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Regional Development Performance in Council Areas of Scotland with the Highest Percentage of Gaelic Speakers

Research on Gaelic language in Scotland has increased substantially in recent decades, as has Scottish regional development programmes following devolution. However, the overlapping of these two aspects remains limited, particularly in the context of regional development data available on regions where Scottish Gaelic speakers mostly reside. This Research Paper uses the OECD Regional Wellbeing index as a framework to measure regional development in Scotland at the level of council area, comparing this with its percentage of Gaelic speakers. Equivalent data for eight of the eleven OECD topics is analysed and the focus is placed on the three council areas with significant Gaelic speaking populations – Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar and Highland. The results show that these three regions consistently perform average or good across the eight topics measured, in comparison to the national average in Scotland. This demonstrates that Gaelic language is not a hindrance to development and the three regions perform comparably to other remote council areas such as the Orkney and Shetland Islands.

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1. Introduction

The revitalisation of Scottish Gaelic¹ as a language in contemporary Scotland has advanced significantly since the early 1990s, with a variety of institutions and legal frameworks emerging. The 2011 census showed that the continuous decline of Gaelic speakers (in absolute terms) appeared to have slowed (Scottish Government, 2017) Similarly, academic and professional sector research on related topics has grown and bodies such as Bòrd na Gàidhlig are working to implement the latest National Gaelic Language Plan 2018-2023 under legislation of the Gaelic Language Act 2005 – aiming to reverse the previously declining trend (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2018). Alongside this, regional development has grown as a focus in Scotland particularly post-devolution and through European Union (EU) structural funds, with increasing amounts of related data available. Yet, specific focus on Gaelic speakers is much more limited, in part due to the difficulty of disaggregating indicators by Gaelic speakers (especially an issue in council areas where this group constitutes less than 0.5% of the population). Whilst there has been research looking at the impact of Scottish Gaelic on the economy, much of this is at the macro level across the whole of Scotland. Thus, the research agenda of this paper is to explore the background



situation for the specific council areas of Scotland which have high numbers of Scottish Gaelic speakers and to ascertain how these compare to the rest of Scotland. This uses the framework of the OECD Regional Wellbeing index² and its broad measurement of regional development across a variety of topics. The data provided by the OECD is only disaggregated to the level of Scotland as a whole and therefore this research recreates the index with local data available at the council level of Scotland, where possible. This leaves eight topics covered, as detailed in Table 3.1 in the subsection on methodology below. Such analysis will allow for consequent research to build upon its findings and seek to ascertain specifically what role the language plays in the regions of Scotland in relation to regional development, in particular with regard to socioeconomic indicators.

The paper begins within an overview of literature discussing regional development in the Scottish context, as well as a summary of the progression of research on Gaelic. A detailed methodology is then provided to explain the indicators used and how the OECD Regional Wellbeing approach has been mirrored in the local context of Scottish council areas. The results are then outlined, concentrating specifically on the three council areas with significant Gaelic speakers; Argyll and Bute, Highland and Na h-Eileanan Siar. Analysis is then given to the findings and what implications and limitations this has, outlining areas for consequent research to build upon this quantitative overview.

2. Regional Development, Scotland and Gaelic Language

Whilst there is a great deal of regional data available at the council area level in Scotland, this is not framed in the direct context of language, and so the aim of this paper is to assess the regional development data and frame it directly in the context of Scottish Gaelic. Nonetheless, this section provides a background overview of what programmes and research has been undertaken on regional development in Scotland, as well as what has been approached more broadly in the frame of Gaelic language.

2.1 Regional Development

The term regional development reflects a contemporary shift in thinking away from purely macroeconomic indicators such as national GDP to measure a society's prosperity across regions (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose & Tomaney, 2017). This shift has also coincided with the emergence of sustainable development as an identified objective – as well as questioning the status quo of continuous growth as the primary economic goal (Robertson, 2005; Leick & Lang, 2017). Moreover, this has also been alongside thought on how to address increasing regional inequality within countries and trading blocs as a consequence of neoliberalism (Tomaney, Pike & Rodríguez-Pose, 2010; Stiglitz, 2010). Thus, a concentration on regional aspects has been recommended from both a sustainability and equality perspective (Raworth, 2017). Whilst these fundamental societal issues still remain, there has been a significant shift towards regional development policies, particularly through the OECD and the EU.



When framed in policy, regional development refers to “a general effort to reduce regional disparities by supporting (employment and wealth-generating) economic activities in regions” (OECD, n.d.). Logically therefore, measurement through indicators is required to assess regions’ performance and this has been primarily thought of through economic measures such as GDP per capita and unemployment figures. Yet the OECDs approach into the 21st century has been to broaden this understanding, something reflected in their Regional Wellbeing index which covers eleven different topics (OECD Regional Wellbeing, 2018). Similarly, the EU has placed significant focus and funds into regional development aimed at “correcting imbalances between its regions” through structural funds such as the European Regional Development Fund (European Commission, n.d. a).

