

The right foundations

Building a just and sustainable country after coronavirus.

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What if we applied the same principles behind our response to coronavirus to tackling health inequalities and climate change?

Introduction.

The coronavirus outbreak has been the most disruptive crisis we've seen in generations and the response from across society has been extraordinary. Along with many other countries, Scotland's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has prioritised people's health and wellbeing ahead of economic growth. At the same time, a huge swell of community-led action has been right at the heart of our efforts to protect and support vulnerable people. In this CHEX briefing, we argue that the reaction to coronavirus has shown us what is possible in terms of radically shifting our emphasis towards the things that really matter. We can build a more just and sustainable country which really begins to tackle long-term health inequalities, but it has to be on the right foundations.

Our key messages are:

1. Preventing harm and protecting health and wellbeing means having a serious **nation-wide dialogue regarding our economy**, particularly around the redistribution of wealth from rich to poor through taxation.
2. **Building on the community-sector response to Covid-19** must be at the heart of Scotland's recovery effort if we are to build back better.

3. Community development approaches can **ensure the voices of people with lived experience of poverty and inequality are heard.**
 4. Funding, community capacity building and investment in partnership-building is needed to **ensure that every community in Scotland can be as resilient** as many have been during the Covid-19 crisis.
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The response from our communities

Community organisations, including many organisations in the CHEX network, have been a huge part of our country's response to Covid-19. Shaped by local knowledge and experience, the actions of these organisations have been swift, impactful and widely celebrated on national and local media. The organisation and management of effort has been community-led with a lot of the work on the ground being carried out by local volunteers. This has kept many members of the population safe and supported and, had it not been there, many people would have experienced adverse outcomes and demand on public services would be higher – immediately and further down the line.

Example from the CHEX network: Collydean Community Centre

As soon as the Covid-19 lockdown was announced, Glenrothes-based community organisation, Collydean Community Centre began to repurpose as a community hub for a Covid-19 response ensuring vulnerable households are supported through the crisis.

The Community Café has become a mini contact centre, the sports hall is now a temporary food-house storing ambient and fresh food and the Centre is distributing food parcels to those struggling, including the increased number of people made redundant. Volunteers get prescriptions and shopping for isolated people and also act as community buddies through a telephone befriending service.

Collydean has high levels of poverty, including child poverty, and the group's work is making a huge difference to already vulnerable groups.

The buddying system has been vital for people who are experiencing increased anxiety about the extended lockdown. The Growing Together Project, a key new initiative encouraging families to work with their children to grow vegetables, is benefitting people in terms of nutrition and saving money - skills that will hopefully continue to benefit families after the crisis.

Read the full article on [Communities Channel Scotland](#).

The rapid funding response, including from the Scottish Government and a range of trusts, has helped community organisations with immediate costs and to develop creative and locally appropriate support. [Inspiring examples](#) are emerging from around the country. In many cases small-scale neighbourhood action has been more immediate and responsive than public sector organisations have been able to achieve. Community-led activity has been able to combine the practical with the social, has involved more local people in delivery work and, as a result, maintained and built on neighbourhood connections and 'sense of community'. It has been able to protect and support some of the most at risk in the timescales that a pandemic demands.

The community-led response is a reminder of how community-led health has a much broader focus than health. Every community-led organisation working for the benefit of their community will have a positive impact on health and wellbeing. The fact that these organisations have been ready to respond as fast and effectively to a pandemic shows how well-positioned they are to deliver appropriate support to their communities, whatever challenges they are faced with.

All this is not to downplay the [difficult challenges](#) that the community sector is facing responding to the crisis, including maintaining current levels of support and reaching our most excluded communities. The importance of building on the community-sector response – while at the same time supporting community organisations to address any emerging challenges – should be at the heart of Scotland's recovery effort.

Example from the CHEX network: Edinburgh Community Food

Within a 24-hour period at the start of the crisis Edinburgh Community Food's food delivery system flipped from business, community and homes to home delivery to vulnerable, isolated and people facing financial hardship.

Soon they were providing meals to 2000 people and families per week, including "Take'n'Make" meals in a bag providing for different sizes of household, as well as 'essential' food boxes containing 'dignified' quality items to help reduce food inequality. They have dedicated space in their warehouse to hold 40 pallets worth of emergency food supplies for Fareshare. These 'forward stores' increase both Edinburgh's overall food resilience and security, and Edinburgh Community Food's ability to respond more quickly to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

In addition to the provision of emergency supplies, the organisation is providing partnership support to food-oriented start-ups and increased provision of online education and training, including weaning classes and family oral-health education. Edinburgh Community Food has also ramped up their social media presence in order to act as a platform to support vulnerable people and demonstrate the work that they are doing.

Read the full article on the [CHEX website](#).

