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## **Negotiating sustainability across scales: Community organising in the Outer Hebrides**

Jaspal Naveel Singh and Tom Bartlett

This paper represents voices of community organisers on Barra, a small island in the Outer Hebrides, Scotland. Although, arguably Barra is geographically and socio-politically located in the peripheries of Scotland, Britain and Europe, the island has been a centre of North Atlantic maritime trade networks for centuries. In the current phase of Europeanisation and devolution of powers within the United Kingdom, the community finds itself in the position of having to attend to multiple scales: the European Union, the United Kingdom, Scotland and the island itself with its various interest groups. We draw on ethnographic interviews with community organisers that were elicited for the research project *Sustainability on the Edge* to illustrate some political challenges and possibilities of such scalar realities. We show that community organisers construct a voice that emphasises a historical quality of what it means to live on Barra while inflecting this quality with worldly knowledge that enables access to resources from outside the island. Our findings remind us that centres and peripheries are neither fixed categories that could simply be mapped on geographical visualisations nor notions independent of discursive practice.

Keywords: Scales, multilevel governance, islands, voice, community organising, devolution

### **Introduction**

The island of Barra in the southern Outer Hebrides, 40 miles off the west coast of Scotland, is nine miles long by four wide. A 13-mile road edges around the coast and a further four-mile road takes you to the north end of the island, passing the Tràigh Mhór, the cockle strand on which the plane from Glasgow famously lands. Archaeological evidence suggests that Barra has been inhabited since perhaps 6000 BCE (Branigan & Foster 2002: 31), with a first peak of human activity between 3600 and 2700 BCE (pp. 33–51). From the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE the Outer Hebrides were part of the Norse Kingdom of the Isles and many villages and the most salient topographical features still bear names clearly derived from Norse. In 1266 control of the islands was transferred to Scotland, and in effect to local clan chiefs. In the case of Barra this meant the MacNeils, whose coat of arms bears a galley, or seafaring narrowboat, in testament to the clan's continuation of the Viking tradition of maritime trading

and raiding. The clan system remained in force until the Jacobite wars in the early to mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, in the aftermath of which the British government sought to impose central rule and to undermine the system of affiliations which maintained the clan system. The economic decline of the Highlands and Islands in the ensuing period, culminating in the Clearances of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, remains a topic of fierce debate. For some, these were the inevitable results of population growth in unproductive areas, intensified by the Potato Famine, while for others, not least in the popular imagination, they are characterised as a brutal depopulation of the islands to make way for more profitable sheepfarming. Barra and the neighbouring Uists suffered more than other areas, with 1700 islanders being transported to Canada in 1851 alone (Richards 2013).

The island economy was revitalised through the fishing industry and Barra was a major herring port until the middle of the last century. Income from the sea, through fishing or service in the Merchant and Royal Navy, was necessary to supplement the largely subsistence economy of crofting (small-scale agriculture and sheep and cattle farming), which has always been precarious on the island's thin and rocky soil. The combination of these industries guaranteed relative self-sufficiency for the island community; but their decline over the last half-century resulted in a second period of out-migration and depopulation. Although the population is now relatively stable at around the 1200 mark, the demographic make-up within the island is shifting as the traditional cycle of in- and out-migration, whereby a large number of young islanders seek work at sea or on the mainland before returning with families, appears to be changing momentum (Euan Scott, Barra and Vatersay Community Council, pers. comm.). Life on the island is therefore more precarious than the population figures alone suggest as minor changes to the demographic and economic profile can have significant knock-on effects for the social systems underpinning island life.

These phases of Barra history reflect different conceptions of what is central and what is peripheral. As part of the sea-based kingdoms of the Vikings and the later Lords of the Isles, then as a herring port, Barra was central to the maritime economy of Europe, as symbolised by its prominent place in the maritime map that occupies a wall of the Doge's Palace in Venice (see also Stiùbhart 2005). But, after the breakdown of the clan system, and again in modern times as momentum shifts from maritime to terrestrial centres of trade and administration, islands have become more dependent on resources and infrastructures coming from the mainland and central government, whose political games and economic flows can feel distant and irrelevant for the people of Barra. Nonetheless, within this system Barra is recognised as a well-organised and innovative community, with a history of community

activism, including the establishment of the airport in 1936, the founding of Scotland's first *féis* (community cultural festival) in 1981 and, in recent years, the construction of a community-owned wind-turbine in Scurrival and mooring bays for tourist yachts in Castlebay. This activism is often accounted for in terms of the dynamic demographics of Barra when compared to other Hebridean islands. Poor farming land entailed travels across the globe with the Merchant and Royal Navy as well as migratory patterns to the terrestrial centres and back for education and employment. As a result many Barra folk have a first-hand knowledge of the workings of the terrestrial centres, and this informs their ideas on the sustainability of Barra as a socioeconomic community. These ideas are thus not born out of a narrow worldview or an ignorance of the world but out of dual and complex competences to understand what it means for Barra to sustainably enter the challenges of a global modernity shaped by policies and decisions from the terrestrial centres.

This paper, as part of the ongoing research project *Sustainability on the Edge*, seeks to understand the challenges of these dual and complex competences from the point of view of the island community. In the interviews, which form the empirical basis of our research, community organisers on Barra have identified communication between actors as an issue of key concern and there is a feeling that their voices are not heard by outside regulatory bodies of governance with differing understandings of sustainability. In the terms of this paper, whose voices get heard (and whose do not) depends on the scale at which sustainability gains meaning.

