



In danger of co-option: Examining how austerity and central control shape community woodlands in Scotland

Kavita Sharma^{a,*}, Jon Hollingdale^b, Gretchen Walters^c, Marc J. Metzger^d, Jaboury Ghazoul^a

^a Ecosystem Management, Department of Environmental Systems Science, ETH Zürich, Universitätstrasse 16, 8092 Zurich, Switzerland

^b Independent/ unaffiliated, Forres, Moray, IV36 2SP Scotland

^c Institute of Geography and Sustainability, Faculty of Geosciences and Environment, University of Lausanne, 3612 Géopolis, Quartier Mouline, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

^d Centre for Sustainable Forests and Landscapes, School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh, 1 Drummond Street, Edinburgh EH8 9XP, Scotland, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Community forestry
Scotland
Austerity
Rescaling
Community asset transfer

ABSTRACT

Community ownership and management of land has gained prominence in environmental policy discussions, especially within land restoration debates. Within Scotland, community land ownership is promoted as a means to give communities greater say over land use decisions, receive a greater share of the benefits from land, and help deliver a just transition to the government of Scotland's net-zero targets. These goals are supported by legal mechanisms that enable appropriately constituted community bodies to buy or lease erstwhile private and public assets to deliver a wide range of social, environmental, and economic objectives. Drawing on interviews and secondary data, we inductively explore the transfer of public forests to communities in Scotland, examining the context of these transfers, the challenges in acquiring and managing forests, and broader implications of asset transfers for community empowerment. We find that community woodland groups operate in a political context shaped by public sector austerity, increasingly stepping in to provide services that local governments have withdrawn from. Our distinct contribution is to demonstrate the ways in which formalization and standardization can have a centralizing effect on place-based initiatives. Both these trends, we argue, can lead to uneven outcomes for community groups. As communities increasingly become part of global environmental agendas, we argue for a critical political geography of 'community empowerment', one that pays attention to the relationship between political processes and uneven outcomes.

1. Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed interest from governments and international organizations towards greater community engagement and participation (Rofe, 2016; United Nations, 2019). Community ownership and management of natural resources, forests in particular, has gained prominence in environmental policy discussions, especially within the recent push for land restoration (Erbaugh et al., 2020; Mansourian, 2018; UN, 2019; WEF, 2022). Much of the literature and policy discourse around community however, treats the emergence of community organizations normatively, as a positive advance in governance, or positions communities in opposition to the state, where resources provided, or powers granted by the state enable or hinder communities (Banner, 2002; Berkes, 2010; Blaikie, 2006; Hendriks et al., 2013; The World Bank, 2022).

In this paper, we turn our attention to the emphasis on communities to address social and environmental challenges through ownership and or management of forests in Scotland. We focus on one of the mechanisms used by countries to decentralize or rescale forest management from the national level to communities - the transfer of public or state forests to community ownership and management. This strategy is being actively pursued by countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe to attain socio-economic and environmental benefits, environmental justice, and democratization (De Royer et al., 2018; Dobrynin et al., 2020; Munyanduki et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2023). As opposed to top-down, centralised forest ownership and management, community management is deemed to be more sustainable and responsive to local needs (Arts & de Koning, 2017; Capistrano & Colfer, 2005; Gauld, 2000; Ostrom, 1990). Critics, however, have examined the rise of community forestry as a response to damages of neoliberal policies such as reduction of state

* Corresponding author at: Department of Environmental Systems Science, ETH Zürich, CHN G72, Universitätstrasse 16, 8092 Zürich Switzerland.

E-mail address: kavita.sharma@usys.ethz.ch (K. Sharma).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103771>

Received 1 November 2022; Received in revised form 19 March 2023; Accepted 3 May 2023

Available online 12 May 2023

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capacities, wider public disinvestment, and loss of industry (McCarthy, 2005; Painter and Pande, 2014). To assess whether these new arrangements alleviate or exacerbate inequity, or how socio-political forces shape them, requires close attention to concrete instances of rescaling in specific contexts (Brenner, 2009).

In Scotland, Community Woodlands (CW) are defined as woodlands partly or completely controlled, either through ownership, management, or lease arrangements, through a community group (Community Woodlands Association, 2022; Logan et al., 2021). Since the first community-led woodland acquisition in 1987, over 100 communities across Scotland have bought woodlands from private and public land-owners to deliver a range of objectives. The Scottish Government has sought to institutionalise this process, establishing legal mechanisms to facilitate community ownership, lease, and/or management of public forests. These include, *inter alia*, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

To date, research on CW in Scotland has focused on woodland typologies, emphasized their potential for social enterprise (Ambrose-Oji et al., 2015; Lawrence et al., 2020), their ability to meet objectives such as well-being, quantitative outputs (e.g. number of trees planted), and inclusion (Ambrose-Oji et al., 2015; Bell et al., 2003; Logan et al., 2021; Ward Thompson et al., 2019). These studies, we argue, treat CW as entities operating separately from the state, *albeit* thinly connected via resources and grants. Little attention has been paid to the political context within which CW emerge, and how they themselves may be part of wider state strategies and rescaling of state functions. We try to address this gap by tracing the evolution of CW in Scotland over time, broadening our analysis to include wider dependencies that CW groups may have with the state, including local and central governments.

Through interviews with representatives of CW groups and other organisations (both governmental and non-profit) that work with communities on public asset acquisition, we inductively explored the experience of communities in acquiring and managing woodlands. We asked them about the skills needed for woodland acquisition and management, day to day operational challenges, and long-term sustainability. We limited our study to forests acquired from the public estate, in order to shed light on the wider strategy of transferring state forests to communities. We find that CW groups operate in a political context shaped by public sector austerity, increasingly stepping in to provide services local governments have withdrawn from. Our distinct contribution is to demonstrate how formalization and standardization of community ownership have a centralizing effect on place-based initiatives. Contrary to promoting local empowerment, an increase in regulations for establishing community groups and accessing public grants has enforced the role of national institutions as gatekeepers. We demonstrate how these trends of austerity and central control can lead to uneven outcomes for communities. Our research therefore underscores the importance of political context and history in understanding both the mechanisms and spatial consequences of transferring public forests to communities.

2. Background

2.1. Neoliberalism, rescaling, and localism

Critical approaches to community come from schools of political economy, development studies, and political geography (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999, 2001; Blaikie, 2006; Jessop, 2002; Macmillan & Townsend, 2006; Rose, 2000. Agrawal and Gibson (2001) problematize the understanding of 'community' as an organic whole, territorially fixed, and homogenous social structure. Instead, they argue that community is an interactive, changing structure of multiple actors and institutions with divergent interests (ibid). Piers Blaikie (2006), in his study of community based natural resource management in Malawi and Botswana describes how theoretical aspects of community, such as 'sustainable', 'small-scale', and 'local' are leveraged by institutions such as the government, international donor agencies, and financial institutes

to provide openings for new political entrepreneurs, new rents, and control of natural resources.

