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**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AMERICA:
SOCIOLOGICAL ISSUES IN NATIONAL POLICY¹**

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ABSTRACT Definitions of the concepts of rural, community, and development suggest problems for a policy of rural community development. An effective policy must address two barriers to development of community among residents of rural areas: 1) deficits in access to resources for meeting common needs and 2) severe inequalities in access to resources that are available. Rurality encourages community development when these barriers are low. The aim of policy should be to attack rural barriers while cultivating rural potentials for community development.

Community development, a keystone of the Great Society policies of the 1960s, has emerged in the 1980s as a focus of rural development policy in the United States. The Carter Administration, anticipating the Rural Development Policy Act of 1980, issued its Small Community and Rural Development Policy in December 1970. The Reagan Administration issued Better Country: A Strategy for Rural Development in the 1980s in February 1983. Although these statements express contrasting views of the federal role in development, they agree on a central premise: Community development can be a key to enhancing the well-being of rural America.

Ironically, this agreement comes at a time of considerable disagreement among sociologists about the meaning and usefulness of such terms as rural, community, and development. Thus, an invitation to rural sociologists to contribute to the search for an effective rural development strategy (Wilkinson, Hobbs, and Christenson, 1983) is a challenge as well as an opportunity. Part of the challenge is to resolve questions in rural sociology and the sociology of community as background for suggesting elements of a sound national policy. This paper explores conceptual and theoretical issues that need to be resolved in responding to that challenge.

Conceptual issues

An effective policy must rest on useful definitions. The crucial definitions for a policy of rural community development are those of the three key concepts -- rural, community, and development.

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Rural

What is rural? Few questions cut so clearly to the heart of a scientific discipline or to the essential premises of a national policy as does this one for rural sociology and rural development. At one level, this question calls for operational criteria. Operational definition, however, presupposes the more fundamental issue of whether the concept of rurality has any substantial meaning in a complex urban society.

The word, rural, has two roots: rewos, for room or space, and rus, for rustic or bucolic. The former gives rurality an ecological meaning, the latter a sociocultural meaning. Rural as an ecological concept means much physical space among people; i.e., population dispersion as a settlement pattern. Rural as a sociocultural concept means primitive and unrefined. In practice, sociologists have distinguished between two rustical qualities for research on this concept, namely reliance on primary industry (e.g., farming) and veneration of primary social institutions (e.g., family, church, and community). Thus, sociological studies of rurality typically consider an ecological component, an occupational component, and a value component (Willits and Bealer, 1967).

Evidence over recent decades suggests that only one of these components--a dispersed settlement pattern--is a persisting, atemporal characteristic of rurality. This is because occupations and values have become as diverse in the countryside as in the city, notwithstanding the tendency for traditional rural values to be more prevalent among farmers than among people in other occupations (Willits, et al. 1982). Areas are rural today by virtue of population dispersion but rarely by virtue of rustical qualities in social life.

This, however, is not to say the consequences of rurality have become trivial, only that the important consequences today tend not to be those emphasized earlier in rural sociology. Now, as in the past, rurality has correlates other than the outlooks and occupations of people that influence social life. One of these is depressed access to resources for meeting needs, a rural characteristic that presents a serious barrier to community development. Another is a relatively small-scale social organization, a characteristic that increases the potential for social cohesion and coordination in rural areas. These persisting correlates of rurality have persisting significance for a policy of rural community development.

Community

Is community a useful concept for understanding a modern society? Or is community an antiquated symbol, one dredged up by politicians and rural sociologists to appeal to popular yearnings for return to simpler times? Why is community development important in a policy of rural development?

While the sociological literature contains many

definitions of community, most of these emphasize only three elements. Community is a relatively small territory where people live together, meeting their daily needs in interaction with a common physical and social environment. This is the ecological component of community. Community also is a more-or-less comprehensive organization of institutions and associations for serving the common interests of people. That is, the community is a holistic structure of social life. In addition, community is a process of collective action expressing the solidarity of the local population. Kaufman (1959) refers to these elements as the locality, the local society, and the field of community interaction. All three elements are present in the phenomenon of community addressed here.

