9 TOWARDS A NEW MODEL FOR THE REVIVAL OF THE GAELIC COMMUNITY

In this chapter, we set out a new model for the revival of the Gaelic community. In section 9.1, we explore the need and present the basis for credible Gaelic policies and community interventions. In section 9.2, we discuss language planning and policy in a community development framework with reference to some of the international literature. In section 9.3, we present our proposal for a new Participatory Minority Language Cooperative to be operationalised as Urras na Gàidhlig (the Gaelic Community Trust). An overview of the new model is presented in section 9.4 and section 9.5 contains a summary description of the operational strands comprising the model. Section 9.6 contrasts the societal and the institutional approaches to language policy and planning. Sections 9.7 and 9.8 provide detailed exposition of the four main strategic priorities within the model. In suggesting a new model for Gaelic policy it is important not to underestimate the challenges involved in taking a new course of action. Adopting a more positive and relevant approach necessarily entails counteracting the effects of inertia and of the many years of linguicidal initiatives against Gaelic; contending with those who benefit from the *status quo* and, more pointedly from a communal perspective, Gaelic revitalisation will also have to address the sociolinguistic reality of two generations of general English-language dominance in the islands.

9.1 Introduction

Based on our analysis, the various modules of this research project set out the evidence and rationale for a process of policy re-alignment (cf. Figure 9.1 below). The unsustainability of the *status quo* (from the autochthonous perspective) and the ongoing loss of vernacular Gaelic communities is the chief rationale for proposing an alternative strategy. In addressing problems affecting groups or societies, it is widely acknowledged that there are four interlinked steps in effecting purposeful change:

1. Identify the problem or the challenge
2. Agree collectively to address the challenge systematically
3. Set out feasible and credible solutions or interventions for relevant stakeholders (individuals, communities and formal bodies)
4. Encourage stakeholders to participate in developing an agreed strategy to engage creatively and pro-actively with the problem.

The depiction in this study of the fragility of the Gaelic-speaking collective of the Western Isles indicates the need for a new paradigm which is focused on the societal and linguistic reality of the existing speaker group, rather than an approach too narrowly mediated through and dominated by institutional aspirations. Credible language development policies in this challenging environment will initially depend on identifying cooperative mechanisms in the Gaelic community to address their societal condition. Agreement on alternative pathways for development will be required before better language outcomes can be made. The alternative path we propose is based on the framework of a Participatory Minority Language Cooperative.

Given the severity of the crisis facing the Gaelic-speaking group in the islands, engaging positively with this condition is an enormous individual, communal and institutional challenge. When we consider that the dominant culture had previously the capacity to bilingualise the dominated culture and to naturalise or depoliticise the process of language shift in the minority, the ethnopolitical and organisational challenges are immense. These challenges are even greater, given the unsuitability of current provision, the weakness of civic engagement and indifferent or only mildly-supportive public attitudes towards the role of Gaelic in Scottish society. The extent of the challenges in the current condition suggests three main options:

1. Do nothing positive for the Gaelic-speaking group, or adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude and await the societal demise of Gaelic
2. Use the mechanisms of the 2005 Gaelic Language Act to require of the Scottish Government and Bòrd na Gàidhlig to address the vernacular crisis
3. Address the crisis through a radical new departure of encouraging, supporting and resourcing a community-development approach among those best placed to address the issue — the remaining vernacular group.

Each of the three options entail various obstacles and difficulties, which we discuss separately here.

Option 1 — the *laissez-faire* approach — poses a political and public policy conundrum for Scottish political life, especially in the context of devolution. The post-devolution settlement has encouraged the promotion of Gaelic in Scotland as a public good, and has sought to enhance the civic presence and status of Gaelic in Scottish public and cultural life. The imminent social erosion of Gaelic will force political and public bodies in Scotland to contend with the language-policy irony that they are promoting policy aspirations for a language which has very few vernacular speaker-groups or a recognisable communal presence in society. Promoting a language with no *in situ* community exposes public policy to potential criticism, i.e. that public bodies are promoting the institutional life of a language despite their failure to promote the language in society. Institutionally-promoted languages, organised independently of socio-cultural context, run the risk of becoming pseudo-cultures. An obvious difficulty with this option is the political embarrassment or possible accusation of pretence in spending public resources and energy on a secondary version of a culture, while ignoring the destruction and loss of the primary habitat of that culture (see various authors on the importance of protecting the social habitat of threatened languages: Fishman's (1991: 58) 'potential oases', Ó Sé's (2000) 'crannóga' [safeguarded dwelling], Ó Curnáin's (2009) 'tearmann teanga' [language sanctuary], and safeguarding the higher social densities of Irish speakers in the Category A Gaeltacht districts as discussed in Ó Giollagáin *et al*. 2007a,b and Ó Giollagáin and Charlton 2015).

Option 2 — the extension of existing mechanisms to address the crisis — also entails significant problems. Using existing public policy mechanisms would necessitate giving Bòrd na Gàidhlig primary responsibility for addressing language-community regeneration. Requiring of Bòrd na Gàidhlig to address the contraction of the Gaelic group in the islands would involve a significant change in corporate and institutional culture and in their operational remit. This option would entail a significant rebalance in the Bòrd's remit and

353