

Coalfields regeneration: dealing with the consequences of industrial decline

During the 1990s, coal mining employment collapsed dramatically. This removed at a stroke the economic rationale of coalfield places, ruptured their cultural and social fabric, and precipitated a deep sense of loss. Katy Bennett and Ray Hudson (Durham University) and Huw Beynon (Cardiff University) have evaluated the impacts of both regeneration policies and community initiatives in these areas. The study found:

- f** The coalfields are unique in character. Neither rural nor urban, their run-down housing estates are like the worst urban areas while their isolation is comparable to rural areas.
- f** There has been some positive change. Much of the dereliction caused by mining has been cleared up, parts of the built environment have been renovated and some new jobs have been attracted.
- f** Nevertheless, the coalfields remain blighted by severe socio-economic problems, relating to unemployment, long-term sickness and poverty. Poverty affects some of those in employment because new jobs tend to be low paid.
- f** Community initiatives have helped to create alternative forms of work and provide services that both the government and market fail to deliver. While not a substitute for well-paid jobs in the formal economy, they have enhanced people's quality of life.
- f** There has been some support for community initiatives from national government and the European Union. However, requirements for partnership working, competition and constant innovation can be difficult obstacles for community initiatives.
- f** Different types of community initiatives have evolved depending upon the characteristics of the place and the people involved in their instigation. Their success, relationships with other community groups and aspirations are conditioned by those involved.
- f** The 'success' of many community initiatives extends beyond quantifiable criteria that account for numbers of jobs and training places created. It often hinges, less tangibly, upon their ability to help individuals to feel included, needed and valuable in places that feel they are no longer of use.
- f** The researchers conclude that the lesson from the coalfields is that places subject to restructuring need strong support from national government and EU programmes. This support needs to be formulated, implemented and managed to help local people use their own creativity and talents to play a role in the regeneration of their distinct places. Programmes for regeneration need to recognise the specific requirements of individual places.

Background

The coalfields are unique. They developed rapidly to power the nation's industrialisation and often became places primarily dependent on a single industry and cohesive communities. Their experiences of decline are also unique, with massive and rapid job losses damaging their social fabric. In the 1990s, it became clear that in many coalfields this decline was terminal. A recent report from CLG Energy Consultants forecasts that two-thirds of the remaining collieries could close by the end of 2001, leaving a deep mining industry of five or six collieries employing perhaps 4,000 men. As a result, the coalfields have become places with poor infrastructure, high levels of ill-health and unemployment.

This study was supported as part of the JRF's programme for action in rural areas. Often thought to have been idyllic rural places prior to the sinking of their pits, the coalfields underwent massive physical, social and cultural transformation with rapid population growth to provide workforces for the mining industry. Despite pit closures, former coalfields continue to be affected by their association with the mining industry, bear no relation to the type of rural place they are sometimes thought to have been and are unlike any other sort of place. They contain individuals who identify their places through their particular industrial heritage and compare the problems they face to both urban and rural areas. Despite this, some rural areas can learn from the experiences of former coalfields, particularly those that contain isolated settlements previously dependent on a single industry and now poorly provided with job opportunities, services and facilities. This study has wider lessons for other places looking to restructure and improve their future prospects.

Policy responses: success and limitations

National government and the European Union have responded to the problems of coalfield decline with a range of policies. These have had a few positive impacts, attracting some new employment and improving built and natural environments. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition that existing 'top down' formal sector approaches have not so far led to the successful regeneration of the coalfields. The work of agencies like British Coal Enterprises has not been as successful as claimed in terms of training, employment creation and new

business start-ups. There has been little growth of small and medium-sized enterprises in the former coalfields and, of such new business, very few have been in (high tech) manufacturing.

Persistent economic inactivity, poverty and related problems continue to characterise these places. Job losses in other sectors and cuts in local government expenditure have exacerbated these problems. Reduced employment opportunities and diminished service and facility provision compound the marginalisation of coalfield communities in relation to the formal economy and other places.

Attracting investment in manufacturing or in service activities, such as call centres, does not necessarily alleviate problems of poverty. Often the prime attraction for such companies is the availability of large numbers of people in search of work. Companies are able to recruit rigorously and selectively to build up workforces of people willing to work flexibly for low wages, frequently in non-unionised workplaces. Work is often part-time and sometimes temporary when factories close soon after opening. Women regularly take up the new jobs; this can create problems within mining communities with a strong tradition of men supporting their families.

In short, little progress has been made in rebuilding the productive capacity of the former coal districts around new economic activities. As a result, high rates of unemployment, low rates of economic activity, low wages and the environmental and social problems that stem from poverty remain. Past approaches have had at best partial and uneven effects in transforming the former coalfields.

Developments in recent policy

Current government thinking seeks to target the UK's most deprived places through encouraging partnership working, community empowerment and area-based initiatives that prompt 'joined up' approaches to the needs of local places. These initiatives have begun to put in place the machinery to effect coalfield regeneration but have not provided new money to support this work. The additional £354 million that the Government announced for coalfields over a three year period is less than the sum accrued to the Treasury through the pensions of British Coal employees. Added to this, the restructuring of EU regional aid concentrates greater resources on fewer areas. The criteria currently used in the allocation of funding restrict the eligibility of former coalfield places.

The plethora of policies and programmes makes a confusing and complex context for the regeneration of former coalfield areas. Locally based projects must be aware of all these because government agenda focuses attention on "involving communities, not parachuting in solutions" (SEU (1998, 10)). SRB Round 5 "wishes to see" up to 10 per cent of its resources spent on community capacity building so that every former coalfield community is able "to take an active role in a coalfields Regeneration Partnership" (DETR, 1998, 13). Yet power is still held at the apex of spatial and political hierarchies, even at the level of Regional Development Agencies that are set up to respond to government agendas rather than to regional and local needs. Communities have not been given a leading role on partnerships. Partnerships and community working are less about devolving power and resources to places to regenerate themselves on their own terms and are more about devolving to them the responsibility for their regeneration.