Sustainability, both in its environmental and economic sense, is a key idea in recent policy making. As an 'empty signifier' (Laclau 1996) its meanings and connotations are fought over by an array of social, political and economic interests (Brown 2015; Bartlett, Montesano Montessori and Lloyd, in press). Sustainability is usually evoked to respond to the perils of climate change and the far-reaching social effects of globalisation, particularly in its current neo-liberal manifestation. At the governmental level sustainability can be regarded, we suggest, as part of a set of soft-power policies that wield control through co-opting and influencing public opinion rather than through hard-power policies of coercion through military might or economic pressure (cf. Nye 2004). Sustainability policies promote the protection of species and habitats, encourage the local management of resources and generally operate within an environmental discourse that seeks to harmonise human civilisation with nature for now and for future generations while ensuring economic development (cf. Munasinghe 2009).

Our interviews suggest that islanders share such a view of sustainability, but that the perspective at the local scale fosters significant differences in terms of what aspects are more pressing and salient while first-hand experience underpins different understandings of the local socioeconomic and cultural ecology. In general, islanders view sustainability first and foremost in terms of the continuance of the island community and the economic conditions that will enable this, such as job security, good transport and telecommunication links, education facilities and efficient use of land and resources. What counts as sustainable on Barra, it seems, connects to a discourse of hard-power economic pressures and provision of essential infrastructures. These competing perspectives can be traced throughout our research as the tensions between soft-power environmentally ‘healthy’ growth and hard-power economic survival are negotiated through the construction of a voice that at once indexes local legitimacy and worldly knowledge. We discuss scales, indexicality and voice further below.

### **The interviewees and authors**

To explore these negotiations we conducted seven hour-long ethnographic interviews with community organisers from Barra and here we present excerpts from interviews with Sheena, Neil, Catriona and Iain.<sup>1</sup> They all live on Barra and are involved in political, communal and entrepreneurial activities and hold, or have held, some kind of institutional or semi-institutional responsibility over the local management of resources. They are thus highly visible in island life as well as to outsiders, such as funders and governmental bodies, for whom they represent the periphery. Our research, arguably, represents a similar intervention from outside (the metropolitan university) to understand and ultimately promote sustainability in the periphery.

The second author and interviewer, Tom Bartlett, identified the interviewees on the basis of their experience with local community organising. However, Tom also utilised his personal networks as his family has connections with Barra and he is known to the participants to different degrees. Tom’s grandmother, Mary Anne Stewart, was Glasgow Hebridean, her family being from the island of Grimsay, to the north of Barra, between Benbecula and North Uist in the Outer Hebridean archipelago. Mary Anne Stewart married Samuel Bartlett, a master mariner from Liverpool, who put himself through medical school and in 1926, when Tom’s father Calum was six months old, took up the post of doctor in

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been anonymised.

Benbecula, moving six years later to Barra. Tom's father spent his formative years in Barra until the family moved to the south of England at the end of the war, with Calum returning home to Barra every year from the mid-sixties, with his wife, Alice, and six children. Tom, who now lives in Glasgow and works in Cardiff, returns to the island several times a year and, as is the tradition on an island well-versed in both genealogy and out-migration, is asked each time "when did you come home?". As such Tom is very much on the periphery of Barra life, as is evident through the identity work performed in the interviews and in which Barra is the centre to which he scales his talk.

The first author, Jaspal Singh, transcribed many of the interviews<sup>2</sup> and subsequently conducted analysis, which was both informed by a theory of scales (discussed below) and comprehensive discussions between the two authors about Tom's ethnographic experiences. We then worked in close collaboration to write up this analysis.

In some ways, the two authors, as well as Tom's liminal position as an insider and outsider on Barra, represent different scales in their own right: Jaspal is an outsider-analyst, who has never visited Barra, and Tom is an insider/outsider-fieldworker with family ties to Barra. Of course, each of the two authors has very understandings of Barra and the people who live there, about the feeling of island life, whether imagined or experienced, and they each have very different responsibilities towards the islanders. From these two positions the present text was authored. We must acknowledge that the difference in knowledge status of the two authors was elided in our narrative, where we mostly speak as 'we', not explicitly specifying who of the two authors made analytical claims or what discussions informed them. Thus, the present text in itself is a result of a negotiation of scales, similar to the ones we attempt to show in the arguments our interviewees make.

### **Scales, indexicality and voice**

The notion of scales, borrowed from human geography, political philosophy and history, entered sociolinguistics to make one crucial point: meaning and power is contingent on multiple, yet ordered, contexts. In this sociolinguistic usage scales are evoked to account for – rather than reduce – the complexities of contexts in times of globalisation (Blommaert 2007; 2010; 2015; 2016; Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck 2005; Blommaert & Rampton 2011; Blommaert, Westinen & Leppänen 2015; see also papers in Collins, Slembrouck & Baynham 2009; Canagarajah & De Costa 2015; Singh, Kantara and Cserző 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> We thank Marta Wilczek-Watson for transcribing a number of interviews.

What particular utterances or signs mean, we know, depends on the context in which they are uttered (Silverstein 1976), while, conversely, it is through signs that contexts themselves are constructed (Gumperz 1982). These two semiotic dimensions, context dependency and contextualisation, are conceptualised as indexicality (Silverstein 2003). Scales, then, force us to appreciate that these indexicalities always operate on many, yet ordered, levels of meaningfulness. This indexical ordering constructs voice contrasts and speakers seem to recognise that some voices are more powerful, or carry more prestige, or can better claim authenticity than others. High varieties (Ferguson 1959), elaborated codes (Bernstein 1971) or professional registers (Agha 2005) usually have the capacity to index such higher-scale voices. They circulate more widely than local vernaculars and are thus understood, or so it is proposed, by a wider or more important audience. Yet, in a particular ethnographic setting vernacular voices can become valorised as prestigious and can index higher scales of power and meaning in local sociolinguistic life. Focusing attention on how speakers move across and between scales (upscale, downscale, outscale, rescale, jump scales, etc.) can help us appreciate that scales are not immutably fixed and that a voice that carries prestige at a higher scale is not always more powerful at a lower scale.