Modernization of society has had important effects on each of these elements, calling into question the continued utility of the concept of community as defined conventionally. Intercommunity linkages have altered the ecological boundaries of local territory, and revolutions in transportation and communications have expanded the local area for meeting needs. Many components of the local society have become less localized, as sectors and organizations are linked more to the outside world than to one another within the locality. Accordingly, the traditional bases of mutual identity and collective action have virtually disappeared in many localities. The community, says Roland Warren (1978:409-17), no longer is a coherent social entity. Instead, he says, it is a turbulent social field within which special-interest groups use the local stage to promote their separate, unrelated goals. Many observers would agree that modern society threatens traditional community identity.

Three observations, however, challenge the conclusion that community has vanished from the American scene. First, such a conclusion simply exaggerates the body of available evidence (Goudy and Ryan, 1982). Second, while an all-encompassing solidarity is unlikely in a complex modern settlement, a mutual interest in the place of residence--an essential basis of community--can persist among people who share few other interests. Third, the demise of community is described mainly in the literature on large cities, leaving open the possibility that community persists mainly in smaller settlements. These observations suggest starting points for assessing the prospects for community and community development in rural America.

People still live together in local areas. They still experience "society" mainly through local contacts. Even with diverse interests and extensive outside ties, people who live together have at least a latent common interest in the area of residence. Community, therefore, is as possible now as at any time in the past, although--as in any era--the form community takes is affected by other characteristics of the society, and other factors can retard the development of community within a local society.

Development

The referent of the term, development, is a process of

improving the well-being of people. While formal definitions of development tend to focus either on the process itself (e.g., on democratic participation in collective action) or on its products (e.g., on economic growth or improved services), a broad concept of development considers both the process and its consequences. The central criterion of development as process and (or) as product is a focus on increased social well-being.

A broad concept of development is especially useful for defining the special case of community development, which can be both a means and an end of the pursuit of social well-being. To promote the development of community in a local society can be a means of promoting economic development and development of services, assuming that collective action influences these aspects of a local society. At the same time, development of community can be the end by which other development programs are justified. Economic growth, for example, might benefit or exploit a local population; and the contribution of economic growth to local social well-being can be judged by the degree to which that growth contributes to maintenance or development of community. Community as means and community as end, of course, both have become controversial ideas as society has changed.

As means, community factors now must compete with factors at regional, national, and international levels in charting the course of development of local jobs, services, and organizations. Nonetheless, recent studies show that community action can make a difference in local development, once the effects of powerful macrostructural forces are taken into account (Lloyd and Wilkinson, 1985; Martin and Wilkinson, 1984). While local initiative rarely determines the overall pattern of local development, it appears that community development still can contribute to improving local well-being.

As an end, the role of community development is in question on several grounds. Emphasis on community as a development goal could mean rejecting much-needed resources if the resources themselves or the process of acquiring them are viewed as threatening to community per se. Further, as Wellman (1979) argues, a bond of community solidarity in a diverse population could result in suppression and intolerance of individual differences. In addition, programs that seem to promote community goals actually promote the well-being of only a local elite, according to some analyses (Molotch, 1976). The idea of community as a development goal, therefore, needs to be qualified carefully to make sure this goal in fact refers to a state of increased social well-being--to creation of a structure that meets needs of local people, protects freedom, and serves the whole rather than only some elite segments of the local society.

One useful concept of development for research and policy specifies four goals in two interrelated categories (Wilkinson, 1979). Economic improvements and improved services are goals that relate to a category of primary needs--the "lower order" needs in theories of individual development. In depressed areas, development must begin

with such goals; otherwise it simply will not begin. Equity and community as development goals relate to "higher order" needs--the needs that emerge and become dominant when a threshold is reached on meeting primary needs. Unless the primary needs are met to a satisfactory degree, the ends of equity and community tend to be retarded; but these emerge as foci of development when adequate provision is made for meeting primary needs. A crucial task of policy analysis, of course, is to determine the point in development of primary resources where the emphasis can shift to higher order needs and potentials.

Rural community development

Rural development clearly must begin with economic development, but the kind of economic development that is to be promoted, and the related developments in services and other resources, must be justified by contributions to equity and community in rural areas. Although rural America has serious deficits in access of residents to resources for meeting primary needs, these deficits could be overcome if available national resources and technologies were deployed seriously toward such an objective. Equity and community also are serious rural problems, and these goals likewise can be cultivated through appropriate policy actions. The key to the appropriate development policy is to promote community development as the central element of rural development.