2.2 Regional Development in Scotland

Regional development in the Scottish context has been approached institutionally for over 40 years, stemming from a concern of a north/south divide in the United Kingdom (UK) with regions including Scotland lagging behind economically (Morgan, 2006). Due to such concerns, the Scottish Development Agency was created in 1975 to stimulate economic growth in Scotland (Halkier, 2006). Yet, this was in addition to the existing Highlands and Island Development Board set up in 1965 aiming to improve economic and social conditions in “an area which had remained underdeveloped compared to the rest of the British and Scottish economy since the eighteenth century” (Hughes, 1982, p. 1055). Thus, there was an early awareness that Scotland required regional development policy both in the UK context and within Scotland, even before plans for devolution were accelerated and completed in the 1990s. These two institutions were legally dissolved and recreated in 1991 as Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Island Enterprise which are both still in active operation. Until devolution however, ultimate control of these enterprises was retained in the Scottish Office at Westminster (Fairley & Lloyd, 1995). Criticism has been directed at the effectiveness of such regional development agencies however, including whether devolution in general provides an economic dividend or not (Morgan, 2006; Pike & Tomaney, 2009). Yet, within this context, the role of the EU and its structural and regional funds should also be considered in terms of regional development effects (Morgan, 2006). Indeed, EU funds through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) contributed over €900m in the last budget period 2014-2020 to the development of Scotland (Scottish Government, n.d.). Whilst this aimed at the general development of Scotland on a comparative basis to the rest of the UK, such programmes also aimed at regional development within Scotland – particularly the ERDF (Ibid.). More precisely in the Gaelic speaking regions, substantial ERDF investment has previously been aimed directly at the Highlands and Islands through a specific Operational Programme (Scottish Government, 2014; European Commission, n.d. b). This programme aimed to create jobs in the region and facilitate support to small and medium-sized enterprises (Ibid.). To a lesser extent, regional development is also on the agenda of INTERREG programmes funded by ERDF, and the west coast of Scotland is involved in one such programme with the north of Ireland (SEUPB, n.d.).



Since devolution there has been an increase in research and a broader focus on what societal goals should be achieved. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is an example of this, developed as a tool to identify areas of poverty and inequality across Scotland, with the aim of “helping organisations invest in those areas which need it most” (Scottish Government, 2016a). Government organisations such as Scotland’s Centre for Regional and Inclusive Growth have been created to implement Scottish Government’s aims to “deliver inclusive and sustainable economic growth throughout Scotland’s economy, and across all of our regions” (SCRIG, n.d. a). This organisation facilitates cooperation between public and private sector entities and has set up a series of Regional Growth Deals across the country, including an Inverness and Highland City-Region Deal already in implementation and a future Islands Growth Deal currently being developed (SCRIG, n.d. b.). Yet, the City-Region deal for Inverness and Highland signatory document does not mention the aspect of Gaelic language at all, despite geographically covering the Isle of Skye³ (The Highland Council, n.d.). Some limited research on Gaelic in the context of regional economies has been published but the language angle is largely neglected. One positive example is the Highlands and Islands Enterprise who published a substantial report in 2014 on Gaelic as an asset in social and economic terms (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2014), as part of their 2012-2015 Gaelic Plan set up as a requirement under the Gaelic Language Act 2005 (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2017).

It is not the intention of this research to ascertain what role each institution has played in the regional development of and within Scotland, it is beyond the scope and focus to do so. Rather, this section aims to demonstrate that regional development has long been on the agenda in Scotland and there are many actors involved. One thing that does seem clear however is that such economic policies have often not been focused primarily on Gaelic language or its speakers. Part of this may be due to the limited amount of Gaelic language research in general, particularly through a socioeconomics lens, as the following subsection demonstrates.

2.3 Gaelic Language in Scotland

Research on Gaelic has developed alongside interest in devolution which emerged in the 1970s and increased further following the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 (McLeod, 2001). It is concentrating increasingly on the contemporary situation of the language as opposed to the historical aspects, this approach coinciding with the legal developments as well as establishment of bodies such as MG Alba, BBC Alba and Bòrd na Gàidhlig⁴ in the early 2000s. Similarly, the Celtic and Scottish Studies department at the University of Edinburgh was formed as the result of a merger in 2001 and has continued to research and publish on aspects including Scottish Gaelic language (University of Edinburgh, 2019). There has logically been a strong focus on law, linguistics and language use, and cultural aspects, all often in the content of language revitalisation (Walsh & McLeod; MacLeod & Smith-Christmas, 2018). Given the declining statistics of Scottish Gaelic speakers (up until the Census



2011), language revitalisation has of course clearly been a vital focus, but in recent years further elements have been researched including in the direction of socio-economic factors. Douglas Chalmers has been a leading scholar in this regard, publishing on the economic impact of Gaelic arts and culture (Chalmers, 2003), including how BBC Alba has contributed towards this (Chalmers et al, 2011). Another key example of socioeconomic research in this area looked specifically at Gaelic speakers on an individual level and their socioeconomic status in Scottish society (Zendoia, 2011).