Political geographers have argued that the emergence of community in politics is not explained by growth in democracy or governmental self-criticism, rather, it is a result of wider strategies of state restructuring (Chorianopoulos & Tselepi, 2020; Geddes, 2006; Rose, 1996). Scholars have framed this as a rescaling of the nation state, where state functions such as fiscal policy, labour regulation, and welfare provisioning are moved to other scales or levels of government – upwards to regional blocs such as the European Union, downwards to community groups and local authorities, and outwards to non-state actors (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Castree, 2008; Cox, 2009; Fletcher, 2010; Jessop, 2013; Raco, 2014a; Raco, 2014b; Reed & Bruyneel, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2004). According to Brenner (2004) rescaling does not imply a weakening or a retreat of the nation state, rather, it can lead to new policy arrangements and configurations of state power. For example, in their research on the rescaling of transport governance in Scotland, Mackinnon and Shaw (2010) demonstrate how the central government reinforced its power over newly created decentralized transport partnerships through prescribing stringent processes for their formalization.

Furthermore, researchers have argued that state withdrawal from state functions, such as welfare or public investment, can lead to spatially uneven consequences. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, European welfare states ostensibly aimed to standardize welfare arrangements and spread industrialization processes evenly across the surface of the national territory, post 1980 neoliberalism engendered inter-locality competition for resources and widening disparity between places (Brenner, 2004; Scarpa, 2016). Peck (2002) illustrates this for the UK, where regulatory functions and administrative procedures for social assistance have been downscaled to private companies, charities, and communities. This has led to local experimentation, discretion, and circumstance specific interventions, leading to spatial variability in welfare outcomes (ibid). Studies have also highlighted how state withdrawal in welfare can exacerbate poverty in spatially uneven forms. Using the case of Great Yarmouth in the UK, Barford and Gray (2022) demonstrate ways in which budgetary cuts to welfare, local public services, and funding for charities can diminish care where it is most needed.

In the UK context, community governance in politics has been linked to New Labour's 'Third Way Politics', and the Coalition Government's 'Big Society' agenda (Blair, 1998; Brownill & Carpenter, 2009; Cameron, 2010; Peck, 2001; Raco & Flint, 2001; Rose, 2000). Where charity organizations and community groups acquire responsibility of state functions, but instead of focusing on a redistributionist agenda, they focus on inclusion, empowerment, and entrepreneurialism (Fuller & Geddes, 2008; Murtagh & Boland, 2019; Peck & Tickell, 1995, 2002). In this sense, 'localism', or the emergence of the third sector in service delivery and governance can convey an understanding of the state "as a (political) process in motion" (MacKinnon & Shaw, 2010; Peck, 2001, p. 449). After the 2008–09 financial crisis, austerity has been a main organizing principle of governments across Europe (Besussi, 2015), and this shift witnessed an intensification of welfare cuts, and outsourcing of public sector duties to the third sector in the UK (Baines & Cunningham, 2015; Donald et al., 2014). Brenner (2009) argues that these new scalar arrangements do not happen on a blank slate, they occur through a layering process, where new rescaling strategies may collide with existing institutional geographies.

Similar to the UK, the voluntary sector is an important focus of Scottish social policy, featuring in one of the first Scottish parliamentary debates in September 1999, (Fyfe et al., 2006; Woolvin et al., 2015). With strong parallels to Third Way Politics and Big Society, The Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan states "communities doing things for themselves can sometimes be the best way of delivering change" (Scottish Government, 2009). Following the onset of austerity, the Christie Commission undertook an independent review of public services and

identified the need to maximize scarce resources to provide services in “partnership, involving local communities, their democratic representatives, and the third sector” (APS Group Scotland, 2011; Woolvin et al., 2015).

An important thread running through localism in the UK, and post devolution, in Scotland, is that rather than focusing on the role of communities to develop policies themselves, the above agendas highlight the role of communities in delivering public services (Evans et al., 2013). A localism in which responsibilities, rather than power or resources, are devolved (Stoker, 2012). Wolch (1990) coined the term ‘shadow state’ to describe voluntary organizations charged with welfare service responsibilities, but remain under state control because of funding and regulatory regimes (Milligan & Fyfe, 2004).

2.2. Community Asset Transfers

Community engagement in governance can take various forms. This includes greater inputs from communities in design of public policies, delivering services previously delivered by the state, and taking over non-statutory functions of local governments. (Hall et al., 2020; Head, 2007). An important mechanism for community engagement in governance within the UK has been Community Asset Transfer (CAT).

CAT is defined as a process that allows a community organisation to take over publicly owned land or buildings for less than market value to achieve a local social, economic or environmental benefit (DTAS, 2022; Nichols et al., 2020). Disposal of public assets has been the subject of wider critique by scholars of neoliberalism, where public assets are no longer considered common goods, but as financial assets to be realized (or surplus to be shed), leading to a leaner and more efficient state (Christophers, 2019; Thompson, 2020). This paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of work on public asset transfer to communities (Emejulu, 2015; Fraser, 2020b), as opposed to the transfer of public assets to the private sector, which is well documented for water, transport, energy, and land (Baber, 2010; Baker & Freestone, 2012; Bakker, 2013; Christophers, 2019; Gibb et al., 1996).

Empirical studies of communities taking over non-statutory public assets (e.g. museums, swimming pools, libraries, etc.) have framed CAT as a result of public sector austerity (Fraser, 2020a; Nichols et al., 2020; Parnell et al., 2019). Nuancing this framing, scholars have focused on the agency of communities in being able to leverage CAT for empowerment, *albeit* conditionally. Nichols et al. (2015), in their review of eight facilities in England (pools, libraries and sport centres), argue that asset transfers can empower communities, but question whether these organizations can be independent, given that they depend on private and public sector to meet capital costs. In their research on the voluntary welfare sector in Glasgow, Fyfe and Milligan (2003) demonstrate that dependence of voluntary organizations on state funding can pressure volunteer organizations to be bureaucratic extensions of the state, and undermine their distinctiveness (from state and market institutions) and legitimacy. In a subsequent paper on the voluntary sector in Glasgow, Milligan and Fyfe (2004), use a geographical approach to emphasize the role that *place* (our italics) can play in contributing to networks of access and inclusion to funding opportunities, providing insights into the uneven distribution of voluntary sector activities.