Whilst policies and programmes recognise that local needs differ, there is still a lack of understanding of the needs of diverse former coalfield areas. Although they share a common heritage, they have unique problems. Old divisions continue, such as those based on union membership, but new divisions have emerged, for example, along generational lines and according to where people live.

Although the Government espouses the importance of linking social and physical regeneration to economic development for sustainable growth, the emphasis is still on economic development. Quantifiable outputs, such as numbers entering into training and jobs, are taken as the key measures of success. Community sector initiatives often cannot be judged against such measures. In some places 'success' needs to be measured in small steps. In situations in which the simple act of engaging with individuals is difficult, targets defined in terms of formal employment often seem impossible ones. One community initiative, for example, helped a mother to keep her child after one to one 'Life Skills' training on parenting, basic nutrition and other matters.

Community initiatives and alternative routes to regeneration?

A wide range of community initiatives, instigated by diverse individuals and organisations (by 'social entrepreneurs' moving into areas, by local residents, or by statutory agencies) provide various alternative

kinds of work and services in marginalised former coalfield places. Community initiatives range from a women's centre on a deprived housing estate offering a variety of services to a project initiated by members of a creative writing group who have managed to generate jobs, services and facilities in a village that had lost these. Often they do so against the odds, working in unfavourable circumstances and with little policy or funding support. Funding frameworks encourage competition between community initiatives and result in conflicts over entitlement to funding. Community initiatives looking to expand and develop outreach programmes can anger small, locally based projects, which argue that they lose out financially because funders are unlikely to support two projects working in the same postcode area.

The focus on economic development also means that funding criteria demand initiatives be self-sustaining. Community development work requires different skills to those required for self-sustainability. Many of those involved in community initiatives have agendas that are in conflict with those of funders because they have skills for community development work and not business start-ups. They work with people and make them feel valuable and included in places spiralling downwards into decline. Creating businesses in places where people are unable to financially support them is difficult. For this reason, most community initiatives provide facilities and services rather than produce and sell goods. Community initiatives are regularly frustrated by what they see as, at best, bureaucratic indifference.

Not all community initiatives achieve everything that they set out to accomplish. Those most likely to fail tend to be initiated by statutory agencies, and consequently constrained by formal policy frameworks. Community initiatives that are likely to succeed are those most in touch with local communities. However, those who assess the 'success' of community initiatives through quantifiable outputs tend to undervalue their contributions to regeneration and to underestimate the public expenditure savings generated by the work of the community sector. At one meeting to assess the needs of the community in relation to EU Objective 1 funding, a representative of a community initiative pointed out that community development work meant more than job creation and preparing people for work. It also teaches people to work as part of a team and to feel involved and needed. Projects such as the Arts Factory, Ollerton and Boughton Women's Centre, Cynon Valley Credit Union, Blaenllechau's

BELL Centre, Bryncynon's Development Centre, the Boughton based Furniture Project and Valleys Furniture Recycling, provide warm and friendly atmospheres that encourage people to meet up, talk and feel included.

Local people involved in community initiatives often said that their problems were not due to lack of capacity but to a lack of resources and funding to fully realise that capacity. They did not see themselves as incapacitated but did express a need for adequate resources to allow them to realise those capacities.

Most of these lessons from the coalfields resonate strongly with the experiences of those involved in rural regeneration in Britain. Similar approaches, of area-based partnerships and challenge funding, characterise rural development policy and the criticisms arising from the coalfields experience are apposite. Funding frameworks and performance indicators hamper the regeneration of places. The same points apply to many urban areas.

Conclusions

Coalfield areas remain in need of strong support from national government and EU programmes for social and economic regeneration to alleviate, if not wholly eliminate, ongoing problems of unemployment, poverty, ill-health and social dislocation. These are not simply marginal areas but home to around five per cent of the British population.

Nevertheless, the researchers conclude that formal 'top down' regeneration programmes alone will not successfully regenerate these communities. The gaps they leave, however, can be filled to some extent by 'bottom up' community initiatives that provide alternative forms of socially useful work and services in deprived and marginalised places.

While government and EU policies support such initiatives to a degree, the ways in which these policies are formulated, implemented and managed can also constrain initiatives. Problems arise because of requirements for partnership working, competitive bidding régimes, short-term and limited-life funding, and consequent difficulties in securing ongoing funding. These characteristics all limit the extent to which local people can use their creativity and talents to regenerate their own communities.

Although coalfield places are unique, their experiences of dealing with the consequences of industrial decline have wider relevance. Both urban and rural areas, especially places witnessing the decline and demise of an industry upon which they were once reliant, might learn from their experiences. Places subject to restructuring need a supportive financial and policy context which allows local people to successfully contribute to their regeneration. This supportive context must also be flexible to recognise the particular needs of individual places.

About the study

This research examined the range of regeneration strategies in coalfield areas and people's views of their successes and limitations. As well as examining a wide range of policy documents and official statistics, it involved extensive primary fieldwork and in-depth interviews. The in-depth investigation of community initiatives focused on two contrasting areas: Rhondda Cynon Taff (in South Wales) and Mansfield (in North Nottinghamshire). In these two areas, participant observation allowed detailed involvement in and access to over 30 local community initiatives (as well as more formal interviews with key activists).

How to get further information

The full report, *Coalfields regeneration: Dealing with the consequences of industrial decline* by Katy Bennett, Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 224 1, price £12.95).