Building on community

We have shown how community-led health and community development more widely has had a critical role supporting people through the crisis. It should now have a key contribution to 'building back better' or, as the Scottish Government [puts it](#), making "the social and economic reforms necessary to achieve the best future for Scotland."

The people of Scotland, and particularly those at the sharp end of inequality, need to be at the centre of the recovery from Covid-19. There is a danger that unequal power

relations and our unsustainable economy will be re-created if the people who are most disadvantaged have no voice. Furthermore, people need to be on board with the difficult but necessary economic and social changes from the start.

Here are some of the ways that our sector can contribute to making this happen.

Local action

Working at the front line of responding to coronavirus and other challenges, community organisations have the knowledge and will to respond constructively to local needs in an emergency and are best placed to know what interventions are required now and in the future. They have a first-hand understanding of how different policies and decisions will affect the people they work with.

CHEX, and our parent organisation Scottish Community Development Centre, have already heard from community organisations across Scotland about the immediate, medium and long-term impacts of COVID-19 and the lockdown. [Our research](#) has highlighted the different, sometimes subtle, challenges faced by a diverse range of vulnerable groups in society. We have heard, for instance, that increased anxiety will leave many vulnerable individuals without the confidence to attend vital services as lockdown is lifted.

It is therefore vital that the community sector is adequately represented in **planning** for recovery and putting this into action. It is essential, for instance, that their voice is heard when assessing how a course of action will impact on equality, inequality and human rights. Community organisations and the people they work with should also be involved in assessing the viability of measures, as they know the practical barriers to putting things into place locally.

For many of the same reasons, the community sector should have a key role in **implementing** measures arising from this planning. Community organisations are well placed to make messages accessible and tailor measures to suit the needs of their wider communities. As has been shown already during the Covid-19 pandemic, they can provide vital support more speedily and flexibly than other sectors have been shown to manage. They will have an essential role in getting the message out about, and supporting people through, the changes needed to 'build back better'.

The trust and reach of community organisations will be a key resource and should drive change locally.

Democratic participation

Democratic innovation is already beginning to flower in Scotland and should be built upon. The recent [Citizen's Assembly of Scotland](#) is a case in point. Before being postponed due to Covid-19, the assembly had prioritised sustainability and tackling poverty. It had explored using fairer taxation in order to make our country more environmentally sustainable. The assembly constituted a 'mini-public', carefully selected to reflect the diversity of views and backgrounds of people in Scotland. Through careful discussion, listening to a broad range of views from fellow participants and expert 'witnesses', the assembly was open to considering brave political choices that should encourage decision makers to go further than they have up till now.

Involving people in the design and delivery of the services they use, through [co-production](#) and broader [community engagement](#), is now understood as a key part of creating and delivering effective public services. Understandably some of this activity has been put on hold by Covid-19 and social distancing measures, but it is important that every effort is made to ensure that participation informs decisions at this critical moment. The 'recovery' phase of the response to Covid-19 presents the opportunity to build on democratic innovations and also the themes and priorities that have been emerging within them. We note that the [Climate Assembly UK](#) is currently being completed digitally and it is encouraging that digital methods are now being considered for continuing the Citizens Assembly of Scotland.

Capacity building

Participation is only effective if everyone can take part equally, and community development approaches can ensure this. Community organisations, in tandem with community development support, are well-placed to build the confidence and resilience of individuals and communities for the economic, social and health challenges to come. Community organisations, using community development

approaches, are well placed to facilitate vulnerable people with lived experience of inequality to be part of democratic processes. They are often led by people experiencing the impact of disadvantage and inequality, and will have the reach into, and trust of, their wider communities. They can conduct their [own research](#) with their communities in order to learn about what works and what doesn't.

Furthermore, community organisations do not exist in every part of Scotland and, where they do exist, they may not reach into marginalised groups within their own community. Some of the strongest and most active community organisations do work in and with our most disadvantaged communities. But it is important to recognise that funding, community capacity building and investment in partnership-building is needed to ensure that every community in Scotland can be as resilient as [many have been](#) during the Covid-19 crisis.

The right approach

The community sector's response has been one of the most positive developments in these difficult times. We have tried to show that community-led health and community development should be at the heart of forging the 'new normal' for the people of Scotland.

Of course, there are some caveats to this. Adequate **funding and support** needs to be provided to community organisations. Furthermore, community organisations should not be expected to take on **responsibility** for essential public services. Stronger and more equal local **partnership** is also needed between public sector organisations and community organisations.

CHEX believes that the approach taken by the Scottish Government, and many other governments around the world, in leading us through, and hopefully out of, the coronavirus pandemic has been the right one overall. Before March 2020, it would have been hard to imagine that any kind of health crisis could lead to a deliberate decision to grind our whole economy to a halt to save lives. As others have pointed out, the response to the pandemic has seen a prioritising of people's immediate wellbeing over economic growth.