In this paper, we examine the process of acquisition (or management), and ownership of public forests by communities. We provide insights into some of the challenges that communities face in acquiring and managing these forests. Our work is both informed by the wider literature on rescaling and neoliberalism, but also pays attention to the context in which these developments take place, and implications thereof.

2.3. Community woodlands in Scotland

In Scotland, greater engagement of communities in the creation, management and use of forests and woodlands is believed to be an

important mechanism through which multiple benefits of climate mitigation, biodiversity, employment creation, and community empowerment can be achieved (Hollingdale, 2022; Scottish Government, 2019, p. 35). The Community Woodlands Association (CWA), a membership organization for CW groups in Scotland, estimates that there are 200 woodland groups in Scotland, with over half owning their woodlands, and the remainder, leasing or partnering with other organizations (Community Woodlands Association, 2022).

To understand the political context of CW, we highlight the policy legacy of disposals of the national forest estate initiated by the UK Conservative government, and policies for land reform initiated by post devolution Labour-led administrations, continued by successive governments in Scotland.

Prior to devolution, under the Forestry Act of 1981, the UK wide Forestry Commission (FC) was empowered to dispose plantations and land to support private enterprise and reduce public expenditure (Christophers, 2019; Hurditch, 1992). By the end of 1984, 25,000 ha of forests and planting land had been sold in the UK, with 17,000 ha in Scotland, mostly to institutional investors and companies (Mather & Murray, 1986). In 1999, the ownership of Scotland’s national forests was devolved to Scottish ministers, and the disposals policy continued under the then Scottish Executive. In 2005, the Scottish Government introduced a repositioning strategy for Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) to sell less valuable and remote forests, to acquire land to create woodlands near towns. This was to provide recreation, amenity, and restore brownfield and contaminated coalfield sites. Since May 2021, Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS), the fully-devolved Scottish agency responsible for management of the public forest estate, follows an asset management approach, selling assets that are “underperforming or that are liabilities”, with the income contributing to land acquisition (Forestry and Land Scotland, 2022a; Forestry and Land Scotland, 2021b).

Whereas several of these disposal sales went to private actors, a small number were transferred to communities. As part of the 57000 ha sold under the repositioning strategy, less than 5000 ha of sales ended up with communities (Forestry and Land Scotland, 2022b; McLeod, 2015; Wong et al., 2015). Early community acquisitions such as Abriachan (1998), and community management of public forests such as Laggan (1998) and Cairnhead (1999) were done without formal provisions, but lobbying by community groups, and policy reforms by successive Scottish administrations have since formalized community acquisition processes (Bryden & Geisler, 2007; Laible, 2008; Lawrence et al., 2009, 2021; Ritchie & Haggith, 2005; Scottish Government, 2021a). These transfers have increasingly come under policy instruments for land reform, community empowerment, and climate change (Forestry and Land Scotland, 2022b; Scottish Parliament, 2015; The Scottish Parliament, 2019; Yang, 2020).

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 introduced the Community Right to Buy, where appropriately constituted community bodies can register interest in (private or public) land and can buy that land at market value if it comes up for sale. Following the Land Reform Act 2003, the National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS) was introduced in 2005 by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS). This allowed community bodies the right to buy land or forests which FCS intended to dispose, before it was put on the open market (classified as “surplus land”), and to request ownership or lease of national forest estate land that had not been put up for sale (classified as “community acquisition”). Approximately 4200 ha were transferred to communities through the NFLS (Wong et al., 2015). Of this, 1183 ha were community acquisition, i.e. initiated by the community and the remaining 3000 ha were surplus land disposals (Forestry and Land Scotland, 2022b) and (McLeod, 2015).

In 2015, the Land Reform Review Group recommended that the Scottish Government develop a clear policy framework for the disposal of public property to appropriate local community bodies. This was to include an integrated and focused approach to dispose forests for less than market value, if that was in the public interest (Reid, 2015). The

Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 introduced statutory provisions for Asset Transfer from Scottish public authorities, including FCS, who established a CAT Scheme (CATS) in January 2017. At present, this is the main mechanism for the transfer of public forests to communities. Approximately 536 ha have been purchased by community bodies through CATS (to April 2022) with a further 46 ha leased. Local Authorities, National Health Service (NHS), and other public agencies also dispose of land, woodlands, and other assets, and are subject to CAT provisions, but have contributed to a very small proportion of woodlands acquired from the public sector.

Both NFLS and CATS lay out various eligibility criteria for community bodies. They must be non-profit-distributing, incorporated as a Company, a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organization, or a Community Benefit Society. As a voluntary scheme, the NFLS allowed communities flexibility regarding eligibility criteria and timescales, assessing applications on a case-by-case basis (Forestry Commission Scotland, 2010). CATS, as a statutory mechanism has greater standardization in terms of assessing applications but allows community bodies to request a discount against market value, based on additional public benefit to be delivered. Assessments are based on benefits (weighted at 50%), viability (30%), the extent of community support (10%), and management of national forests and land (10%) (Forestry and Land Scotland, 2021b).

Most community asset acquisitions are financed by the publicly funded Scottish Land Fund, initially established in 2000. Other common funding sources include donations, crowdfunding, and charitable trusts. Some communities have financed buyouts by borrowing against future profits or selling their forest management rights. For example, the Sleat Community Trust, and the South West Mull and Iona Development Trust, took out loans secured against profits from future timber harvesting. The Colintrave and Glendaruel Development Trust raised funds for acquisition by entering a 99-year lease covering 80% of Stronafian forest with a private forest management company in 2013. Alternatively, communities may work in partnership with other organisations. The 2016 acquisition of the Loch Arkaig forests (1096 ha of FCS surplus land) was funded by the Woodland Trust in an arrangement under which the community owns 55 ha, and inputs into the management of the remaining 1040 ha owned by The Woodland Trust.

There are also novel models developing where communities have used natural capital markets and engaged in contracts with carbon brokers or NGOs to receive grants, in exchange for carbon credits for planting trees or restoration (MacPherson et al., 2021). For example, in a first of its kind, a recent transfer of private land to a community, the Langholm buyout in 2021, was partly funded by “the Woodland Trust who offered capital purchase funds in exchange for the rights to future carbon credits from native woodland planting” (Ibid, page 59). To meet operational costs, CW can be self-sustainable by selling timber or firewood. The community can also obtain funding for operations and projects such as community gardens, forest schools, and men’s sheds (garden sheds for men to use gardening tools and socialize), from government grants, windfarm, or hydropower development, if applicable.

