

“In what constitutes the real happiness of human life, [the poor] are in no respect inferior to those who would seem so much above them.” Adam Smith: The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759)

The SIMD figures – And Constructive Community Responses



A proposal for a SURF Index of Multiple Assets and Aspirations (SIMAA)

Why?

The publication of this Autumn's SIMD¹ figures (September, 2016) provoked a predictably negative and stigmatising response from much of the traditional media. Context and nuance were lost as newspaper, radio and television headlined the message that despite continued and ongoing investment in regeneration, there had been little or no change in those communities which appeared to stubbornly remain Scotland's 'most deprived'.

The same coverage included statements by a few residents of Ferguslie Park ("**Scotland's Poverty Black Spot**"; *The Sun*) protesting at their community being labelled in this way – but the dominant message was that life was bleak in those communities which the SIMD scale had identified as suffering from multi-deprivation. For the people who saw their own reality in different or more positive terms, there

¹A Scottish Government index – dividing Scotland into 6,976 'communities' - which uses stats from employment, income, health, education, crime, housing and access to services as a way of calculating areas of 'multiple deprivation'.

was no existing platform for presenting that more balanced view to the wider public. As well as being locally depressing, under-informed negative stereotyping has a chilling effect on external perceptions, connections and investments.

Why SURF?

SURF is engaged with several of Scotland's poorest communities, both in its role as a forum for some 300 cross sector regeneration agencies and thousands of individuals – and in its Alliance for Action place based, regeneration collaborations. Literally, within hours of the SIMD figures being released, SURF had been contacted by people from across Scotland expressing frustration and irritation, at what was seen as a fundamentally unfair and unhelpful portrayal of life in their communities.

"We're so fed up with being told how miserable our lives are by people who know nothing about us."

"A couple of us were in tears at what we were hearing"

"We know there are good things happening, but no-one is interested in that"

"It makes us feel that what we do is useless, ignored."

"What we want measured is community spirit, skills, assets, people, fun"

In a response to media coverage, SURF Chief Executive Andy Milne said "We all know there are far too many people in Scotland in really difficult circumstances, but that's only part of the story. Our experience is that poor communities are also full of hard-working people with skills, knowledge and aspirations who are changing their communities for the better – positive changes which aren't reflected in these figures."

The people who contacted SURF weren't trying to palliate the reality of their communities – they wanted the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate a more representative image. They were frustrated at being characterised by outsiders as 'deprived', based on a limited range of data, selected as important by external agencies

Several suggested the need for some kind of alternative or additional index to better reflect the more balanced reality of life in those Scottish communities struggling against the impacts of poverty and economic decline.

In response to those constructive reactions from within SURF's own network, SURF initiated a series of conversations with relevant agencies which support SURF's partnership and collaborative regeneration work.

SURF also discussed the negative impact of the SIMD press coverage with Scottish Government colleagues who compile the figures. Their job is to enable "effective analysis for targeting of policies and funding where the aim is to wholly or partly tackle or take account of area concentrations of multiple deprivation." They too expressed frustration at media headlines, which seemed to only add to the challenges of the struggling communities they were trying to help.

Within a few short weeks, SURF uncovered a solid consensus across its network of academics, policy influencers, funders and those who live and work in the communities stigmatised by the SIMD media coverage. All agreed that an additional and different kind of index could help to rebalance shared understanding, inform better policy and support more collaborative action.

What? SIMAA – SURF’s Index of Multiple Assets and Aspiration

SURF’s proposal for the creation of a supplementary index is made in direct response to a need expressed by those communities within the SURF network. As such, it sits well with SURF’s continuing efforts to inform and rebalance the popular regeneration narrative towards a more equitable view of regeneration challenges and opportunities.

SURF’S Index of Multiple Assets and Aspirations would promote a more holistic view of ‘deprived’ communities as integral parts of a wider regeneration ecology system – one where they are acknowledged as functioning elements of the same system – and not alienated and stigmatised as being other and dependent.

The strong, constructive responses of SURF contacts living and working in these communities, and helpful offers of support from others within SURF’s network, have informed the following proposal.

There is general agreement that any SURF supported SIMAA should be underpinned by two basic principles:

- Any measures of community assets or aspirations would be identified by the communities themselves. It is not the role of SURF or academics or other ‘outside’ agencies to identify and map a community’s assets on behalf of those who are far better able to do so - the people who live and work there.
- The measuring of community assets and aspirations does not negate the ongoing challenges facing individuals and communities at the sharp end of national and international economic factors and policies, over which they have no significant influence. Presenting a more balanced view would not be a justification for reduced public services or investment.

Where and What will SIMAA measure?

SURF would initially focus on those communities it works most directly with to first identify a baseline of local assets and aspirations. It would utilise its existing good relationship with contacts in the three current Alliance for Action areas to produce a list of broad categories to which assets and aspirations could be attached.

