

Labour Mobility in Remote Communities

Understanding the various processes and complexities that contribute to labour market mobility is the very essence of unlocking the economic potential of these areas.

The 3 papers presented in the Labour Market Mobility session provided the Energy From the Edge Conference with a rich vein of experienced academic research combined with a wealth of practical examples.

Professor Ottar Brox's "Challenges and Opportunities for Sparsely Populated Areas" uses the example of Norwegian rural communities in the post second world war era to speak of different forms of labour market mobility. He illustrates this paper with examples of people resisting the temptations to move from rural areas, largely due to a sense of place and basic agrarian security. In some cases industry moved to these remoter places to use spare labour capacity, thereby reversing some of the population shifts to more urban areas. Of course there was also the attraction of cheap power in many rural areas of Norway. This attitude of the importance of community has in more recent years served to transfer of skills into the oil industry without resulting in significant population movement.

Professor Godfrey Baldacchino's paper "Population Dynamics from Peripheral Regions" concentrates on the attitudes of mind that people have in thinking about depopulation and inward migration. Using material from Prince Edward Island, he strongly advises that communities and authorities in remoter places need to be more receptive to the attitudes of incoming people. The ways in which the global community are connecting with remoter places are changing and remoter societies need to be able to understand how to live with an increasingly more mobile world population. Places that can adapt to indigenous population being replaced by inwardly mobile and sometimes wealthier people will be able to survive much better than places that are averse to receiving new people with fresh ideas.

Mr Andrew Blackadder's paper, "Challenges Facing Remote Rural Labour Markets" provides a great deal of detail on the labour market dynamics of the Highlands of Scotland and concentrates particularly on the Shetland situation. He calls for better co-ordination of effort in preparing policies that can tackle the barriers of mobility. This includes having the knowledge to plan properly (a range of research work is suggested), investing in skills improvement and training, modern infrastructure, promotional campaigns and consideration of some incentives for returning graduates. A detailed part of the paper concentrated on ways that the Highlands and Islands can connect better with foreign migrant workers to foster a better chance of integration into remoter communities.

In addition to these 3 valuable papers the Conference also heard from Mr Yasutaka Matsuo from Senshu University in Japan who addressed an earlier session on "Current Local Life Support Policies by the Local Governments under the New National Land Sustainability Plan". Mr Matsuo's paper spoke

of the statistical centralised approach of the Japanese authorities, which recognises only population numbers when deciding how regions are structured and governed. This top down approach has led to the deliberate erosion of regional identity with resulting severe consequences on the economic and social choices of remoter populations. Consequently, young people are much more likely to move to the urban areas and do not value their rural background.

Summary

At the centre of ensuring that remoter places retain population, have jobs and the labour supply to drive the economy forward, the people in these communities need to retain a confidence in and a commitment to their community. However, this commitment must be outward looking and has to be receptive to change. Communities that are not receptive to new ideas will not attract new people to replace those that decide to leave. In order to achieve the confidence that people must have to stay in remoter places, decision making on the services that affect these communities must be as decentralised as possible.