3. Methods

In-person discussions over the course of 2019–2021 informed our research objectives. We spoke to organizations engaged in forest management in Scotland, and through attendance at CWA annual conferences, meetings hosted by Scottish Land Commission, Community Land Scotland, conferences such as Poverty in Scotland 2021, and Scottish Land and Estates conference (2019, 2021). These discussions highlighted the role of CW to address land reform and net-zero agendas of the government, but at the same time, focused on the lack of funding and support for community organizations more generally. We wanted to situate these conversations within wider structural reforms in Scotland – reorganizing of public land holdings based on cost efficiency concerns, austerity related cutbacks to local authorities, and increased emphasis

on communities to deliver services.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with CW groups created through CATS, NFLS, or transfers by other public bodies. At present, around 40 communities own their woodlands (from transfer by public bodies), and 23 lease or manage them in partnership with public bodies (Community Woodlands Association, 2022). The majority of these are from FLS, and others include local authorities, NHS, Ministry of Defence (MOD), and NatureScot, making a population of 63 CW. We contacted 45 of these over email and Facebook messenger (some did not have websites or publicly available emails and used Facebook instead). Representatives from 16 CW groups responded, and 15 interviews were conducted and used in the analysis (ca 25% of the population) (Table 1). One CW group did not respond further to follow up emails to set up an interview. Another 8 interviews were conducted with other informants (OI) from organizations such as FLS, Local Council CAT teams, DTAS, Scottish Land Commission, Forest Policy Group, and independent consultants who work with communities on asset acquisition, (Table 1).

Questions focused on the reasons for the community to acquire or lease part of the national forest estate, skills needed for acquisition and day to day management of the woodland, challenges, and long-term sustainability issues. Interviews were conducted over the phone or Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic between October 2021 and March 2022. Interviews lasted between 35 min to 117 min, and were transcribed using *otter.ai*, cleaned, and inductively open-coded in QRS NVIVO (Chandra & Shang, 2019). Our process sits within reflexive thematic analysis, where themes are produced by organizing codes around a relative ‘central organising concept’ that the researcher interprets from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). Following this approach, we repeatedly examined and compared interview transcripts to identify common issues. We categorized or open-coded (Kyngäs, 2020) the quotes in QRS NVIVO as “land prices”, “skills and knowledge”, and “funding sources”. We then re-examined the transcripts and codes, and derived themes reported as part of our results such as “local council austerity”, “uneven distribution of skills”, and “trade-offs” etc. We did not use autocode functions, because computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) is not reliable for analysing semi-structured interview data, as the “existence of multiple synonyms” in the text may lead to erroneous analyses (Welsh, 2002). We therefore analysed the text manually and used NVIVO to organize quotes alongside their respective codes and themes.

We used documents such as case studies on CW groups (their history, composition, success factors etc.) produced by Forest Research and Forest Policy Group, parliamentary discussions, questions and answers, written submission by local authorities, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) reports and submissions, Scottish Land Commission reports, and Scottish Government Reports to triangulate the findings. The process of triangulation was to confirm the themes identified through our analysis of interview transcripts.

This work was undertaken under ETH Zürich’s ethics guidelines and confirmed by an approval of the Ethics Commission (EK 2020-N-35). Informed consent was given by all participants at the beginning of each interview.

4. Results and analysis

Eleven of the 15 CW group interviewees were involved in the initial acquisition or management agreement with the respective public body. The woodland groups ranged in age with the oldest group being formed 30 years ago, and the youngest in 2021. In terms of area, the woods range from less than a hectare to about a thousand hectares (Table 1). Ten groups acquired the woodlands to prevent its sale to a private buyer, as part of surplus land disposals or CAT. The rest proactively sought management agreements or ownership. Just under half the woodlands depend solely on grants to fund activities such as forest schools and planting trees, and the rest operate commercial forests or managed their woodlands for firewood and wood fuel. All but five depend entirely on

Table 1
Community woodland groups and informants included in this study (source: interviewees, Scottish government's urban rural classification ([Scottish Government, 2022b](#)), and Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation ([Scottish Government, 2020](#))).

Name	Type	Role of interviewee	Staff	Commercial activity	Non-commercial activity (grant funded or voluntary)	Area of woodland owned or managed by the community [*]	Location ^{**}	SIMD ^{***}	Standalone CW group or part of a larger community trust ^{****}	Mechanism
CW1	Ownership	Chair	Voluntary	Carbon finance	Native tree planting, recreation	0 ha – 20 ha	Remote rural area	3	Part of a larger community trust	Other national body
CW2	Management agreement	Chair	Voluntary	Firewood	Men's sheds, recreation, non-native species control, mental health support, community engagement	0 ha – 20 ha	Accessible rural area	4	Part of a larger community trust	Bespoke management agreement with FLS
CW3	Owned	Secretary	Voluntary	None	Community gardening, mental health support	0 ha – 20 ha	Very remote rural area	2	Standalone CW group	NFLS
CW4	Owned	Former manager	Voluntary	Timber	Native tree planting, heritage, and recreation, community engagement	500 ha – 1000 ha	Remote rural area	4	Part of a larger community trust	NFLS
CW5	Owned	Board member	Part time	None	Recreation	500 ha – 1000 ha	Very remote rural area	3	Part of a larger community trust	NFLS
CW6	Owned	Forest manager	Part time	Timber	Native tree planting, recreation, forest school	20 ha – 100 ha	Accessible rural area	4	Standalone CW group	CAT
CW7	Managed	Long term Volunteer	Voluntary	None	Native tree planting, recreation, nursery school, and local school activities	0 ha – 20 ha	Other urban area	5	Standalone CW group	Other local public body
CW8	Owned	Former Chairman	Voluntary	None	Community gardening, native tree planting	0 ha – 20 ha	Very remote rural area	4	Standalone CW group	NFLS
CW9	Owned	Board member	Voluntary	Firewood, some timber in the short term	Native tree planting, recreation	0 ha – 20 ha	Accessible small towns	3	Part of a larger community trust	CAT
CW10	Leased	Board member	Voluntary	None	Recreation, forest schools	0 ha – 20 ha	Accessible rural area	4	Standalone CW group	Bespoke management agreement with FLS
CW11	Owned	Chair	Voluntary	Christmas trees	Recreation, school activities	20 ha – 100 ha	Accessible rural area	4	Standalone CW group	CAT
CW12	Owned	Forest manager	Part time	Timber, biodiversity finance	Recreation, native tree planting	100 ha – 500 ha	Remote rural area	4	Standalone CW group	NFLS
CW13	Owned	Chairman	Voluntary	None	Riding schools, forest schools, recreation, biodiversity, native tree planting	20 ha – 100 ha	Accessible rural area	4	Standalone CW group	NFLS
CW14	Owned	Board member	Part time	Woodfuel	Summer school and holiday activities, native tree planting	20 ha – 100 ha	Remote rural area	4	Standalone CW group	NFLS
CW15	Owned	Chairman	Part time	Timber	Community hub, recreation, education, and training	20 ha – 100 ha	Remote rural area	3	Standalone CW group	CAT
OI1 – OI8	Other Informants from FLS, Local Council CAT teams, independent consultants who work with communities on asset acquisition, DTAS, Scottish Land Commission and Forest Policy Group.									

