing for a national pot of money.
- Regional implementing authorities with greater flexibility in decision-making would be better able to adapt to changing regional needs through more lenient procedural processes, which still meet audit and other requirements.
- A simpler, more intuitive application process would potentially enable a wider range of applicants to apply without necessarily having to rely so heavily on consultants.

For more information on the work of SRUC’s Rural Policy Centre, please contact: Dr Jane Atterton, Manager and Policy Researcher, Rural Policy Centre, SRUC, T: 0131 535 4256; E: jane.atterton@sruc.ac.uk; W: www.sruc.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre

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4 Interest: the amount of concern a stakeholder has about the number and type of scheme options adopted in their region

5 Influence: the amount of influence a stakeholder has on the number and type of scheme options adopted in their region.