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## **A Vision For The Northern Great Plains**

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### **Abstract**

*This essay presents a number of positive alternatives for the future of the rural Northern Great Plains. A number of trends occurring in the 1990s are used to assemble this vision, such as sustainable agriculture, information technology, wireless communication, and small communities working together in mutual interest. This vision identifies the important role of social capital and social relationships as rising in value over a consumer oriented society. The strength of a positive vision exists in its ability to fire people to actively seek these ends. [ed.]*

Visions have a powerful sociological history. They lay out alternative futures, based on a shared past and the current reality. Visions are meant to mobilize actions. The American Indians who moved to this part of the continent had visions they acknowledged and the settlers that came from the eastern United States, Scandinavia, Germany, Mexico, Cambodia and Bosnia had implicit visions. Visions are narratives, stories. Among scholars we call them utopias. As sociologists, we often become so caught up by where we are now and how things got to be this way, we simply extrapolate the past and present to the future. This vision builds on the elements of narrative to lay out an alternative future--and how we might get there.

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For many people in the rural Northern Great Plains, it felt like a wildfire had burned over the landscape in the late 1990s. Agriculture first felt the shock, as programs established to deal with the emergency conditions of the Depression, but which remained in place to lock in a monoculture production system and a dependency on the federal government to absorb risks, were gone. The negative impacts of technology on the environment led increasing to regulation. Those regulations provided a focus for the growing rage that accompanied the feelings of powerlessness concomitant with increasing globalization. That rage was focused on the federal government.

Human services programs were radically restructured, subject to the felt need for budget cutting on the part of the politically ambitious and the fiscally concerned. An outbreak of communicable diseases, diphtheria, hepatitis, and tuberculosis, swept the region with devastating impacts on the very young and the very old. These contagious diseases, once only a paragraph in health textbooks, began among the poor without access to managed care, but ultimately spread to the middle classes.

The rural Northern Great Plains was at a crossroads at the turn of the century. It could, as had been predicted, empty out, leave the Great Plains to the buffalo commons, empty the rich soils to all but the most heavily capitalized precision farmers and corporate hog hotels, with a few corporate-owned destination tourism centers where the menial work was done by those from other countries desperate for a job and willing to commute daily from the isolated mobile home parks, where they could afford housing, to feed and clean up after the affluent, who could afford the leisure.

But emptying out did not occur, despite the doomsayers. The pull factors for the city were not there, because economic

growth did not result in increased high wage urban employment as it had in the 1940s, 1950s, and even the 1960s. And much of urban living, despite the growth of the walled suburbs with their paid armed guards, their expensive alarm systems, their beautifully pedigreed guard dogs, was not available or even attractive to those who had had the chance for participation in their local communities and had known they made a difference. Social capital provided a safety net--and sense of identity and purpose.

Beginning in the most rural of the communities on the Great Plains, some of the patterns initiated in the 1990s became dominant. Many producers of both agricultural and nonagricultural crops shifted from producing commodities to producing products. Instead of concentrating on genetic engineering to insure an easy to produce commodity (Bt corn or Round-Up Ready soybeans), they utilized new biotechnology and regional farmer clubs to preserve traditional varieties and to develop new ones with specific end use characteristics to produce crops and animals with specific characteristics for specific consumers. Value chains were better coordinated yet more complex.

The relatively high educational levels of the residents in rural areas of the Northern Great Plains meant that rural residents were able to respond to the constantly shifting context by utilizing their generalist skills. By looking first at the human capital assets, communities built on the ability of their citizens to engage in plural activity, to take advantage of the flexibility and resiliency for which their multiple roles in rural communities--coaching sports teams, 4-H leader, church deacon, Main Street leader, Head Start parent--prepared them.

The economy continued the shift begun in the 1990s, moving from the traditional wage jobs to self-employment, building on nuclei of flexible, interrelated production units. These flexible

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economic networks were aided in part by the information technology in place. Initially behind in electronic connectedness, the Northern Great Plains was able to leap frog over the high cost wiring and fiber optic cables to utilize the new, wireless technology. The flatness of the topography aided that connectedness.