^{*} These ranges are in hectares and are provided to maintain anonymity of CW groups interviewed as part of the study.

^{**} These categories are part of the Scottish government urban rural classification. The remoteness and accessibility of the area is determined by population density and drive time to the nearest settlement ([Scottish Government, 2022b](#)).

^{***} The SIMD divides Scotland into 6,976 data zone and categorizes them by deprivation in quintiles ([Scottish Government, 2020](#)). As reported here, SIMD is on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = belonging to 20% of the most deprived data zones, and 5 = belonging to 20% of the least deprived data zones. We also looked up the SIMD for population of 63 woodlands, just one woodland is in SIMD 1, and 10 are located in SIMD 2.

^{****} A standalone community woodland group can be incorporated a Company, a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organization/ trust, or a Community Benefit Society.

volunteers. 10 groups operate as standalone CW groups, while the rest are part of a larger trust that have other activities and assets, such as cafes or heritage buildings. We also used the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) postcode lookup to assess any significant socio-economic differences across our sample. Of our sample of 15, just one registered community body is located in the 40% most deprived data zones in Scotland. We note that there is a debate on whether SIMD can be a reliable indicator due to the dispersed nature of deprivation in rural areas (Clelland & Hill, 2019). We would therefore caution against establishing any correlation or causality between this indicator and our results. We discuss this point further in section 5.

Despite the differences in CW that were interviewed, in terms of size, purpose, and location, there were several cross-cutting issues. First, whereas communities in some instances are filling in areas that the state is withdrawing from, they are also affected by withdrawals in other arenas of service delivery. Second, despite a decentralizing rhetoric of community ownership, there is a centralizing tendency when it comes to skills needed for applying for grants, or even for the management and acquisition of assets. These standards are defined and developed at the national level, and the central government therefore retains power to formalize these groups. Third, while CW are expected to deliver win-win-win outcomes on social, economic, and environmental objectives, our work highlights structural impediments that constrain CW to achieve these goals. Within each of these findings, we also discuss the unevenness of community resources and capacity, and what that means for community empowerment across space. Lastly, we note that while some of our respondents highlighted positive contributions of the woodland to the community and discussed skills and confidence they built up through the process, our study focuses on the challenges CW face. Our results therefore should be understood in the context. We organize these results in sub-sections below.

4.1. Community woodlands and austerity

The transfer of public assets to communities is not only theorized as a result of the roll-back agenda of neoliberal states, but gains momentum under public sector austerity. Austerity, in the form of reduced support available to communities, can further limit the ability of communities to successfully manage and use the public assets, (Findlay-King et al., 2018). In her work on the UK, Bethany Rex (2020) argues that while mechanisms for asset transfer of public museums to community groups existed prior to local government austerity programme (2010–15), financial circumstances of the local government had bearing on the sustainability of such models. The context of disposals and austerity therefore is important to both understand why CW emerge, and the kinds of pressures that wider public sector restructuring can impose on them. While at the national level, FLS continues to dispose land that is “underperforming or that are liabilities” (Forestry and Land Scotland, 2022a), austerity related local council cuts also limit the ability of communities to pursue local causes such as acquisition or management of woodlands. Furthermore, budgetary cutbacks also impact the level of support local authorities can provide community groups, in terms of planning or advice, with communities increasingly having to either outsource or build that knowledge in-house.

4.1.1. Taking over council functions

Interviewees highlighted ways in which austerity or reduction in local government spending can lead to communities taking over those functions. CW group respondents mentioned how they had stepped in to meet some of the non-statutory functions of the local council. These included fundraising for putting up Christmas lights, mowing grass, and clearing ice from pavements. One respondent commented that communities taking over these tasks was taken “for granted” by the council – “I mean, I’ve been in council meetings where they say, well, what more can volunteers do... Well, you mean, what can we do for free?” (CW13). Another respondent framed it as a zero-sum game, where communities

and governments are both service providers, but communities deliver them through a voluntary workforce –.

“You want government to charge more in your local taxes and clean the pavements? Or do you want then to charge less in taxes so that you’ve got more disposable income and then look for volunteers to clear pavements” (CW2)

The response of community organizations, including CW groups, in terms of stepping up to provide support during COVID was highlighted both in our interviews and by a report commissioned by the CWA and Community Land Scotland (Ross, 2020). One informant stated that this demonstrated opportunities for local councils engaging in “partnerships with communities through service level agreements” (OI2) where communities have well-defined contracts to deliver services erstwhile provided by the state. Another informant cautioned against this kind of approach and stated that “there’s a danger of co-optation ... into the sort of infrastructure of the state to a degree” (OI7).

Respondents reflected how council cutbacks in other areas affected the capacity of communities. One respondent discussed the closure of non-statutory facilities such as libraries and toilets, and the impact that can have on communities, and individuals that may want to get involved with the CW –.

“Local communities taking on services from the Highland Council like libraries and ... the big one here is toilets ... the Highland Council closing toilets and communities having to take that on ... what happens to the communities where you’re already at capacity or you don’t have those people? ... there are multiple areas in which communities are kind of being squeezed and ... individuals are being squeezed right now as well... there are a lot of people already involved in a different group and don’t have the capacity to get involved with this one?” (CW14)

It is estimated that between 2006 and 2016, 2,000 toilet facilities were closed in the UK (DTAS, 2021). More widely, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) has drawn attention to the ways in which reduction in core budgets of local councils have led to decreased spending on facilities (COSLA, 2020a). We discuss how budgetary cutbacks have limited the ability of local authorities to support community groups in several ways, next.

4.1.2. Limited support from local councils

Communities can rely on local councils for planning advice, land management expertise, and financial support for activities and programs. Parliamentary discussions have highlighted how austerity related cutbacks to local council budgets can reduce the availability of such support (Scottish Parliament, 2020; The Scottish Parliament, 2018). We found strong resonance of this in our interviews. When asked about the level of support that local councils provide woodlands, several woodlands responded negatively, and connected this to cutbacks, where budgetary allocation is “ring fenced for specific purposes, and the council does not really have a great deal of leeway once it covers its basic costs” (CW8). COSLA has argued that increased ringfencing of budgets limits the ability of councils to use resources across service areas, and services such as maintaining roads, paths, facilities, and community hubs can bear the brunt of budgetary cuts (COSLA, 2019, 2021).