As mentioned above, further research has followed from the Gaelic Language Act (2005) and the Highlands and Island Enterprise's work is a good example of this. Nonetheless, it remains somewhat thin on the national level, especially in a comparative context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Regional Wellbeing Index

As outlined above, regional development is usually thought of in socioeconomic terms, but this has begun to broaden to include much more than simple measures of GDP or unemployment. On an international level, tools used for comparison across regions include the OECD Regional Wellbeing index and the Eurostat's 'My Region' portal which allow regions to be compared to one another using Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques (NUTS) levels. Unfortunately, in the case of Scotland, the lowest level NUTS (level 3) still groups regions larger than Scottish council areas. Moreover, NUTS level 3 statistics are only available on Eurostat; for OECD Regional Wellbeing statistics, NUTS level 2 is used which considers Scotland as one whole region. Given that Gaelic speakers are mostly concentrated in just a few Scottish council areas, using such statistics is of no use for the purposes of this Research Paper. Therefore, the methodology chosen involves using OECD Regional Well-Being index as a thematic guide and following this as close as possible using local statistics available at the Scottish council area level. This allows the research to be tied to an internationally recognised framework for measuring regional development and thus strengthens the methodology of the paper, whilst also compensating for the lack of data that the OECD Regional Well-Being provides at this level. It therefore facilitates a meso level approach which assesses the percentage of Gaelic speakers at the level of local administrative areas in Scotland. In this sense it is consistent with the methodology previous deployed by the author in research on regional development and ethnic minorities in the Baltic States (Willis, 2019).

Accordingly, the paper first presents statistics of Gaelic speakers as a population of the council area based on data from the most recent UK census in 2011 (Scottish Census, n.d.). This is defined as the "[percentage] of the population aged 3+ who can speak Gaelic" (Ibid.). Gaelic language therefore takes the place of the independent variable, assessed against a series of indicators measuring the dependent variable of regional development. Given that the share of Gaelic speakers only reaches 4% in 3 of the



32 council areas, this research will not test for a statistical relationship between the independent and dependent variables as this would be redundant. Rather, an initial chart outlines the regions by Gaelic percentage and then regional development indicators are discussed in a comparative context. The intention therefore is to allow the reader to view whether these three council areas are consistently better, worse or similar to other regions in Scotland.

Table 3.1: OECD Regional Wellbeing Index and a Scottish Equivalent

| Topic | OECD Indicators | Local Scottish Equivalents |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Income | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Household disposable income per capita | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % income deprived % employment deprived |
| Jobs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment rate (%) Unemployment rate (%) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment rate Unemployment rate |
| Housing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of rooms per person (ratio) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A |
| Health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life expectancy at birth (years) Age adjusted mortality rate (per 1,000 people) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life expectancy at birth (male) Life expectancy at birth (female) |
| Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share of labour force with at least secondary education (%) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of population with a degree |
| Environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Estimated average exposure to air pollution in PM2.5 ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$), based on satellite imagery data | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A |
| Safety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homicide rate (per 100,000 people) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A |
| Civic Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voter Turnout (%) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local election turnout 2017 |
| Accessibility of services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share of households with broadband access (%) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of adults agreeing with positive statements concerning access to local services |
| Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of people who have friends or relatives to rely on in case of need | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of adults who have people to rely on in their neighbourhood for help. |
| Life Satisfaction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average self-evaluation of life satisfaction on a scale from 0 to 10. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life satisfaction, scale 0-10. |

Source: OECD Regional Well-Being User Guide (OECD, 2018, p.13). Second column adapted by author.

In terms of regional development data, the OECD Regional Well-Being portal covers 11 topics using 13 measurable indicators (OECD Regional Well-Being, 2018, p. 13). Similar data could be found through Scottish and UK government statistics, but not for every topic and sometimes a slightly different indicator is used. Table 3.1 above details the 11 topics and their indicators measured by the OECD index, plus the equivalent indicators this research has adopted for Scotland.⁵ As equivalent data for some topics could not be found at the council area level in Scotland, this Research Paper is working with 8 topics involving 11 indicators as a measurement for regional development. The following subsection lists these in more detail.

3.2 Regional Development Indicators for Scotland

The most common economic indicator used to measure the state of an economy is GDP or GDP per capita, unfortunately this is not available at the council level for Scotland (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2015). Moreover, the Eurostat statistics of GDP as a % of EU average 28 is not useful for this research because many of the NUTS level 3 regions contain more than one Scottish council area (Scottish Government