But high levels of social capital aided the economic networks even more. Existing networks of reciprocity and trust were strengthened as rural residents responded to the crisis, based on 1) the understanding that no would solve the problems but themselves and 2) the belief that they indeed were capable of creating viable alternatives if they worked together.

In the face of the sharp decline in external resources, rural communities assessed their internal resources--human, social, environmental, financial, and manufactured. Using that base, they were able to make strategic investments in manufactured capital, particularly information technology. Strategic investment meant drastic changes in the way local governments did business. Local governmental units collaborated to provide services for their citizens in innovative ways. Day care for elders and children were combined and linked to public schools and health care. City and county governments facilitated linkages between public and private sector agendas. And they formed multicommunity collaborations to achieve economies of scale profiting from the low transaction costs provided by high levels of social capital. These multicommunity collaborations published newspapers, established radio shows, and utilized local cable and satellite access to inform themselves about each other and to share the alternatives being developed.

Local alliances such as cooperatives and worker-owned enterprises were formed to invest resources. Alternative investment strategies were laid out and the impact assessed in

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terms of community well being by diverse community groups. Investment in the environment, which was increasingly viewed as one of the attractions of the region rather than an enemy to be overcome, resulted in new enterprises and multiple use of land. Billions were saved in lock and levy construction, as fewer raw commodities were moved out of the region and more were processed and consumed where they were grown. As crops diversified for regional markets, fewer row crops were grown and less soil had to be dredged from the region's waterways. Wildlife returned to the rivers and the wetlands, encouraging visitor tourism by hunters, fishermen, photographers, and bird watchers.

Facilitated by state and regional groups, local entrepreneurs, and well-networked volunteers, linkages were made to the regional urban centers and to communities which had complementary or additive capabilities to develop inter-nested, flexible networks and value chains.

Such organizations are able to maneuver in the globalized economy, which favors the large and the mobile, but is penetrable by the small and the rooted when they are enabled by personal as well as electronic relationships. When those organizations rooted in rural areas were able to use the advantage of rural, high levels of social capital, they created a series of networks that increased information linkages with each other and the outside. That information, in turn, was the basis of new investment decisions by individual and communities of interest and of place. Quality of life increased as diversity in production, the landscape, and the lifescape increased.

It was difficult at first to move away from the mass society economy, where status was gained by what you consumed or how much you produced per acre. Although painful, the lack of government subsidies forced farmers to move from commodities

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that were undifferentiated and oriented toward mass markets to differentiated products oriented to very specific markets and produced to meet those market needs. Old on-farm patterns had to change, particularly in terms of record keeping. Through the linkages provided by the information highway and the strategic connections created by friendships formed in a variety of institutional settings and carefully maintained through the internet, telephone calls, and critical meetings, flexible work organizations--both agricultural and nonagricultural--were able to identify potential needs and effective demand and were able to determine the best ways to enter new markets. Transaction costs were reduced through critical friendship networks. There was a growing understanding that pollution is a result of inefficient use of resources. Innovative ways of reducing harmful wastes, based on results rather than design standards, increased profitability and environmental quality.

Small communities began to link with similar communities to increase their ability to efficiently offer critical services to their citizens. The kind of self-help civic organizations that had been part of the heritage of the Northern Great Plains became even more valuable in an increasingly complex and dynamic market economy. Social capital decreased transaction costs. Ability to network enabled producers of goods and services to link more directly into highly integrated value chains, to deliver as needed and to respond quickly.

Nothing was produced until the product had been sold. Forward contracting was common. That forward contracting ranged from Community Supported Agriculture (CASs) to livestock production, with strong diversified producer associations assuring both quality and quick response to changing conditions. Technology was adopted because it increased management efficiency in achieving social, environmental and economic capital,

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not just because it decreased labor costs. Value added, through more targeted marketing, resulted in increased wage rates and employment of local young people often after they had spent several years outside the region, increasing the assets of Great Plains communities from their experiences.

