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The impacts of changes in farm structures on rural communities and environmental management in the Cumbria uplands in the UK and potential implications for the English Rural Development Plan

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Abstract

This paper is based on a qualitative investigation of social capital within farming communities in Cumbria (North-West England), how the maintenance of cooperative activities aids the provision of public goods, and the means by which policy can best ensure effective and socially just public goods outcomes. Essentially, the study revealed that despite the Cumbria region, and the Lakes District in particular, receiving maximum support under existing agri-environment schemes, there remains a serious problem with the gradual attrition of farmers from the land. The main driver for this is not predominantly agricultural, but rather is associated with exceptionally high housing prices creating a process of farm divisions as farms are split into housing, buildings and land for sale in separate lots. Loss of farmers from grazing puts pressure on those remaining as gathering and other cooperative tasks are made more difficult and hastens the potential arrival of ‘ranching’ systems. In addition to the social and economic impacts on local rural communities, this change from traditional to ranching systems is likely to influence the ability of farmers to manage the land for the provision of environmental public goods.

This study provides evidence that increasing subsidization through agri-environment schemes may be ineffective in halting rural decline – in some upland areas at least. Without measures to curb the division of the farms and enhance the ability of hill

farmers to attract successors it is likely that traditional co-operative hill farming practices in the region will not continue. Thus, while agricultural policy works towards one objective, unless policy is targeted at a much more local level and allows for more rural community involvement, it is possible that environmentally and socially important areas of the countryside may be affected despite high environmental subsidy levels. Importantly, the study shows that an isolated CAP can not solve complex problems of rural areas. Instead, an integrated rural policy needs to go beyond the scope of the present English Rural Development Plan (ERDP) and CAP and to consider other policy areas such as local planning policy and regional economic development programmes. We discuss, in this context, the opportunities and conflicts for developing a broader and more integrated ERDP, in particular with respect to forthcoming rural policy changes such as a new Rural Development Regulation in 2007.