A scale, although readily imaginable as a spatial category, also involves time or history as well as personhood or identity. We can thus think of a scale as a space-time-identity nexus of meaning, a Bakhtinian chronotope that can be evoked to establish and negotiate the power and meaning of a particular voice (Bakhtin 1981; Silverstein 2005; Agha 2007; Perrino 2015; Blommaert 2015). Congruently, Agha (2007: 321) defines a chronotope as a “semiotic representation of time and place peopled by certain social types”. In the standard view, longer, larger, more permanent, global, generalised and abstract chronotopes can be regarded as indexing more power than shorter, smaller, more momentary, local, particular and concrete chronotopes. From this perspective, the notion of chronotope as unified spacetime (see also Wallerstein 1997) implies that an increase across the spatial dimension entails a parallel increase along the temporal dimension. Our data, however, suggests that extensions of time and space, the respective powers of *chronos* and *topos*, can be discursively construed in more complex ways. While the terrestrial centres can be imagined to govern vast geographical areas, such as nation states, and thereby inhabit power as *topos*, their histories and temporal power can be argumentatively constructed as shallow in comparison to the deep history of island life, which inhabits power as *chronos*. Rather than understanding everything that is spatially larger as also being temporally more extensive, or vice versa, we thus need to pay

attention to how speakers negotiate *chronos* and *topos* and make them operate on distinct yet highly interconnected tiers, on which they can be scaled up and down.

In the current phase of globalisation, we can expect considerable complexity of such negotiation across and between scales: the local and global influence each other in complex ways, histories intersect and diversity itself becomes diversified (Vertovec 2007). For peripheries especially, the complexities of globalisation create both uncertainty and possibility in the interplay and negotiation of scales. With the unprecedented intersecting of cultural possibilities, new inequalities become significantly articulated and visible. A scalar perspective of discourse acknowledges, therefore, that power and meaning are polycentric, or negotiated in relation to various and shifting centres of normativity (Blommaert 2010).

### **Scale uncertainty in times of devolution**

While globalisation tends to centrifugally diversify the resources of meaning-making, the current political climate also seems to emphasise the nation-state as the centripetal locus of meaning. We seem to witness a return to national essentialism that Beck (1994) understood as a reflex of modernisation. In the case of Barra, the current moment of globalisation is perhaps most clearly manifest politically in the policy of devolution. Over the last 40 or so years, the peripheries of the UK, the so-called Celtic Fringe, have gained some political autonomy from the central UK government in Westminster, London. Scotland is arguably the most devolved nation within the UK, with its own government, limited tax-raising powers, and control over a number of institutions at the national (i.e. Scottish) level. In September 2014 the Scottish Government held a referendum on full independence from the UK. Approximately 44 percent of voters voted for independence and approximately 56 percent voted against it. Two years later, in June 2016, the whole of the UK held a referendum that will lead to Britain's exit from the EU, the so-called Brexit. Because Scotland voted predominantly against Brexit, the Scottish Parliament has officially requested a second referendum, which would make it possible for Scotland to remain in the EU if it gains independence from the UK. This presents remarkable conflicts of interest as the population of Barra voted 70% in favour of independence, yet the fishing industry, both locally and in Scotland as a whole, is very sceptical about EU policy, with national organisations supporting Brexit and the Western Isles as a whole voting 53% against independence – but also 55% against Brexit. Our interviews were conducted in late 2015 and early 2016, a year after the Scottish independence referendum in September 2014 and just months before the UK-wide referendum on EU membership in June 2016. The interviews, as well as our analysis, thus



capture a moment in which Scottish politics is characterised by a heightened awareness and uncertainty about the scales on which Scotland, as well as its internal peripheries, will operate in the future.

This uncertainty provides possibilities for rescaling and imagining new types of devolution for the peripheries: from Westminster to Edinburgh, from Edinburgh to the Western Isles and from the seat of the local council in Stornoway, on the island of Lewis, to Barra. This system of UK-internal devolution is part of a larger European and international network of supra-governmental institutions such as the EU, several transatlantic unions, global interest groups and international regulatory bodies such as the International Monetary Fund. Political action at any of these levels of governance needs to take into account the higher-level scales of governance, as well as the lower scales, in which it operates. The centres thus each have higher centres in relation to which they might occupy a peripheral position and these peripheries have their own peripheries and so on, creating a kind of fractal scalarity that Westinen (Blommaert, Westinen & Leppänen 2015) has also described for the ideological topography of Finnish hip hop (see also Brenner 2001; Baynham, this issue).

Such scalar topographies, we need to remember, are not fixed but constantly in flux, and especially so in times of heightened scale uncertainty. These flows of scales offer up opportunities for rescaling. For instance, after the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, the three island councils of Scotland, Orkney, Shetland and Western Isles, put forward a collaborative vision – *Our Islands, Our Future* – to respond to the challenges faced by the peripheral island communities, ecologies and economies within the many changing levels of governance. Such collaborative endeavours create centres within the peripheries, to increase their visibility and attract funding from the higher-scale centres: from Edinburgh, from Westminster, from Brussels, and from other global agencies. This leads to an extremely complex network of allegiances that cross-cut the fractal scalarity and potentially bypass hierarchical levels of governance, as when the EU directly funds projects in Europe's peripheries without necessarily negotiating with governments in the capital cities (Bachtler & Turok 1997).