Those young people included the sons and daughters of the diverse low wage workers brought in under the old development model, and the daughters and sons of the farmers, professionals and small business owners who had been there for generations. Reservations increasingly were included in the coordinated value chains so that young people did have to choose between economy and culture. The commitment of the Northern Great Plains states to higher education and their increasing innovations to deliver quality education at the least cost to students wherever they were facilitated this transition.

The diversity of the agricultural products and the innovation by the producers meant that people in the Northern Great Plains were now eating much more of what they produced. Animal agriculture prospered, as producers and communities to fit the local environmental and social context negotiated production systems. Communities organized together to provide quality meat products to the locally owned and operated packing plants, which, as a result of deregulation and aggressive adoption of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP), were able to respond to locally imposed norms and regulations based on food safety, rather than on standards set by large scale food processors and regulators for mass society food systems. The focus of the old food safety system was on the means: the distance between the drinking fountain and kill floor, while that of the new food safety system was on the ends: safe foods. Good linkages with the Land Grant researchers helped develop the technology to make this possible and to put it into place quickly. Hogs continued to eat



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that which was produced in the area. In certain seasons that included the wastes from vegetable products, which were increasing raised locally, processed locally and consumed by rural/urban regional networks. And they were grown and marketed in diverse systems and sold to distinct markets.

Capital had been initially a problem as a centralization of banking led to a disappearance of small loans. Targeted loans for less than \$50,000 made sense in rural areas, but were just too much bother to make from Miami-based bank headquarters. (After all, it costs the same to give a small loan as a large loan, and the larger banks, heavily indebted through buying each other, needed not only to make profits, but the largest profits possible.) Thus, a series of financial institutions sprang up responding to the needs for rural capital, not simply agricultural capital. These new financial institutions were locally controlled and their risks were reduced through broad-based loan portfolios. Bankers and producers educated each other about the advantages and disadvantages of retained livestock ownership.

An important role for the federal government, now much less intrusive in local affairs, was the establishment of secondary markets for loans for the new kinds of investments that were taking place in rural areas. The increased competition in the rural credit markets greatly enhanced the competitiveness of the region and indeed provided a good example of the new role of a smaller state. In particular, new mechanism of credit were provided to Native Americans which stemmed Indian land loss and increased economic diversification as Indian Country products produced, processed, and marketed by tribal members reached specific consumers in the United States and abroad.

Part of the competitiveness and dynamism of the Great Plains in the 21st century was its ability to move quickly from a

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standardized to an unstandardized production process, based on the continuous learning of its labor force. As agriculture moved from mass oriented, commodity program-based farming to location-specific farming based on increasing knowledge of the physical as well as the economic environment, so did the production of other goods and services respond to the challenge of assessing changing global conditions and responding to them. Agriculturists became more sustainable through their flexibility to respond to changes in markets and market risks, which they did through diversifying and establishing interlocking markets. They responded to potential environmental risks through increasing diversification of their farm enterprises, including the production of a much broader spectrum of species and varieties, producing them in diverse ways. New urban-rural linkages provided cash markets for ecological services, and state and local government, along with private sector partners, helped pay for and support remediation of past “land reclamation” that had forced water downstream at ever-faster rates.

Local communities became very adept at monitoring the conditions under which they were producing. New business opportunities were created to do this, interlinked with the existing firms. This transformation was possible, in part, because of the ability of the area residents to share a vision of the future. The vision was based on key relationships with the economy, with the environment, and with people. Visioning was necessary in response to the sharp drop in revenue from state and federal governments and the increase in expenses imposed on local areas as the results of the devolution of responsibility (but not resources) to local areas to meet the basic needs of their citizens. Local communities banded together to set their visions for the future and map the resources in the community to achieve that shared vision. Communities became places of discussions and interaction. While they did not have all the storefronts that once were there, every community had a place where people could gather. And people did

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gather. They gathered across generations and across ethnic groups. Newcomers were welcomed, because old timers had learned that the more alternatives they examined, the better choices they could make. Each new person enabled the community to broaden the range of possible solutions in the quest to make their vision real.