While several respondents believed that their local council was not supportive in planning processes, planning laws and procedures also seem to be a bureaucratic and financial burden for several woodlands, requiring knowledge and skill to navigate. Planning policy and law is a complex area challenging for the Scottish public to engage with (Revell & Dinnie, 2020; Shucksmith, 2010). Furthermore, some recognized that “a community is not going to have knowledge in itself (of) standards for forest certification, the increase in health and safety, ... all sorts of different regulations” (CW4), an issue that councils have also raised (North Lanarkshire Council, n.d.). One respondent from a CW group described how they navigated a planning permission application with the help of a voluntary group member –.

“They (local council) said we’d have to apply for full planning permission (for a shelter), which was going to cost £400, ... But thankfully, the person who’s managing the woodland, who does these things on a professional basis was able to argue that the shelter was ... for working purposes... for the maintenance of the woodland ...and so we did not have to put in a planning application.” (CW1)

Another CW respondent who did not have access to planning expertise, stated that –

“It’s tough to get volunteers ... because life’s too short. Doing battle with the council planning department or FLS, these are not things that you take on lightly. And if you’re not paying someone to do it, it can be tough” (CW13)

Local authorities have also provided written evidence to the parliament stating they cannot provide support to disadvantaged communities, engage with community groups, or commit resources to projects, given the current climate of budget cuts and service reduction (Mundell, 2021). Local authorities have had their core budgets significantly reduced in real terms between 2013/14 and 19/20 (Audit Scotland, 2020), and 10,000 FTE jobs have been lost in local government since 2010/11 (COSLA, 2020b). Specifically related to woodlands, loss of local council tree officers, outdoor rangers, and personnel has reduced the support and advice available to CW groups (Scottish Countryside Rangers Association, 2017; Scottish Parliament, 2020; The Scottish Parliament, 2018). One CW respondent described the implication of staff losses, specifically in the following way –

“Because of the continuing pressure on, well, basically savings, people aren’t willing to fund councils. The personnel in councils get overworked, they’re probably not well paid where they could be, but they’re certainly overworked, poorly staffed, so the timescales of feedback get longer” (CW9).

The ability of CW groups to perform council functions (section 4.1.1.) or be self-sufficient when it comes to navigating planning (section 4.1.2) depended on both the time and skillset of their members, and these are unevenly distributed across communities (Rolfe, 2018); an issue we discuss next.

4.2. ‘Professional’ skills are increasingly required but unevenly distributed

Another common theme across woodland groups that were interviewed was the importance of a particular skillset of people in the community. As the state encourages entrepreneurialism and competition (Brenner, 1999), professional skills become increasingly important for communities to navigate both acquisition and management of woodlands. While practical skills in forestry, such as thinning and harvesting, were valued, skills such as accounting, law, finance, and administration were increasingly part of the “professional turn” (OI3) in community ownership. Relatedly, a review on CAT commissioned by the Scottish Government found that asset transfer request processes were more accessible to communities with sufficient levels of capacity, skills and knowledge (McMillan et al., 2020). We find that differences between communities in terms of capacity are exacerbated under a regime of increasing standardization, high dependence on grants, and importance of building a financial case.

4.2.1. Greater standardization of community ownership

We asked informants who had been working with communities on how the process for community ownership of woodlands had changed recently, as both Scottish Land Fund and Community Empowerment Act prescribe eligibility criteria for communities (Scottish Land Fund, 2021; Scottish Parliament, 2015). One informant stated the following on community ownership, more generally –

“A lot of public bodies have gone very prescriptive into how you purchase that asset from them and have made it more bureaucratic, whereas previously some of them were to say, Right, well, yeah, you want to buy that? We’ll sell it

to you. End of story. Whereas now it’s all right, Empowerment Act, right? We need make sure we fulfil all the expectations of the Act, and that is actually more bureaucratic.” (OI5).

Specifically on public forest acquisition by communities, respondents indicated that there has been greater standardization. Compared to NFLS, CATS requires communities to jump through several additional hoops, which are considered by FLS to be necessary to ensure the “sustainability of projects” (OI3).

This shift towards greater standardization is important to understand both the kinds of skills that are increasingly required within CW groups, and the ways in which, through standardization, there is an element of greater central top-down control over local initiatives. Within the CATS assessment, indicators defined at the central level are being used to assess local initiatives, where some elements of local choice are retained within the constraints of externally set central controls (Heald & Steel, 2018).

4.2.2. Applying for public grants

There is a wide range of public funds available for communities in Scotland. The Big Lottery fund, the Scottish Land Fund, and the Climate Challenge Fund are the largest funding sources for community-based activities (Dinnie & Holstead, 2018). Other government funds include Investing in Communities Fund and the Aspiring Communities Fund (Scottish Government, 2022a). Within the context of climate change, the government also funds a Community Climate Asset Fund to support funding for things such as electric vehicles, bikes, and polytunnels (Keep Scotland Beautiful, 2022).

CW groups recognized that having someone that could understand public grant structures and schemes, including understanding the language, was a critical skill. Several CW group respondents mentioned people on their board or within the community that worked (or continue to work) in public bodies such as NatureScot, Scottish Forestry, or FLS, bringing a particular set of professional skills to the woodland, namely, *“to write stuff that wins approval, say the right things, to know how to write outcomes” (CW1).* As one respondent stated –

“I think the group was well-off, ... because it had people like me who been used to writing grant applications and a lot of these things are answering questions and understanding what the question is getting at. ... making sure questions were answered in boxes according to how many words they wanted.” (CW9)

Whereas some respondents celebrated the fact that they have got “plenty of expertise” (CW13), others lamented the lack thereof. One respondent admitted that they did not apply for certain funds because *“you have to know the language that they use, and we have no experience of that” (CW3).* Additionally, public grants are often short term and output driven (Creamer, 2015), making it difficult for communities that do not have a commercial or regular income to carry out existing projects or management activities. This can put communities without grant application and administrative skills at a disadvantage (Markantoni et al., 2018). Additionally, short, or tight timelines for applications can also advantage community groups that have ready to go plans, or people on standby that can put applications together at a short notice. For example, the recently announced 3 million GBP funding pot for community led development projects was only open for four weeks (Johnson, 2022), giving little time for grant preparation.