In the following analysis we will show how community organisers navigate these scales to make powerful arguments in the context of our interviews. First we show that our interviewees recognise scales. Scale is thus not only the researchers' category through which we subject our participants' talk to conduct close data analysis informed by globalisation research but also a category with which our interviewees make sustainability meaningful for Barra. Secondly, we show how our participants jump between scales, how they rescale, to

make arguments that carry their voices across scales. Finally, we turn our focus to informal types of community organisation as a possible alternative to more formal types of community organising.

### **Recognising scales**

In many of our interviews ideas about the scales of governance as well as the cross-cutting characteristics of scales are recognised and discussed. In this first interview excerpt the recognition is based largely on an insider/outsider dichotomy. Sheena, a community organiser who supports the production and sale of local goods, regrets that representatives of outside bodies who come to Barra to promote sustainability do not listen to the local people but rather impose their predefined ideas of what is good for the island. Transcription conventions can be found in the appendix at the end of this article.

#### Excerpt 1

962 Tom: how'd that look then if they were to do work with [((Local Organisation))]?

963 Sheena: [I think they would have to  
964 come in and they'd have to listen to people before they say anything (.) just  
965 listen about what people's priorities are and then work out how they can help  
966 as opposed to putting stuff on the community

967 Tom: uhum uhum

968 Sheena: you know and it could be that what they want and what the community wants  
969 are actually very similar

970 Tom: uhum

971 Sheena: but there's always this there's gonna be this tension and the spite (.) if they  
972 just come and just listen

973 Tom uhum

974 Sheena: you know and listen to what the community wants how the community wants  
975 to develop and grow and whatever then it could be there's really good tie-ups  
976 there

(Sheena, interview, lines 962-976)

Sheena linguistically indexes the outsiders' voice by using the third-person plural shifter 'they'. The anaphora (cotextual referent) of this 'they' can be found a few lines before

Excerpt 1 sets in. There Tom mentions the “government and European organisations” that are “working much like they already know the answers”. Thus Sheena’s instances of ‘they’, as well as Tom’s “they” (line 962), in Excerpt 1 seem to index actors on higher levels of governance that, and this is perhaps the crucial bit, operate in opposition to the islanders. Her rather clear-cut indexical distinction between insiders (‘people’, ‘community’) and outsiders (‘they’) asserts that this distinction could lead to tensions if the outsiders put their own ideas first and do not listen to the islanders. For her, overcoming the tensions can be achieved through a fair-minded mode of communication, a dialogue, between the outsiders and insiders. Outsiders should first “listen to” (line 964) the local community before making suggestions, scaling back the aims they had already identified in the larger scales of institutional protection. In this way they can enter into an equal conversation with the islanders, who have valuable local knowledge and expertise that needs to be taken into account (cf. also Bartlett 2012 on the downscaling of specialised knowledge to make it relevant to local issues). As both sides work towards a shared and viable vision of sustainability a common ground of interests, “really good tie-ups” (lines 975-976), and viable solutions for the future could be developed. While this surely questions who is expert and who is not, Sheena’s expectation also reinstates and thereby recognises the outsiders’ power. They have the choice over listening or not listening and they seem to have more often chosen not to listen and just impose their ideas of what is good for the island community.

This power of the outsiders, however, is challenged in Sheena’s argument. From her perspective the equally important voice of the islanders needs to be heard in a fair-minded dialogue. For this argument to take effect, Sheena construes a unified island voice, as suggested in her “what the community wants how the community wants to develop and grow” (lines 968-969). Sheena’s univocal depiction of the Barra community becomes meaningful through the indexical distinction between insiders and outsiders. This distinction situates the Barra community in relation to larger-scale actors who are involved in development and sustainability policies and come to the island to protect and manage. *Vis-à-vis* these outsiders, the Barra community needs to articulate a clear, singular voice that can be recognised by the outsiders and enter into an equal dialogue with them.

If we move down scales, the singularity of the Barra voice loses its meaningfulness and gives way to polyvocality and internal complexity. Neil, who is involved in both the fishing industry and local activism, suggests that the Barra community in fact consists of a multitude of communities, each with their own interests. Upon being asked about his role as a community development officer, he says that he was:

### Excerpt 2

95 Neil: working with (.) a whole different kind of (.) I suppose the communities  
96 within the community (.) just you know (.) the different groups within the  
97 community each which (.) feels that it's got a a an interest of its own (.) so you  
98 had for instance uh ((Local Organisation 1)) the ((Local Organisation 2)) (.)  
99 you had ((Local Organisation 3)) (.) you had ((Local Organisation 4)) (.) uh  
100 ((Local Organisation 5)) (.) there was just a whole lot of wee (.) organisations  
101 with each of their own (.) kind of wee goal within (.) the bigger picture  
(Neil, interview, lines 95-101)

The singular voice we encountered in Sheena's description of outsiders and insiders above, here gives way to a polyvocality of insider voices, represented through several local organisations (anonymised in the transcript) that are, however, all part of "the bigger picture" (line 101). The fact that there are many communities within the Barra community suggests that it is rather difficult for outsiders to identify who to speak to and listen to on a particular topic. The Barra community itself is polycentric and complex.