& SpatialData.gov.scot, 2019). In the absence of the above, an alternative indicator of income/economic performance is required and the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) provides an opportunity for this. A comprehensive tool developed by the Scottish Government since 2004, it is now in its 5th cycle published in 2016 (Scottish Government, 2016a). Using data from the Department of Work and Pensions, the income related subsection calculates a percentage of income deprived population by geographic area (data zone), which is part of a broader set of indicators ranking a data zone in terms of deprivation (Ibid.). This is undertaken very much on a micro scale across 6,976 small areas across Scotland, however this Research Paper is concerned with what data is available on the council area level. For this, the index aggregates income deprived and employment deprived only, and these indicators are therefore used here (Scottish Government, 2016b). This obviously overlaps to the Jobs topic and for this the most recent statistics available on unemployment and employment as a percentage of the council area population⁶ are used (Statistics.gov.scot, n.d. a; n.d. b). For the topic of Housing, no similar data on rooms per person could be found and the other indicators available are considered too subjective or difficult to compare (for example median house price – is a high figure positive or negative?). Life expectancy data is available for the Health topic, although only broken down by gender – thus two indicators are used in this instance (Office for National Statistics, 2015). Regarding mortality rate, the same statistics used by OECD Regional Well-Being are not available in Scotland and the data that is available does not fluctuate enough to allow for any real comparison – thus it is held that life expectancy is sufficient alone for the Health topic indicator in this research. Education again differs slightly from the OCED Regional Well-Being indicator, with the Scottish index focusing on percentage of workforce with a degree (Statistics.gov.scot, n.d. c) as this was the most relevant available. No data could be found for Environment disaggregated at the council area level. For the Safety topic, similar data was found on homicide rate, but the levels were so low that the data was not useful.⁷ Civic Engagement uses voter turnout as the measurable indicator and this is the same for the Scottish index, using data from the 2017 local election (The Electoral Commission, 2019). For the topic Access to Services, equivalent data on broadband access could not be found. Rather, the attitudes of the local population towards access of local services is used, represented by “the percentage of adults who agree with various statements about local authority services and performance” (Statistics.gov.scot, n.d. d).⁸ For Community, a similar indicator could be found which detailed the percentage agreeing with “I can rely on people in this neighbourhood to help me” (Statistics.gov.scot, n.d. e).⁹ Finally, Life Satisfaction simply uses the life satisfaction figures available for each council area (Office for National Statistics, n.d.).

This Research Paper therefore uses the above list of statistics to create its own regional well-being index for Scottish council areas which can then be used to assess against the percentage of Gaelic speakers. That the indicators used are not exactly the same as the OECD Regional Wellbeing index is not of relevance here; the research is intended as a comparison within Scotland and not across OECD