4.2.3. Building the financial case

Despite the putative social benefits of CW, such as community cohesion, empowerment (Lawrence, 2022; Scottish Government, 2019), the commercial case is important. In terms of the application process for CAT, financial feasibility is an important criterion. It is both assessed as part of the benefits of the projects, in terms of overall benefits (reducing public sector costs or providing public benefits), and its viability, through assessing the financial sustainability of the project, and

performance management, including use of resources and delivery of outcomes (Forestry and Land Scotland, 2021a). One informant involved in community asset requests stated –

“Yesterday I was having a conversation with somebody who joined (a community’s) board (and the community had) a fantastic vision and ideas and great big plans, but not much financial sense... (this person had a) strong finance background, experience of governance of charities. And ... that is really reassuring because there was a gap in (their) skills and... they have addressed it, which is great.” (OI2)

Whereas under the NFLS, the community was required to pay market value for the forest, CATS allows for discounts. Novel approaches to make a financial case, therefore, are increasingly valued as well. Niche finance and accounting skills such as recognizing natural capital and using calculations of net present value were useful in applications. For instance, one of the woodlands had an experienced ecologist in the community, and s/he had been able to secure a discount equivalent to 10% of the purchase price from FLS based on providing biodiversity conservation values of the woodland. Furthermore, while some woodlands are engaging in contracts for biodiversity offsets, and carbon markets, others did not know about these, or were misinformed about how carbon markets could benefit them. A lack of knowledge of newer models of funding was identified as a significant impediment for their uptake, according to a recent report published by the Scottish Land Commission (MacPherson et al., 2021).

4.3. Balancing the economic, social and environmental

Several CW groups engage in non-profit making activities, such as providing support for mental health, maintaining forest trails, and other community engagement activities. These however can conflict with financial feasibility. Most of the respondents agreed that CW could help achieve economic, social and environmental objectives, as also laid out by the Scottish government (Scottish Government, 2019). One informant summed an idealized objective of community ownership of assets, including the ability of community assets to attract people and reverse depopulation trends, also a priority of the Scottish government (Scottish Government, 2021b). S/he stated - *“Maximizing the economic potential and the social potential of that land asset to deliver on sustainability for local communities in ways that are actually going to help reverse depopulation trends” (OI7).*

In contrast to the above, there were conflicts and trade-offs between these objectives (Brownill & Carpenter, 2009). One obvious tension was between social objectives and financial sustainability, particularly for non-commercial woodlands, something that Aiken et al. (2011) also find for community organizations across the UK. Some of these woodlands extended non-commercial services such as providing spaces for mental health patients, conducted programs for past offenders and drug users, and hosting men’s sheds for people from within and outside the community. They were however severely financially constrained. Even commercial woodlands recognized that they had to trade off one objective for another such as *“sacrifice (timber) yields for more biodiversity” (CW13)* or *“selling future forestry rights (to timber harvests) to a private company (to raise capital to acquire the forest for the community)” (CW5).*

One respondent illustrated the trade-offs between economic development and environmental objectives, and the disconnect between local needs and national priorities. S/he did so by describing how permission for an infrastructure project was denied based on national environmental designations -

“There was a choice of local jobs, land available for local housing, all the kind of things that we were crying out for, but permission was denied all kinds of designations are slapped all over the Highlands without any consultation with the local population” (CW8).

While CW are intended to attract people and reverse depopulation, other structural issues such as lack of affordable housing or schools

prevent people from moving to some of these areas. Respondents mentioned how within their lifetimes, schools have been closed and people had moved away. The lack of affordable housing is an issue that has been studied as a cause of rural decline in Scotland, including its impacts on the ability of businesses to recruit and retain staff (56 Degree Insight, 2022; Slee & Miller, 2015).

5. Discussion – Towards a critical political geography of community empowerment

Our research has focused on two facets of CW in Scotland – their political context, and their uneven development across space. Utilizing the literature on neoliberalism and rescaling has enabled us to critically appraise the emergence of CW, emphasizing their links with neoliberal policies and austerity, rather than viewing them as emergent phenomena, devoid of history and political content (MacKinnon & Shaw, 2010). In paying attention to the differential capacities of CW groups, we have been able to highlight issues of access and exclusion to public funds (Milligan & Fyfe, 2004), and how policy developments may impact different groups differently.

While studies on CAT of facilities such as leisure and sports centres in the UK have examined the causal relationship between austerity and community acquisition (Findlay-King et al., 2018; Nichols et al., 2020), we argue that neoliberal reforms of privatization of state forests, along with land reform statutes are likely more important in CAT of public forests in Scotland. We have however demonstrated ways in which austerity can negatively affect these groups, including how community groups are co-opted to deliver services previously provided by local authorities. Our distinct contribution has also been to highlight ways in which formalization and standardization can have a centralizing effect on place-based initiatives. It would be an oversimplification to argue that all CW that have acquired public forests are a result of the FLS disposals policy or fill in areas where the public sector withdraws from, but we emphasize that there are important connections between these elements overlooked in the literature. Examining these connections allows us to ask critical questions on why CW emerge, and the challenges they face over time, and their uneven development across space. Asking these questions also problematizes some of the progressive assumptions around the emergence of CW, especially their potential to empower communities, without wider public investment in areas such as housing, welfare, and service delivery.

We find that communities are embroiled in new forms of work as a result of reduced public expenditure (Fraser, 2020a). Cutbacks in local council budgets result in loss of personnel, and withdrawal from discretionary tasks such as mowing the grass on football fields, clearing snow and ice off pavements, or maintaining toilets. This puts pressure on community groups and volunteers for time and resources. Moreover, as communities begin to take over council functions to deliver services, community organizations can become more formalized, akin to administrative units, becoming preoccupied with the business of the state (Meade, 2005; Shaw, 2017). Several of our respondents understood this as co-option and recognized that this was putting community groups in a squeeze. Additionally, austerity has also resulted in notable reduction in the quantity and quality of advice and support that councils can provide to communities (Gray & Barford, 2018). These budgetary cuts are also made in a spatially uneven manner (ibid), and are likely to affect deprived communities even more than others, where the shift of functions from the state to communities can disproportionately impact communities less engaged with civic activity (Bock, 2016).

We also observe a tension between centralization and decentralization in the transfer, or rescaling, of state forests to communities. CAT are supported by policies for community empowerment and justified on the basis that communities are uniquely positioned to respond to their respective local needs (Community Land Scotland, 2023; Scottish Parliament, 2015). However, we note the central state can reinforce its power through greater prescription and regulation of community

groups. The acquisition process has become more complex and standardized, in terms of eligibility and assessment. Through the effect of prescribing governance rules and processes, the central state becomes a gatekeeper for eligibility. Furthermore, the skills needed to acquire and manage woodlands are also becoming standardized. In contrast to more traditional forms of community skills such as advocacy or activism, professional skills such as law, accounting, ecology, and administration are becoming increasingly important for community bodies. This is likely to favour acquisition by communities with members from professional managerial classes, and areas that have a social advantage in terms of people and resources. Therefore, while there may be valid reasons for several of these requirements, chiefly, to ensure financial sustainability of CATs, and to ensure generation of public benefits, it can negatively affect communities that lack these skills.