Sheena's and Neil's accounts illustrate that community organising on Barra involves a polycentric negotiation between macro-forces from outside on the one hand and the micro-cosmos of the island on the other. In both accounts the micro and the macro appear as relatively stable or fixed contexts in which Barra operates. These contexts seem to each fit into a larger context, like a Russian doll.

In Excerpt 3, however, Iain, who has worked for public organisation both nationally and in Barra, complicates this picture. Iain speaks about a scalar dilemma that occurred when the Western Isles Council, which is located in Lewis, the largest island in the Outer Hebrides and several islands to the north of Barra, cut the funding for a direct flight between Barra and Stornoway on Lewis. Iain here recounts a story that, as he told Tom, he uses frequently to make the councillors in Stornoway understand the consequences of their cuts.

### Excerpt 3

553 Iain: but we we ☺ know ☺ we know that we can get to the seat of our (.) national  
554 government er in two and a half hours (.) an hour's an hour's flight to  
555 Glasgow and an hour's bus through to (.) to Edinburgh and we're at the seat of  
556 our national government (.) erm our seat of our local government (.) would

557 take us about six seven eight hours to get up to  
 558 Tom: since they cut that plane  
 559 Iain: since they cut that plane  
 560 Tom: @ @ @ @ @ @ @  
 561 Iain: so we use that all the time now ☺ and it really annoys them you know ☺ @  
 562 (.) but er it does kinda bring it home a wee but you know like ((whispering))  
 563 “oh right enough” I mean it’s maybe not too it’s maybe not too relevant cos  
 564 you probably get to (1.0) parliament and find out nobody’s there but  
 565 Tom: ☺ at least you get a weekend in Edinburgh ☺  
 566 Iain: yeah that’ll be good  
 567 Tom: ☺ better than a weekend in Stornoway ☺  
 (Iain, lines 553-567)

Iain’s story suggests that the hierarchical order of governance (World > Brussels > Westminster > Edinburgh > Stornoway > Barra) is not always in order. In this example Stornoway cut itself off by cutting the direct air link from Barra (line 558-559), so that Barra folk can now reach Edinburgh much faster than they can reach Stornoway (line 553-557), effectively bypassing the council-level of governance and metaphorically rendering it as unimportant. Iain’s story is taken from an ongoing dialogue with councillors in Stornoway and retold and recontextualised within our research interview. It is a repeatable story of some emblematic value that can be used “all the time” (line 561) in order to talk about scalar complexities of acting in the peripheries. The bypassing of the council-level of governance is but a minor disruption to the established order but carries, we suggest, the threat of further insubordination. Iain also emphasises a more general disillusionment with politics by moving back into the story world to suggest that national Scottish parliamentarians will probably be absent in any case (line 564), which then expands into a more humorous exchange with Tom about at least getting to spend some recreational time in Scotland’s capital.

In Excerpt 4, Catriona, who is very active in lobbying national bodies, suggests that this cross-cutting of scales also works the other way around, from the macro to the micro, again rendering the local council as unimportant or even redundant.

#### Excerpt 4

410 Catriona: I think part of the reason for that it maybe EU (.) uhm led as well I’m not  
 411 entirely sure but so much funding has suddenly become available for locally

412 based community projects (.) so if you're looking what we've got in Barra (.)  
413 we've got (.) we've got all sorts of organisations that are tapping into funding  
414 and you you look at the community council and you think (.) "well what is  
415 there left for them to do?"

(Catriona, interview, lines 410-415)

The council in Stornoway, as well as in fact the Scottish Government and the UK Government, are seemingly bypassed by direct funding streams from Brussels or similar larger scale centres. Catriona's hedges and her careful epistemic stancetaking, "I'm not entirely sure but..." (lines 410-411), generalise and upscale the outside levels of governance and funding. In her account it remains implicit where the funding comes from, why it is distributed and who has an interest in supporting and helping. What is clear though is that money becomes available "suddenly" (line 411) from the higher scales and that this has consequential effects on local governance. Catriona stresses later in the interview that she supports the direct funding from larger-scale bodies to local organisations, but also suggests that these local organisations need to encourage local participation to become accountable and open to democratic scrutiny.

In the four excerpts discussed so far, we have shown that community organisers on Barra recognise higher scales of power that operate on some kind of general level of governance that is not fully transparent in their accounts. They also operate in opposition to the island community, which is in itself polyvocal and can cross-cut scales. In the second part of our analysis we show that community organisers, because they are aware of the polycentricity of their work and understand how the different scales are ordered, develop strategies to find new possibilities of making their own voices heard, especially in times of devolution and its heightened scale uncertainty. We suggest that these voices are constructed through processes of upscaling.

### **Upscaling communication**

One of the most unmistakable instances of upscaling in our data can be found in the interview with Sheena. Sheena recognises that the language of the formal institutions, what she calls "civil servant speak" (line 943), needs to be actively appropriated for the local community organisers to access funding. Sheena recounts a story in which she applied to a national trust for funding for her social enterprise. She was unsuccessful in the first year but

then changed the name of her social enterprise to give it a more ‘social’ ring and received funding in the second year.