Questions remain around the protection given to vulnerable groups, including people in care homes – people’s **human rights** [risk not being met](#) in some instances. The virus has also had a **disproportionate impact** on [already disadvantaged communities](#), including less affluent and black and minority ethnic communities. The worldwide Black Lives Matter protests in light of the killing of George Floyd by police in the US illustrate the extent of injustice in our societies. They reflect on us all and require reflection *by us all* in how we organise ourselves as a society.

Now is the time to imagine, and begin to put in place the building blocks for, the kind of economy and society which could emerge as we recover from the impact of Covid-19. The way our economy is organised is the main factor behind inequality and poverty in Scotland. We can’t make society fairer without seriously looking at economic questions, particularly the redistribution of wealth from rich to poor through taxation.

Moreover, as a [recent paper](#) by Public Health Scotland and Glasgow Centre for Population Health has shown, ongoing inequality has and will reduce life expectancy in Scotland much more than the coronavirus has. The paper contrasts actions to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 with actions to prevent health inequality, stating:



It is interesting to compare the radical government action in the face of the COVID-19 threat but much less drastic policy interventions to reduce income, wealth and power inequalities (e.g. through social security benefit values, progressive taxes, ownership of capital, etc.) to reduce inequality-related mortality. The post-COVID-19 pandemic period should be used to ‘build back better’ and ensure that society and the economy in the future provides the basis to reduce social inequalities in health and all avoidable causes of death.



A similar case can be made in terms of addressing climate change. As [a report](#) at the end of 2019 by the medical journal, The Lancet has explained, our choices around how we tackle climate change will have a huge impact on life expectancy:



The life of every child born today will be profoundly affected by climate change, with populations around the world increasingly facing extremes of weather, food and water insecurity, changing patterns of infectious disease, and a less certain future [...] Bold new approaches to policy making, research, and business are needed in order to change course. An unprecedented challenge demands an unprecedented response. It will take the work of the 7.5 billion people currently alive to ensure that the health of a child born today is not defined by a changing climate.



In Scotland, there are some optimistic signs that we are ready to ask ourselves difficult questions about what kind of society we want to live in. A national campaign led by [Friends of the Earth Scotland](#) and signed by thousands of people and over 80 organisations has called for the Scottish Government to take a just and green approach to ‘building back better’. At a UK level, the New Economic Foundation’s [#BuildBackBetter campaign](#) calls for a nationwide response to tackling inequality, the climate emergency and to ensure public services are properly resourced.

At a government level, the Scottish Government’s [recovery ‘route map’](#) has strongly emphasised that we cannot simply return to how things were before the global pandemic. The [Advisory Group on Economic Recovery](#) was perhaps a missed opportunity to enable those at the sharp end of economic policy to have a voice in shaping it. However, a separate group, the [Advisory Board on Social Renewal](#) was set up in June to listen to people with lived experience of poverty and inequality and to come up with recommendation on improving equality, human rights and social justice in Scotland. Set up before the Covid-19 pandemic, the [Just Transition Commission](#) consultation closed at the end of June, and will be advising on a net-zero economy that is fair for all. Separately, local [Community Climate Action Hubs](#)

are planned to engage local communities in making this transition. CHEX, [along with some others in the community-sector](#), would like to see existing community organisations be able to take up this role.

Clearly, there are constitutional questions about the powers Scotland currently has in order to implement the necessary changes. The Citizens Assembly of Scotland was set up to explore this which we believe is the right approach. As we have set out in this briefing, participative, deliberative forums like this enable people to have thoughtful discussions about difficult, divisive issues and to come up with creative solutions.

The Coronavirus crisis has been devastating for many, yet presents an opportunity to fundamentally do things differently. It is understandably challenging to pick ourselves up from one disorientating crisis to have to start thinking about others, and it would be easy to focus on trying to get back to 'business as usual'. In addition, we can't ignore the fact that people's health and wellbeing is being adversely affected as a result of lockdown and other measures. We've recently heard of the "[lives vs lives](#)" conundrum, referring to the balance between preventing harm from coronavirus with harm from social distance measures. A more difficult, but no less important, balance has to be struck between the harm caused by the current lockdown-driven economic crisis and the harm from continuing with our unsustainable and unequal economic system.

What next

CHEX and SCDC will continue to work with our network and partner organisations in order to reinforce the key messages in this briefing. If you would like to contribute your own ideas or speak about any aspect of the briefing, please contact

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More information

In addition to following the links contained within this paper, you can find more information on community-led health, community development and support for community organisations responding to Covid-19 at the following links:

- Visit www.chex.org.uk for more information on community-led health, including a [list](#) of previous policy briefings.
- Join the [CHEX network](#) for free and be listed on our [community-led health database](#).
- For all things related to community development, see Scottish Community Development Centre's website at www.scdc.org.uk
- More on community organisations responding to Covid-19 can be found on [Communities Channel Scotland](#)