Relatedly, we also show that while CW have a multiplicity of objectives, they must navigate, and increasingly adopt the language of government policies. The rescaling literature puts into focus the spatial effects of the shift to the community sector, and ways in which state power is channelled and consolidated through these new scalar arrangements (Brenner, 1998, 2004; Coulson & Sonnino, 2019). We find that state grant funding is another such mechanism. Public funding for CW through the Big Lottery Fund, the Scottish Land Fund, and the Climate Challenge Fund, while crucial, can encourage a particular kind of community group, one that the state prescribes, chooses to fund, and for specific purposes (Catney et al., 2014; Dinnie & Holstead, 2018). Furthermore, as they enrol in public funding mechanisms, as Creamer (2015) observed for community initiatives in Scotland, top-down or centrally administered grants encourage community organizations to take on a business-like form, competing with others for resources. One of the characteristics of the present neoliberal or entrepreneurial state (rather than a redistributive one) is that it encourages inter-local competition for resources (Peck & Tickell, 2002; Wilson, 2012). This inter-local competition is buttressed by disciplines such as accountancy, economics, and management, and is subject to new forms of centrally administered standardized performance indicators such as cost-effectiveness, financial sustainability, and delivery of set outcomes. Furthermore, inter-local competition for resources leads local agencies to strive to out-perform each other to maintain their share of central funding. In the context of public expenditure cuts, this encourages what some have called 'institutional Darwinism', where competitive localities survive, and the ones that cannot compete are left behind (Jessop et al., 1988; MacKinnon, 2000). We demonstrate that while some communities have greater capacity and skills than others, these differences are being exacerbated in a context increasingly shaped by competition and value for money concerns.

Contrary to the win-win rhetoric around CW to achieve economic, social and environmental goals, we see that these objectives can be in conflict with each other (Aiken et al., 2011). Forest disposals are motivated by cost concerns to the public purse, and transfer of these non-profitable assets to communities can make it difficult for communities to generate surpluses (Aiken et al., 2011; Moore & McKee, 2014). Whereas a voluntary workforce can allow them to continue to operate, there are limits to what they can do in the absence of alternative revenue streams. We also observed instances of communities owning commercial forests but having to sell their timber harvesting rights to private companies, to raise enough capital for the initial buyout.

Lastly, there are several structural issues at play that make it difficult for CW groups to achieve their objectives. We find that that in the grey literature, CW groups are expected to address the very same issues that are limiting to them to begin with, e.g., depopulation, lack of resources, and capacity (Scottish Government, 2019; The Woodland Trust, 2011). Therefore, the initial conditions, or what Markantoni et al. (2018) have called "pre-preparedness", may hinder a community from coming together for a common cause such as woodland acquisition. Furthermore, this pre-preparedness or capacity is likely part of a socio-economic gradient (McCulloch et al., 2012; Rolfe, 2018). Members of deprived

communities are likely focused on meeting their short-term needs, instead of coming together for community action on asset ownership. As DTAS reports, the vast majority of community-owned assets are to be found in areas that do not experience marked levels of deprivation, with over 90% located in the 80% least deprived areas of Scotland, and just 3% in the 5% most deprived areas (DTAS, 2012). These results include assets like council buildings, libraries and other buildings that are more applicable in urban contexts. While most of CW groups interviewed as part of our research are also registered in least deprived areas of Scotland, the dispersed level of deprivation in rural areas can make SIMD unreliable (Clelland & Hill, 2019). More granular approaches may be needed to understand why some woodland groups had access to greater levels of expertise than others. This might include studies that examine networks between key actors, or neighbourhood level variation in demographics, and or socio-economic indicators such as income or education.

Relatedly, our study is limited to CW groups that were successful in acquiring assets. More research is needed in areas where communities do not come together to initiate such agreements or fail to do so. For example, in their research on community engagement in South of Scotland with EU funding streams, Skerratt and Steiner (2013) focused on 'communities that do not engage', and argue that a focus on community empowerment can side-line factors such as development and capacity building that allow for empowerment to happen in the first instance. Rose (2000) refers to this as "new technologies of welfare", and argues that these approaches put the onus on communities and places to become more resilient, rather than examine the structural forces that generate poverty and exclusion in the first place, such as deindustrialization, welfare restructuring, or unequal distribution of resources and material inequality (ibid; MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013). Strong and proactive communities become stronger, and communities less capable of generating ideas do not access support, potentially becoming weaker (Skerratt, 2012).

6. Conclusion

To conclude, our research has drawn attention to an uneven geography of community empowerment that is continually shaped by wider political changes. Through the rescaling literature, we have empirically demonstrated the tension between centralization and decentralization, and between spatial uniformity and unevenness of state strategies (Brenner, 2004; MacKinnon and Shaw, 2010). As noted in the introduction, Brenner's concept of layering (Brenner, 2009) is useful to show how state policies of community land ownership in Scotland have been layered onto ongoing privatization of public forests since the 1980s, the localism agenda of the 1990s and 2000s, and austerity, since 2008. This perspective allows for examining how seemingly new governance innovations are not only layered onto previous institutional configurations, but also are shaped by their political context. In doing so, we have challenged some of the assumptions around the transformative potential of CW groups, and community organizations more broadly.

On the other hand, our empirical approach has also brought to light the agency of CW groups, the strategies they adopt to navigate this space, and their differential capacities. CW as a concept is rooted in environmental and social progressivisms (Blaikie, 2006; Herbert, 2005), and while there have been successful outcomes of community approaches, these are contingent by-products of a whole series of conjunctural conditions, including a favourable regulatory environment, facilitative local institutional arrangements, and supportive local economic circumstances (Peck, 2002). Our research findings also caution against transfer of public asset to communities under conditions of austerity. Governments across Europe have witnessed public sector withdrawal from sectors such as welfare and health, especially after the 2008–2009 financial crisis (Hermann, 2017). Transfer of public land or forests in such contexts can lead to intersecting effects (Barford & Gray, 2022), where lack of public services can further undercut the ability of

deprived communities to utilize these assets for socio-economic goals. Focusing on mechanisms for community empowerment in the absence of these support systems therefore is a risky strategy and can stymie community initiatives and lead to uneven outcomes.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kavita Sharma: Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jon Hollingdale:** Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. **Gretchen Walters:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Marc J. Metzger:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Jaboury Ghazoul:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all research participants that took part in this study.

Funding

This work was supported by the Chair of Ecosystem Management at ETH Zürich

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