Excerpt 5

193 Sheena: it was the second (.) I I didn’t (.) uhm uhm was unsuccessful the first time (.) it  
194 was the second time around

195 Tom: right (.) what more tweaks did you have to do [(xxx)

196 Sheena: [uhm I had to get rid of the word  
197 ‘crofter’

198 Tom: why is that?

199 Sheena: uhm because it was seen as too commercial (.) and I put in the word ‘gardener’  
200 @ @ @ instead

(Sheena, interview, lines 193-200)

The name change from ‘crofter’ to ‘gardener’ was a way for Sheena to tap into funding as well as to sharpen the profile of the goals of her enterprise within the formal structures of funding and national policies. The name change draws attention to Sheena’s metalinguistic awareness of how linguistic signs, in this case the lexical items ‘crofter’ and ‘gardener’, can index different discourses that are connected with commercial and social types of enterprise respectively. This semantic contrast, while effective for funding purposes, is rather nonsensical at the local scale, however, and the humour of the situation arises out of an awareness of both this lack of fit and the canniness of the community in exploiting it. Although crofting does involve stockbreeding and the sale of surplus produce, the term ‘crofter’ would not be understood in primarily commercial terms on the island, but rather evokes notions of self-sufficiency, land ownership and social organisation. However, for outsiders, Sheena says, “it was seen as too commercial” (line 199) while the term ‘gardener’, though a long way from how the communities might describe their activities, gained acceptability. Sheena is aware of the indexicalities and reimagines island activities from the viewpoint of the funding agency and so renames her proposal to attend to the norms of the higher-scale centres. Even though Sheena goes on to say that the organisation from which she accessed funding shifted their policies slightly so as to appreciate more commercial projects as a viable route to sustainability, the change from ‘crofter’ to ‘gardener’, we suggest, is a type of linguistic upscaling that illustrates the community organisers’ awareness and navigation of multilevel governance.

The signifier ‘crofter’ to mean small-scale farming is restricted to the Scottish Islands and Highlands and therefore clearly indexes a rootedness in the local. Because crofting is becoming less important on Barra – some say it is dying out – it also indexes historical or nostalgic ideas of what the island life used to be like. The signifier ‘gardener’, in contrast, seems to index a modern, even urban, sentience of what it means to promote healthy lifestyles, sustainability and community cohesion in late capitalism (Okvat & Zautra 2011). The juxtaposition of these two worlds, and the movement of the islander between them, is a common source of humour in stories and songs in the Highlands and Islands.

The complex timespace intersections involved in this linguistic upscaling from crofter to gardener reveal the polycentric orientation of community organisation on Barra and Sheena’s laughter (line 200) after she mentions the word ‘gardener’ might indicate her metalinguistic awareness that her upscaling is perhaps irrelevant to the central aims of her project or for the island community. The renaming of her project seems to be ‘just’ linguistic, but it is at the same time necessary for her strategy to make her project understood and eligible to funding from higher-scale centres.

In similar ways Iain describes the term ‘social enterprise’, which we suggest bears traces of indexicalities comparable in certain ways to the term ‘gardener’. In official terminology, a social enterprise commits to a mission that reinvests in the community and in the environment from which it gains its profits, rather than channelling the profits into the pockets of capitalists and their institutions (cf. [socialenterprise.org.uk](http://socialenterprise.org.uk); Dart 2004). A social enterprise, therefore, seems to occupy a middle ground between a not-for-profit organisation and a fully profitable business and might thus be regarded as a good compromise between the outside’s soft-power environmental and the island’s hard-power economic understandings of sustainability.

However, despite this apparent fitness for local purpose, the foreignness of the term is a potential problem. In Iain’s words, ‘social enterprise’ is “a term that’s come down over the last few years (.) and you’re tryin to slot things into that term (.)” (Iain, interview, lines 201-202). Iain here recognises ‘social enterprise’ as a recent phenomenon that was generated outside, and in some ways higher up in scale terms, that has “come down” to the island. He furthermore recognises that this term is an empty signifier which can be filled with a host of local meanings as appropriate.

Iain continues to argue that although local people on Barra seem to be unfamiliar with the specific term ‘social enterprise’ and its socio-political indexicalities, they nevertheless



recognise that certain soft-power agencies, like the local newspaper *Guth Bharraidh* (*The Voice of Barra*), indeed contribute to the hard-power economy of the island.

Excerpt 6

202 Iain: but it's there's been a lot of social ent- listen if you ask people in Barra "who  
203 what's a social enterprise" they would probably say "well I haven't got a clue  
204 what you're talkin about"  
205 Tom: yeah @@  
206 Iain: but then again if you say "well the *Guth Bharraidh* has been runnin for thirty  
207 five years" and they say "ah yes I know it's a great service" and it's like and  
208 it's enterprising and it makes a profit (.) you know and it kind of helps  
209 employing people  
210 Tom: aha  
211 Iain: and so so it is an enterprise and if that's what they want to call it  
(Iain, interview, lines 202-211)

The final "they" (line 211), similar to Sheena's use of 'they' in Excerpt 1, refers to a higher-scale agent that can impose certain terms, like 'social enterprise'. Such terms are not readily understood or necessarily deemed significant by the islanders (lines 203-204), though it is understood that a soft-power community newspaper can indeed be economically profitable, provide great services and also exist over large periods (lines 206-209). Iain, we should note, here takes for granted that the social aspects of the *Guth Barraidh* will be readily understood and so emphasises its entrepreneurial benefits, such as "service" (line 207), "profit" (line 208) and "employing people" (line 209). This emphasis, he argues, helps islanders understand that the incoming term imposed from above does not in fact mean anything different to what has been going on locally anyway. A social enterprise is thus not necessarily a fundamentally new way of enterprising sustainably but rather an empty signifier that can be put to service to upscale community voices, to enable them to be heard within higher scales of institutional funding.