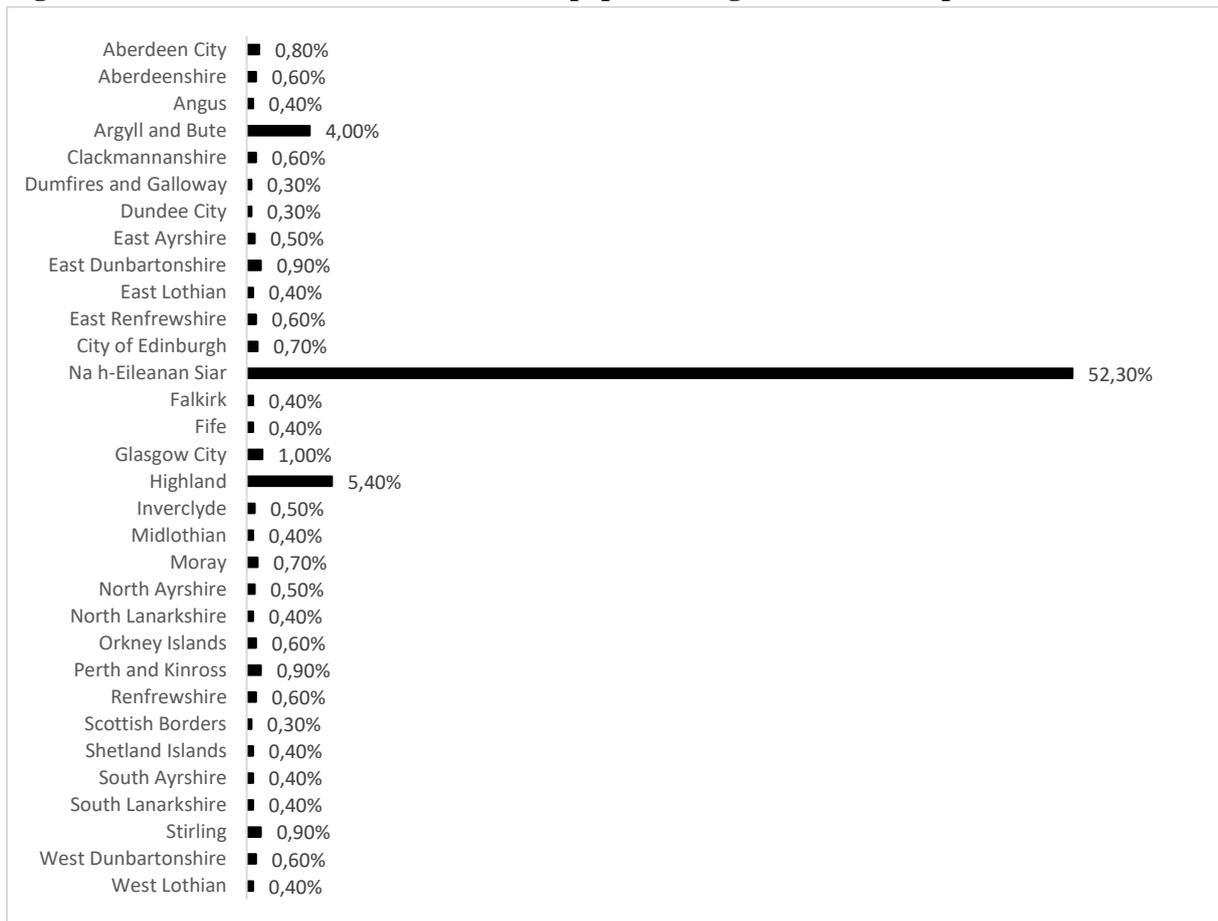


countries. The following results section details all of these through a variety of charts and a final table which summarises the three council areas where Gaelic is spoken most and ranks each indicator from the 32 council areas, allowing for a broad overview.

4. Results

As indicated above, for purposes of simplicity, it is not useful to create scatter plots given the breakdown of council areas in terms of percentage of Gaelic speakers. Rather, Figure 4.1 outlines each region by this percentage, and this can be used in reference to all of the following graphs and tables.

Figure 4.1: Scottish Council Areas and % of population aged 3+ who can speak Gaelic



Source: Authors own table, using data from Scottish Census, n.d.

As can be seen from Figure 4.1, there are three council areas of note; Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar, and Highland (for purposes of simplicity, hereafter referred to as the three council areas with Gaelic speakers). All three can be considered rural areas, with Na h-Eileanan Siar and Highland relatively inaccessible in comparison to most of Scotland. Furthermore, Na h-Eileanan Siar is entirely island communities, whilst Highland and Argyll and Bute are also significantly constituted by islands¹⁰ and thus all three can be considered somewhat similar to Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands in terms of remoteness, as well as population density.



The following paragraphs will consider the statistics for each of the indicators listed in Table 3.1 above, with the full data to be found in Appendix I. These are broken down into the 32 council areas and the percent of Gaelic speakers is listed again there for ease of comparison. Furthermore, the three council areas with Gaelic speakers are displayed in Figure 4.2 by ranking across Scotland. This lists all of the indicators under the 8 analysed topics and ranks them between 1 and 32 (1 being the best) for each indicator to allow a comparative focus across all of Scotland.

Figure 4.2 Ranking Table

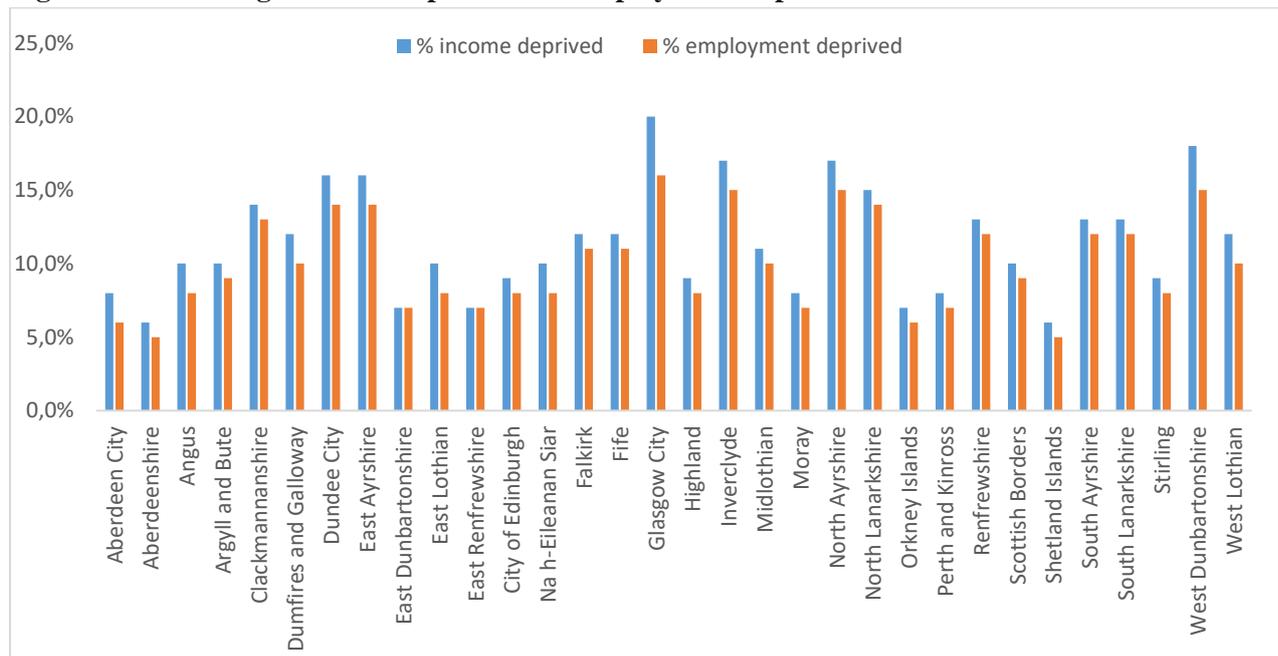
| Topic (Indicator) | Council Area (% Gaelic speaking) | | |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|
| | Argyll and Bute (4.0%) | Na h-Eileanan Siar (52.3%) | Highlands (5.4%) |
| Income (income deprived) | 12 | 12 | 9 |
| Income (employment deprived) | 15 | 9 | 9 |
| Jobs (Employment) | 27 | 8 | 5 |
| Jobs (Unemployment) | 10 | 3 | 7 |
| Health (Life Expectancy Male) | 15 | 23 | 17 |
| Health (Life Expectancy Female) | 15 | 26 | 6 |
| Education (% with a degree) | 13 | 14 | 16 |
| Civic Engagement (Voter turnout) | 12 | 2 | 10 |
| Accessibility of services (positive attitudes towards this) | 24 | 6 | 20 |
| Community (neighbour to rely on) | 20 | 1 | 4 |
| Life Satisfaction (rated out of 10) | 8 | 1 | 4 |