The role of community development in rural development is defined ambiguously in recent policy statements, as it was in earlier policy statements (Powers and Moe, 1982). With the advent of federal rural development programs in the early 1970s, the term "community development" was used to distinguish a relatively novel emphasis on nonfarm issues from the interest in farm issues that had dominated rural policy over previous decades. The current policy (i.e., the national rural development strategy of the Reagan Administration) endorses rural community development as a means of bolstering agriculture (e.g., by providing off-farm resources to farm families) and as an expression of a grass-roots philosophy of government. A sociological appraisal of the factors influencing community development in rural America can help to clarify the potential contributions of such a national policy to rural welfare.

The prospects for rural community development hinge on the two persisting correlates of rurality in modern society, namely limited access to material resources for meeting needs and a scale of local social organization that permits development of a more-or-less integrated local society. One of these is a barrier or challenge to community development, and the other has positive potential for community development. The aim of policy obviously should be to address barriers while cultivating the positive potential for community development in rural areas.

Limited access to material resources for meeting needs restricts the probability of community development. This condition means either that needs must go unmet or that people must travel outside the local area to meet their

needs. In either case, the result is a barrier to formation of a complete local society and a constraint on the probability that community solidarity will emerge within the local population.

Unmet needs for material resources can lead to social isolation and preoccupation with the struggle for meeting primary needs. Where jobs are inadequate and services are sparse, particularly in remote areas where people cannot easily travel to other centers to meet their needs, the prospects for community are dim. In such settings, as described by Kraenzel (1980), the struggle for individual survival captures the energy that might be expressed in collective actions. Specialized organizations to meet community needs tend to be absent or poorly developed in such localities, and where such organizations exist, they tend to be in conflict with other local units. Rural areas, therefore, need jobs and services to support a full complement of local associations and to supply the necessary social infrastructure for community to emerge in the local society.

With the evolution of highly efficient "contact technologies" (i.e., automobiles, telephones, computer networks, and the like), space has become less of a factor in access to material resources than in the past, although two important rural-urban differentials still can be noted among consequences of these technologies. One is that rural areas are being "wired last," as it were, for the emerging information era (Dillman, 1985). Thus, there is a rural lag in access to the space-shrinking technologies that are needed most critically in rural areas. Second, in rural areas to a greater extent than in urban areas, the contact technologies tend to increase the proportion of contacts that are outside the local area rather than inside that area. This differential occurs because the urban locality contains, by definition, sufficient resources for meeting virtually all of the daily needs of the population while the rural area does not. In the urban area, contact technologies affect social life in many ways, but not in the crucial way they affect the ecological structure of the rural community. In rural areas, transportation and communication technologies have contributed to an expansion of the ecological field where people meet their daily needs. As people relate to a wide area in conducting their daily affairs, the scope, if not the intensity of commitments to the immediate area of residence, is likely to be limited.

Limited access to resources for meeting needs specifically within the local area, therefore, is a barrier to rural community development. While better roads and sophisticated information technologies can give access to resources outside the rural area, rural community development depends to no small extent on meeting needs within the rural area. Thus, some aspects of the quality of life--specifically those measured in material terms--might be improving in rural areas while other aspects of the quality of life--namely those measured in terms of social relations--are not improving. In the past, rural poverty might have been offset somewhat, for example, by rural community cohesion; today, improved rural access to

socioeconomic resources--specifically to resources that take people out of the local area to meet needs--undercuts the potential for local solidarity among residents of these areas. Rural community development will require development of jobs and services specifically within rural areas. Otherwise, a barrier to community development will persist even as rural people gain greater access to resources through contacts outside the rural area.

In a sense, urbanization is needed as a rural development strategy. Rural areas need more of the infrastructure that generally can be found in urban areas. Questions about such a strategy become obvious, however, when one considers the other persisting correlate of rurality--the potential for coordination and integration in a setting of limited social scale. Urbanization clearly can reduce that potential. Thus, overcoming a barrier to rural community development through urbanization could work against cultivating the potential for community development that already exists in rural areas.