Another way for community groups to make themselves visible to potential outside funders is to form constituted groups or small formal organisations. However, our interviewees were sceptical of the representational legitimacy of such constituted groups. Even if these groups showcase themselves as official representatives of a specific community, topic or issue, they often lack a systematic agenda, according to Catriona.

Excerpt 7

433 Catriona: well sometimes you know these organisations and I'm not specifically talking  
434 about Barra (.) they can get up  
435 Tom: uhum  
436 Catriona: they can get off the ground maybe three people at the kitchen table one night  
437 Tom: yes  
438 Catriona: just decide just decide to set up a group (.) and it uhm "we live here so we'll  
439 call it a community group and we'll put together a wee profile (.) to show how  
440 we'll benefit the community and we're off" (.) you know  
(Catriona, interview, lines 433-440)

Catriona's hedging "I'm not specifically talking about Barra" (lines 433-434) frames her as someone with translocal experience. From this experienced positionality, Catriona's argument operates on a higher scale to evaluate such 'organisations' across the islands. The narrated scene at the kitchen table one night then downscales her argument and through the juxtaposition of higher and lower scales creates incongruence and humour (cf. Attardo & Raskin 1991) in the interview context. The three narrative figures decide, just on the basis of living on whichever island it may be, to "call" (line 439) themselves a "community group" (line 439), which, through a performative speech act of naming, describes a shift towards formalisation. The "wee profile" (line 439) they put together then publicises and circulates the agenda of the formalised group across scales and frames it as charitable in order, we are left to assume, for the group to access funding.

Neil expresses a similar concern in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 8

416 Neil: and one of the things that that bothers me about this whole thing is that (.) it is  
417 a perception (.) that people who come from that background <the background  
418 where it's absolutely normal to have> constituted groups coming into a  
419 community which has a much mo- more flexible way of working (.) can  
420 effectively turn around and say (.) "we're gonna hold a meetin (.) in the hall (.)  
421 u:h or in a hall or in our building" <or whatever the hell> "uhm and we're  
422 going to fo:rm the justice and peace committee" for the sake of any argument  
423 (.) right (.) "a:nd after we've done that <and anybody could come along and

424 anybody could be elected onto the board> (.) alright a:nd then and we'll get it  
 425 all goin and then that's (.) and that's we're gonna look after (.) justice and  
 426 peace" (.) a:nd you're gonna go "well look" a community that's foreign to  
 427 you just sits back and goes "what's happened?" (.) uh uh uhm (.) but  
 428 suddenly you got somebody (.) who (.) may not represent anybody at all (.)  
 429 other than the people who turned up at that meeting  
 430 Tom: yeah and and they're constituted  
 431 Neil: and they're constituted and they can go "look well we're a constituted group  
 432 from Barra (.) and we are recognised" and there may not be a Barrach<sup>3</sup> among  
 433 them  
 434 Tom: aha  
 435 Neil: there could (.) on the other hand be a whole crowd of Barrachs that are from  
 436 Borge and not from Tangasdale<sup>4</sup> ☺ you know ☺ @ @ @

(Neil, interview, lines 416-436)

Neil here expresses the concern that people who come from a background of community organisation form constituted groups in order to represent the island community, which, in his phrasing "has a much more flexible way of working" (line 419). These people are not necessarily outsiders but could well be any of the islanders who decide to go down the more formal way of community organisation and perhaps access national or EU funds. In Neil's account the procedures that are required to formalise community organisation, namely the procedures involved in forming constituted groups, holding formal meetings, electing members, are potentially ineffective as they do not necessarily represent the island adequately (lines 427-429), either because no one who constituted the group was actually from Barra, a Barrach, (lines 423-433) or because everybody who constituted the group was from one particular village and not from another (lines 435-436). In Neil's argument the potential problem of representation of constituted groups is a function of the scales from which they gain their representational legitimacy: the scales are either too small (one village) or exogenous (outsiders).

If the complex scalar rearrangement involved in formal organisation is dilemmatic, as Sheena, Neil, Iain and Catriona suggest, what then are the alternatives? What is the island's

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<sup>3</sup> Barrach, in Gaelic, means a person from Barra. Note, in the second occurrence of the term (line 435) the plural is Anglicised, so rendering the term locally-indexical English.

<sup>4</sup> Borge and Tangasdale are two small villages on Barra.

“more flexible way” that Neil mentioned? In the final analytical section we explore how our interviewees understand sustainability from a point of view that we describe as informal types of organisation.

### **The complexity of informal organisation**

With our deployment of the notion of informal organisation we broadly follow discussions of the informal economy (Castells & Portes 1989) that seek to account for the complexities of the modes of production in late capitalism, both in the peripheries and in the centres of capital. Inspired by this line of research, we do not want to suggest any kind of lesser or less complex formality in the local organisation of Barra. We even stress that local organisation in the peripheries is more complex than in the centre, due to the dilemmatic upscaling negotiations that the periphery is forced to develop vis-à-vis the centre. Informal types of organisation are thus more complex and elaborate than formal types. This is so, because informal organisation partly depends on formal organisation, which makes funding, circulation and recognition possible, but it needs to downscale this formality so that it becomes legitimate and authentic in relation to the rootedness of the community one wishes to support or represent. On Barra, the flexibility of community organising has a long and successful history, as described in the introduction above, and in this final section we show that the mechanisms of such organising are understood by our participants as being at once informal and deeply rooted historically.

Neil offers the example of the Fisherman’s Mass, an annual event that takes place on the pier in Castlebay ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d\\_xZN6WHqB0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_xZN6WHqB0)), to emphasise how informal organisation can be effective and efficient.