Notes: Each council area is ranked from 1-32 with 1 performing best and 32 the worst. *Sources:* see Appendix I.

It would be repetitive and space consuming to present the data for all 11 indicators in graph form, but to demonstrate the variance in a visual form Figure 4.3 below displays one example using two of the prominent statistics; % income deprived and % economic deprived, taken from the SIMD. It can be seen that for both the income and employment deprived percentage figures, the three council areas with Gaelic speakers have relatively low figures (all 10% or less), compared to the national average of 11% and 12% for income and employment deprivation respectively (Scottish Government, 2016a). They are much lower than urban/industrial areas around Glasgow where statistics reach up to almost 20% and 15% for income and employment deprivation. However, the other peripheral island-based council areas of Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands have slightly lower figures in the 5-6% range. Yet, further rural sparsely populated areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, Scottish Borders, and Perth and Kinross have comparable figures in the 10% range. Thus, overall it seems the major divide in these statistics is between urban and rural areas, with the former having more deprivation (City of Edinburgh is an outlier in this sense).



Figure 4.3 Percentage Income Deprived and Employment Deprived



Source: Authors own chart, using data from Scottish Government (2016a).

With further regard to employment statistics, the figures shown in columns 5 and 6 of Appendix I list employment and unemployment. The three Gaelic speaking areas score 72.3%, 78.2% and 79.8% for employment compared to a national average of 74.7%, and then 3.3%, 2.7% and 3.0% for unemployment compared to a national average of 4.1%. Again, urban areas such as Aberdeen City (4.1%), Dundee City (6.4%) and Glasgow City (5.5%) perform much worse. The Orkney and Shetland Islands again perform slightly better, and sparsely populated areas such as Perth and Kinross and Dumfries and Galloway are again quite similar. Overall the three council areas with Gaelic speakers perform much better than the average and dramatically better than some other non-urban council areas such as East and North Ayrshire.

The next topic listed is for health, whereby the indicators taken are life expectancy. Appendix I displays these statistics separated by gender. Here there is a slight variance in performance, with Na h-Eileanan Siar scoring the national average at 76.4 / 80.2 years for male and female, whereas Argyll and Bute and Highland are above average at 77.3 / 81.2 and 77.2 / 81.9. This is also reflected in the ranking whereby Na h-Eileanan Siar is 23rd and 26th placed in Scotland for male and female. These figures are not drastically different to Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands but are all significantly better than the worst performing council areas such as Glasgow City (72.6 / 78.5) or Dundee City (74.3 / 79.3).

Education, measured by the percent of the population with a degree, sees all three areas slightly below the national average with statistics in the low twenties compared to 25% nationally. However, the ranking shows that all three regions are above the median ranking (in 13th, 14th and 16th place). The reason for this is that a few urban council areas have particularly high statistics, such as City of



Edinburgh at 42% and this therefore pushes the national average higher (when considering population density of such council areas also). Compared to Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands, the three council areas with Gaelic speakers score much higher for this indicator. Overall the trend seems to be that council areas with a higher population density have a higher percentage of the population with a degree – considering this, the three council areas with Gaelic speakers are above the rural average.

The total voter turnout in the 2017 local elections is one of the strongest topics for the three council areas with Gaelic speakers, ranking 12th, 2nd and 10th respectively. This places them all above the national average of 46.9%, with figures of 48.9% for Argyll and Bute, 56.1% for Na h-Eileanan Siar, and 49.6% for Highland. These figures are also much higher than other rural areas such as Orkney Islands (43.4%) or Shetland Islands (41.2%).

For the Accessibility of Services topic, the indicator stating the ‘percentage of the adult population agreeing with positive statements concerning access to local services’ had a national average of 41%. Here there was a significant difference between the three council areas, with Argyll and Bute (39%) and Highland (37%) scoring below this national average, whilst Na h-Eileanan Siar (53%) significantly above – ranking 6th best nationally. The latter is therefore in line with Orkney Islands (58%) and Shetland Islands (67%). Nonetheless, Argyll and Bute and Highland are both far from worst performing in the country, with other rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway (28%), Angus (32%) and Aberdeenshire (35%) scoring much worse.