A solution to this dilemma can be worked out in theory, and possibly in practice, by focusing on the positive contributions of rural and urban ecologies, respectively, to community development. An advantage of the rural is the greater potential for local coordination. An advantage of the urban is the presence of a complete round of associations and institutions to coordinate. Too much of either obviously can be a problem for community development (i.e., a problem of there being either far too little or far too much to coordinate). The solution would be an optimal ecology for community. This, I believe, would be a setting both rural enough and urban enough to be "beautiful," in the sense of Schumacher's (1973) use of this term. For rural areas, therefore, the first key to community development is to address rural deficits in jobs and services by promoting local development of these resources but the second key is to retain and cultivate the positive contribution that rurality itself can make to community development.

How does one "cultivate" such a contribution? Adult educators have created numerous programs for teaching community development skills (Christenson and Robinson, 1982). While many such programs contribute, no doubt, to the well-being of those involved, there is little firm evidence that people can be--or need to be--taught how to develop community among themselves. Community just happens. It emerges or fails to emerge pretty much on its own depending on whether the conditions are right for it to emerge. The right conditions appear to be simply those specified by the definition of community--people living together, meeting their daily needs together, and acting together to address their common problems. Community is an inherent structure in human social life, and community development is a natural human disposition. Thus, cultivation of community simply means removing impediments to expression of the natural tendencies of people.

While many barriers to community have been discussed in the sociological literature, three in particular are most relevant to understanding the rural-urban context of community development in modern society (Wilkinson, 1979).

One is the essentially rural problem of an incomplete local society, as discussed above. Another is the essentially urban problem of overwhelming mass and diversity, also mentioned above. The third is inequality. Where the ecological conditions are most conducive to community development, inequality can emerge as the most serious barrier to this process.

Two forms of inequality are common in American communities, and the most extreme cases of both tend to be concentrated in rural areas. One is more-or-less functional to a capitalistic system and is indexed crudely by the distribution of socioeconomic statuses. The other is dysfunctional to any egalitarian order and is indexed by ascribed racial and ethnic differences in access to resources for meeting needs. For a variety of reasons, rural areas tend to have higher rates of inequality of both types than do urban areas.

Furthermore, inequality poses a somewhat more direct threat to community development in rural areas than in urban areas. This is because inequality works against the coordinative, integrative potential which is the most distinctive contribution of rurality to community development. Income inequality, for example, isolates people from one another, and ascriptive inequalities (e.g., those based on race or ethnicity) generate hostilities between social groupings. Inequality, therefore, depresses and distorts the natural tendency for local interaction to produce community, and this can counteract the somewhat greater potential for community to emerge in small towns and rural areas rather than in large cities.

Inequality can be attacked indirectly simply by promoting economic development, given the tendency for the extent of inequality to be greater where the overall level of economic well-being is low than where the overall level is higher. This would be only a partial solution however, for two reasons. First, groupings with the lowest socioeconomic status, who tend to be heavily concentrated in rural areas and whose presence is a major part of the reason for the high rate of rural inequality, are not likely to be affected significantly, at least not positively, by schemes to improve the overall economic resources of the community. Special programs dealing with the special problems of the rural poor will be needed to reduce the inequality blocking community development in many rural communities. Second, ascriptive inequality in rural America is as much a product of history as of present economic conditions. Its causes include invasion and conquest of native peoples, slavery, exploitation of alien workers, and so on--causes that are not likely to give way quickly to programs that develop jobs, services, and opportunities for dominant or majority populations in rural areas. While economic development is needed for community development and can contribute toward reducing inequality, rural community development requires more than rural economic development. It also requires a concerted attack on the two forms of inequality that can block community development in rural America.

Conclusion

Rural community development faces large hurdles and is not likely to occur in very many localities unless there is a major, sustained attack on certain barriers. Limited resources restrict the probability that communities will form or be maintained in rural areas, and increased rural access to material resources in the larger society can undercut the potential for community development by reducing the importance of ties within the community area. Development of resources, such as jobs and income, in rural areas is part of the answer, but only part. Community development also depends on equality, and rural America contains pockets of exceptional inequality. On the positive side, in rural areas where local resources can be developed to support a more-or-less complete local society, and where inequality can be reduced, community is likely to develop as a natural expression of human values and inclinations in a setting that is relatively free from the kind of barriers to community one finds in dense urban settlements.

While policies of rural development can benefit from critical appraisals of their sociological premises, they also can contribute to sociology by challenging the discipline to produce workable solutions to more or less obvious rural problems. A next step would be to design specific policy instruments to attack the barriers to community development in rural America.

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