#### Excerpt 9

- 346 Neil: yeah I mean like (.) there’re (2.0) again I I can give you another GREAT  
347 example of it is (.) the effort that’s put in for the Fisherman’s Mass  
348 Tom: aha  
349 Neil: as far as I’m aware there has never been a committee (.) for that=  
350 Tom: =right  
351 Neil: uh it (.) there’s not a formal organisation (1.0) to run something which is one  
352 of the most ORganised events (2.5) it’s  
353 Tom: ☺ himself upstairs is organising it ☺ @@@@  
354 Neil: @@@ ☺ well yeah (.) when you look at it how it comes together ☺ (1.5) it’s

355 (2.0) by (.) a lot a hard work (.) by (1.5) a hell of a lotta folk (1.5) most of  
356 whom only find out how they're doing it @@ ☺ a day or two in advance ☺  
(Neil, interview, lines 346-356)

Neil's account of the Fisherman's Mass emphasises the spontaneity and informality with which organisation takes place and has taken place ever since. He says that there has never been a formal committee to run a very well-organised event (line 349, lines 351-352). But who/what then runs this event? Tom humorously offers God – “himself upstairs” (line 353) – as the highest-scale grand designer of the Fisherman's Mass. Neil takes up the humour (line 354), but then more seriously proposes a set of traditional island values: hard work, a dense network of familial and social ties, and a communal spirit of spontaneity (lines 355-356). These types of resources derive from historical and traditional knowledge of how to get things done locally, rather than from specialist knowledge generated formally through constituted groups.

Sheena, similarly, highlights that “the fishermen that fish in these waters for all their lives, they are more expert than people that come down discover something like ‘Oh wow let's protect it’” (Sheena, interview, lines 786-789). Who is expert and who is not, in this argument, depends on traditional and holistic knowledge that was handed down from generation to generation and the lifelong experience of locals, rather than the specialist knowledge from the outside, which, as she says later, has a “focused viewpoint cos they've got their project and job it's a nice nice little box” (Sheena, interview, lines 917-918). The fishermen's life-long historical knowledge is here juxtaposed with the tick-box knowledge of short-term intervention projects. Sustainability is therefore understood on two different chronotopic scales. The fishermen have larger time scales at hand, but are restricted to the local; the outsiders have more translocal knowledge and recognition, but they lack drastically in temporality (see also Bartlett, Montesano Montessori and Lloyd, in press).

In the introduction we described the histories of Barra not merely to situate our object of research in time but also to point to the deep historical archive of which people on Barra perceive themselves to be part. We can see from Sheena's and Neil's accounts in this section that sustainability is a historicised notion that is contingent on the past knowledge that was informally handed down from generation to generation and circulates as part of a profession and lifestyle. We would like to highlight therefore that sustainability on the island is understood by our participants as operating on large timescales (cf. Braudel 1973). The island's deep-historical sustainability contrasts to some degrees with the ways in which

sustainability is promoted and executed politically by states, non-governmental institutions and other formal agencies operating on higher levels of governance (see also Singh & Dattatreya 2016). Here, sustainability resembles a short-term intervention (e.g. a three-year funding project) that would need also to produce immediate effects or at least showable outcomes ('ticking the boxes'). Ironically, even if such higher-scale institutions arguably envision sustainability as generating long-term shifts, the level of governance on which they operate only seems to afford short-term cultural interventions that are intertwined with a progressive logic of what it means to be good in late capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

In our analysis we first showed how community organisers recognise a difference between the voice of outsiders who come to Barra to protect and help on the one hand and the voice of islanders who live and work on Barra on the other. They also recognise that these two voices are not singular but complex, even if they generally assign some kind of formality to the outsiders' voices and some kind of informality to the islanders' voices. We then traced how the multitude of voices on Barra are organised or formalised through upscaling so that they can enter and map onto higher-scale centres to access resources provided by outside bodies of governance and funding. Finally, we discussed how informal types of organisation are imagined to operate on long timescales that historicise community organisation in order to seek legitimacy on a locally meaningful scale.

Community organisers on Barra seem to recognise multiple centres of decision making that operate on different, and at times conflicting, scales of time, space and personhood (chronotopes). The larger terrestrial centres are imagined to require formal discourses, whereas the smaller maritime centres of the island communities seem to organise themselves informally, even if they depend on funding and resources from the larger centres. We hope it has become clear from our analyses, first, that community organisers recognise these scales of formality, and secondly, how they upscale and downscale their communication to make constructive arguments about the sustainability of Barra in the interview context (including narratives of similar rescalings in other contexts). These two dimensions, recognition and rescaling, we argue, construct a voice that is at once informal, emphasising a historical and experiential quality of what it means to live on Barra, and formal, inflecting this quality with worldly and upscaled knowledge that enables access to dispersed governmental, civic and commercial bodies and so recentres Barra at the intersection of these latterday virtual trading routes.

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### **Appendix: Transcription conventions**

(.)	untimed short pause or end of an utterance
(1.5)	longer, timed pause
(xxx)	indecipherable data with one syllable represented as ‘xxx’
((shocked))	nonverbal, paralinguistic and other contextual information
@	laughing syllable
?	rising intonation, possibly a question
[	start of overlapping speech
[ ]	entirely overlapped speech
=	contiguous, ‘latched’ utterances (no perceptible pause)
<u>underlining</u>	perceptible additional emphasis
CAPS	loud speech
<>	fast speech
☺ ☺	smile voice
:	lengthened syllable
trunc-	truncated word
‘ ’	intertextual voice
“ ”	represented discourse (self-quotes and quotes of others)

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