Some specific themes have already been suggested as appropriate counterweights to the seven sets of statistics used to produce the SIMD data. For example where SIMD looks at employment, SIMAA could highlight the numbers of volunteers; where SIMD identifies academic results, SIMAA could recognise practical knowledge skills and experience.

By drawing on its existing community engagement partners and processes in the Alliance for Action communities, SURF would facilitate meetings, surveys and social media, with a view to producing an early draft of proposed SIMAA categories.

Other communities with strong SURF connections², would then be invited to comment and amend the suggested categories. Partner organisations which have already expressed an interest in collaborating in this process, include colleagues at the University of Strathclyde and Glasgow

² SURF has strong existing relationships with many communities depicted as ‘deprived’ outwith the Alliance for Action, for example with the Clyde Gateway area and with Pilton in Edinburgh, both would be able to provide valuable input into any SIMAA process.

Caledonian University. They would help to formulate a final list of asset themed categories, to which communities would contribute examples.

Some SURF partners are using creative mediums as a way of capturing and presenting positive views of Scotland's poorest communities to a wide audience and have expressed interest in using the development of SIMAA as a vehicle to enhance their work.

There are already efforts being made to record broader community outcomes in Scotland. SURF will not duplicate existing work, but is always interested in constructive collaboration that would enhance shared knowledge and practical cooperation.

Analogous projects include, for example, Oxfam's excellent Humankind Index³ produced with support from the New Economics Foundation and the Fraser of Allander Institute, which assessed and compared Scotland's 'prosperity' in 2009/2010 and in 2010/2011. The 18 indicators that Oxfam used were based on initial consultation with some 3000 people about what constitutes 'a good life'. They include measures of social relations, health and skills, physical environment and natural context, and financial assets. The Humankind Index calculated a 'good life' average across Scotland and then compared 'deprived' communities to the average as a way of measuring change. Among other organisations exploring comparable themes are the Scottish Community Development Centre and the Development Trust Association, Scotland.⁴

Who and How?

Even at this early stage, SURF has received a wide range of useful offers of practical support. These provide a sound basis for productive discussions within its network and with partner organisations about the most effective, accurate and practical way of collating and presenting the information.

Given that the identification of assets must be supplied from within the communities, several appropriate suggestions are being considered and SURF is open to any others proffered. Intelligent use of social media could be highly effective in connecting people living and working in targeted communities directly to a website where they could record local assets. Colleagues involved in current large scale national evaluations have already expressed an interest in helping to design and develop an online forum where interested projects and individuals could contribute directly to the index knowledge base.

In its early stages, SIMAA would focus on collating and providing specific localised information to constructively promote more holistic, inclusive views of the participant communities than SIMD can do alone from its data base. In this way, SIMAA could ameliorate the perceived negative impact of the SIMD figures and the unfair picture presented by the media of those communities deemed 'most

³ Measuring wellbeing in Scotland: the Oxfam Humankind Index. / Dunlop, Stewart; Swales, Kim. In: Fraser of Allander Economic Commentary, Vol. 36, No. 1, 06.2012, p. 81-88.

⁴ Other examples include: the Bank of Scotland and YouGov's "Scottish Happiness Index" based on a survey which includes questions about income, travel and work satisfaction and rates the responses in a table of regions; the UK Government's own Measuring National Well-being Programme, produced by the Office for National Statistics since 2010; and the work of Professor Nick Bailey of the Urban Big Data Centre at Glasgow University .

deprived'. It would not attempt to replicate the thoroughness of the official Scottish Government data with its breakdown of nearly 7000 discrete areas, but to productively compliment it.

Resources and Timescale

SURF proposes to undertake an initial development pilot phase focusing on the three current Alliance for Action sites, each of which have datazones ranked in the 10% most deprived (2016 SIMD). They are:

- Govan, Glasgow
- East Kirkcaldy, Fife
- Rothesay, Isle of Bute

This initial research and scoping phase would run over six months, from the beginning of 2017. SURF proposes to undertake it on a pro bono basis by drawing on SURF's existing knowledge, contacts and resources. The approach will be to engage with relevant local contacts and organisations these communities, to identify the main relevant assets and aspirations that they would like to see featured in an eventual SIMAA index.

Knowledge and experience accrued from this work would then inform the design of an expanded process, aimed at researching and incorporating the views and experience of additional 'multi-deprived' areas across Scotland, into a structured and comprehensive SIMAA. SURF would then welcome discussions with supportive partners on in kind and financial investment towards the realisation, sustainability and most productive use of that more comprehensive SIMAA index.

Conclusion

This proposal is a direct and practical response to concerns and aspirations expressed to SURF by people and organisations living and working in communities designated as multi-deprived by SIMD. Conversations with relevant SURF cross-sector partners and stakeholders, indicate there is a widespread willingness to support SURF in this initiative.

We have indicated an initial timescale and process for action. We will welcome comment, advice and suggestions on the proposal and its further development. Meanwhile, SURF will continue its various conversations with relevant partners, all of whom share the aim of supporting a constructive community-based challenge to the reductive portrayal of life in some areas as being simply multi-deprived.

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