Another subjective topic, Community, offers another variation between the three council areas with Gaelic speakers. Taking the indicator of percent of population who feel they have a neighbour to rely on, Argyll and Bute is ranked 20th with a score of 84% compared to Na h-Eileanan Siar ranked 1st with 95% and Highland ranked 4th with 92%. This against a national average of 86%. There again seems to be a general trend of an urban/rural divide in this topic, with other extremely rural areas such as Orkney Islands (94%) and Shetland Islands (92%) scoring very highly and urban hubs like Glasgow City (82%) and City of Edinburgh (82%) lower. Or worse still, Dundee City at 78%.

Finally, life satisfaction see strong scores for all three council areas, ranking 8th, 1st and 4th nationally. The rates of 8.2 and 7.9 for Na h-Eileanan Siar and Highland are particularly high but are matched by Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands with 8.1 and 8.0 respectively. Again, urban areas such as Dundee City (7.4), City of Edinburgh (7.6) and Glasgow City (7.4), score dramatically lower. Other sparsely populated council areas such as Dumfries and Galloway (7.8), Scottish Borders (7.8) and Perth and Kinross (7.7) sit somewhere in between the two extremes.



5. Analysis

The results indicate many similarities in terms of regional development between the three council areas of Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar and Highland which contain significant numbers of Gaelic speakers. It is clear from the statistics as well as the rankings in Figure 4.2, that these council areas are certainly not amongst the worst performing council areas for any of the topics assessed. Rather, there are many instances where these three council areas are amongst the best performing areas of Scotland, particularly in life satisfaction for example. When comparing these three regions to comparable rural remote areas such as Orkney Islands or Shetland Islands, they are rather similar. This fluctuates somewhat, with the Gaelic speaking council areas slightly outperforming the Orkney and Shetland Islands for certain indicators (education, voter turnout, life satisfaction) and slightly underperforming in others (deprivation, employment, services). Largely, all five of these remote council areas outperform other rural, sparsely populated council areas such as Dumfries and Galloway or Scottish Borders. For the most part then, the most prominent divider evident throughout this data is between rural and urban; with Dundee City and Glasgow City consistently performing worst and to a lesser extent City of Edinburgh also low in many indicators. Council areas in the periphery of large cities are often also very poorly performing, particularly in the traditional industrial heartlands such as those surrounding Glasgow. This urban / rural differentiation is the opposite of what was found in previous regional development research on the Baltic states (Willis, 2019) where the cities, particularly the capitals, strikingly outperform rural areas in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Moving the focus specifically to Gaelic speakers, the analysis certainly has its limitations. Firstly, the three council areas vary enormously in terms of percentages. Argyll and Bute has just 4% Gaelic speaking population in comparison to Na h-Eileanan Siar at 52%, therefore care must be exercised when drawing any conclusions from the regional development data in the context of Gaelic speakers. What can be said though is that the regions in which Gaelic speakers reside are not disadvantaged in terms of development at the council area level. Thus, the broad living standards at the council area level are above the national average and in some cases amongst the best in the country. Given the small percentage of the population speaking Gaelic in Argyll and Bute and Highland, it is not possible to suggest from this evidence that Gaelic speakers are contributing to this development. For this, more in depth analysis would be needed at the neighbourhood level – for which quantitative data is much harder to come by. However, the SIMD map may be one tool which could be utilised, if data by neighbourhood for Gaelic speakers was available and that data showed a geographical concentration of speakers. It is certainly a desirable area for further research if possible. However, in the case of Na h-Eileanan Siar where 52.3% of the population speak Gaelic, it is more plausible to suggest that Gaelic speakers directly contribute to the regional development – given that they still constitute a statistical majority. Of course, further research is needed to draw concrete conclusions, but there are positive signs in this data.



Causation is even more difficult to prove, whereby it would seem illogical to suggest that regional development attracts Gaelic speakers - given the historic context of the language there. Yet, it could be suggested that regional development is fuelled through funding to revitalise Gaelic language (as the background literature suggested). However, if that was the case then it need not be seen as a negative.

The analysis was based on a wide range of topics, recreating the OECD Regional Wellbeing index, and it would be incorrect to suggest that the above paragraphs refer to each of these topics equally in terms of its impact. Whilst the above refers to the general picture across the eight topics, a few words can be said more precisely. The statistics for income and employment are arguably the most indicative, given the historic tendency of governments to measure prosperity through economic means. The deprivation and un/employment statistics consistently show that the council areas with Gaelic speakers perform better than the national average. This has to be seen as a significant positive regardless of causation, both for authorities and for the Gaelic speaking communities to know that their local economic opportunities are above the national average. A limitation of this is that the results rely on just one period of data, albeit the most recent and this limitation is the same as the OECD Regional Wellbeing index has. Nonetheless, a comparison across time would strengthen this finding.

This criticism of using snapshot data can be applied across all topics, to a varying degree of significance. For indicators such as life expectancy or education such data is less likely to fluctuate in the short term, however for the civic engagement topic it is much more limiting. Using data from just one election to assess voter turnout is clearly not enough to robustly indicate a pattern, although this is the approach the OECD Regional Wellbeing takes. Given the frequency of local, general and EU elections (particularly in the last decade) in Scotland, deeper analysis across multiple elections would increase the strength of this finding and is therefore a logical area for further research.

6. Conclusions

This Research Paper offers an overview of the current day situation in Scotland regarding regional development, placing the main focus on council areas with significant populations of Gaelic speakers. The broad finding is that the three council areas of Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar and Highland all perform above the national average for most indicators across the eight topics assessed. As the analysis outlined, the degree to which varies somewhat between the three council areas and within different topics. However, it can be concluded that from this snapshot analysis these three council areas perform similarly to comparable rural remote regions such as the Orkney and Shetland Islands where Gaelic is spoken by around only half a percent of the population. The indication therefore is that the Gaelic language does not negatively impact regional development in Scotland. A significant reason why these island-based communities perform well could lie in the notion of community and group identity, particularly for topics such as Community, Life Satisfaction and Civic Engagement, which could be



having knock-on effects to Income, Jobs and Health. Further research framed with this core question in mind could provide more insight here, using a set of measurable indicators concentrating solely on community aspects and comparing Scottish islands to other areas.

Whether the Gaelic language specifically is a boost to regional development and which actors affect this aspect is not shown here. As Argyll and Bute and Highland have just 4% and 5.4% Gaelic speakers it is unknown whether Gaelic speakers affect the regional development of these council areas; it can only be concluded that the Gaelic speakers do not suffer economically by living there rather than elsewhere. In the case of Na h-Eileanan Siar where 52.3% of the population speak Gaelic, it is more plausible to suggest that the Gaelic speakers do affect the local economy. Further research is therefore needed on a neighbourhood level to assess how the communities where Gaelic is even more concentrated perform – for instance the Isle of Skye in Highland. In the absence of such quantitative data, qualitative case study research may be required. Moreover, to improve the robustness of the results found here, a comparison across time should be undertaken. It would be particularly interesting to compare data from pre-devolution in 1999 or before the ERDF Operational Programme for Highlands and Islands 2007-2013, to measure what effect targeted funding programmes have had. Likewise, with the Highlands and Islands Enterprise and their work over the previous decades, a comparison across time could quantify any improvements in the regional development indicators measured if comparable data is available. Furthermore, a comparison across the UK to look at other Celtic language speaking areas could also provide fruitful insight into the effects of historic Westminster domination.

Whilst the results of this research indicate a general overview of regional development in Gaelic speaking areas of Scotland in comparison to the rest of the country at this point in time, what it categorically does not show is any causation. The question of why this is the case is not answered here. A consequent next step would be to investigate the actors in these local areas and seek to find out who is fuelling the performance of regional economy in the likes of Na h-Eileanan Siar. Nonetheless, this work acts as an initial step in establishing the broad picture for Gaelic speaking regions of Scotland, opening several avenues for future in-depth research to further the findings.



Notes

¹ Scottish Gaelic as opposed to Irish Gaelic. However, for simplicity and following common practice, this text will henceforth use simply Gaelic to refer to the language.

² The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has compiled a variety of data to create an index measuring regional development which is comparable across 402 regions in the 34 OECD countries. More information is available in their User Guide:

<https://www.oecdregionalwellbeing.org/assets/downloads/Regional-Well-Being-User-Guide.pdf>

³ The Isle of Skye is of particular relevance for the Highland council area as it contains the largest concentration of Gaelic speakers in this administrative region.

⁴ MG Alba, BBC Alba and Bòrd na Gàidhlig are three of the most prominent Gaelic focused organisations created and linked to language and communications legislation in Scotland. [MG Alba](#) is the Gaelic media service with a remit to “ensure that high quality televisions in Gaelic are made available to persons in Scotland” and thus works in close cooperation with [BBC Alba](#) – the British Broadcasting Company’s Gaelic channel. [Bòrd na Gàidhlig](#) is a non-governmental public body “responsible for promoting Gaelic development and providing assistance to the Scottish Ministers on Gaelic issues”. All three are funded through public funds.

⁵ OCED uses most recent data available and this varies per country - thus will not be stated in the table below, unlike the data for Scotland which is obviously specific for this paper and is therefore listed.

⁶ Unemployment is calculated using model based estimates. Both data sets are taken from Q2 2019.

⁷ In all but one council area, the ratio of homicide per 1,000 people was 0.

⁸ This data is collected from the Scottish Household Survey and concerns all adults above 16 from the reference period 2017.

⁹ 2018 data from Scottish Household Survey. This statistic and many other similar sentiments were available and could be disaggregated by age, gender, households with and without children, and even ethnicity. Unfortunately, not by Gaelic speakers!

¹⁰ Na h-Eileanan Siar is entirely islands, including the substantial Isle of Lewis, whilst Highlands contains a scattering of islands including the substantial Isle of Skye where most of the council area’s Gaelic speaking population resides. For a visual overview of the council areas’ positions in Scotland, see <http://www.lgbc-scotland.gov.uk/boundary-maps/maps>.



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