In the course of creating their collective vision, citizens began to define the quality of life they sought for themselves and their children. Much to their surprise and early embarrassment, they found that their quality of life was not based on the size of their television sets or even their income. When they began to analyze why they felt good about themselves and where they lived, they found it had to do with the social relationships among generations and among different kinds of people and the options they had in terms of their productive, reproductive and community work, not just in the number of brands of frozen pizza they had at the local market. Were they respected? Did they feel they could make a difference? They found these relationships (social capital) were a major asset in their community.

During the period of the sharp wage drop of the late 1980s and 1990s, a number of workers from all over the world had come into the rural Northern Great Plains, changing its complexion. The first reaction to increased diversity in the 1990s had been hate, fear, and demonization, as the new immigrants were blamed for all the troubles the communities possessed, from increase in the crime rate to problems in the schools, to increasing health costs. As communities began to assess their internal resources and to recognize they had to strategically invest them locally to make their visions a reality, the skills and values of these new immigrants became an important piece of the resilient and flexible strategy. Perceptions of new immigrants were transformed from a community liability to an asset.

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There was increasing recognition that the old model of industrial recruitment was deeply flawed. Equating number of jobs with development was challenged. Citizens began to ask themselves, "Why do we want more jobs?" Many acknowledged they want jobs so the community youth would not migrate out. They realized the kinds of jobs are critical. After years of building industrial parks and sending "ambassadors" to recruit outside firms with little success (and major costs and consequences to those communities that successfully snared a multinational firm) communities instead sought increasing economic independence through local/regional interdependency. Analysis of the kinds of jobs they wanted suggested that such jobs would not be provided by corporations seeking the cheapest labor force, the most lax environmental regulations, or the lowest level of mandated benefits. Northern Great Plains communities now concentrate on making the local community an even better place to live. They identify the resources in the community to bring them together in ways that make them even more productive.

As they began to map their assets, their social capital increased, increasing innovation, increasing risk taking, improving risk management, and increasing the appreciation the members of the community had for one another. "Community" began to be defined more broadly, as new resources were revealed in the course of this process.

Northern Great Plains communities now look quite a bit different than they did in the 1990s. Main Streets are no longer filled with boarded retail storefronts. Instead Main Street boast a senior center and day care, often connected, teen centers, coffee shops (even with strong coffee), communication centers with public access to the internet and World Wide Web (WWW), as well as lending libraries of books, audio and video tapes, satellite health clinics, and other services. These spaces, in turn, provided places

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for both for-profit and not-for-profit firms. Local citizens are able to get the goods and services they need, sometimes by mail order catalog, sometimes by going together to urban centers to shop, often by using telnet and distance learning centers available, and always working with their fellow citizens to do so.

The strengths of rural life are celebrated, particularly strong networks of volunteers that integrate those resident into community through supporting senior centers and day care. Youth and elderly are enabled to serve each other, delivering meals on wheels, teaching language skills from one generation to another, and increasing cultural awareness and appreciation. The blossoming rural volunteer networks led to a growing understanding of individual and collective responsibility.

At the same time rural citizens, through their networks, began to see the need to address federal policy as a regional block. They saw the impact of the policies of the 1990s, which had favored financial and manufactured capital over human and social capital.

They grew concerned with tax structures that provided incentives for capital investments and discouraged investments in human capital. They saw the wisdom of policies encouraging the middle class to acquire assets, as it increased their self-reliance. But they were increasingly concerned with policies that made it impossible for the poor to acquire assets. Their efforts to increase household and community self-reliance through their elected representatives brought about change at the state and national level. Local policies were implemented that tapped new sources of collective income (including an increasing willingness to tax corporate earnings and higher income professionals as well as the "bad" produced by society, including consumption of human and natural resources at rates grater than replenishment). They began to

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educate state and federal representatives to consider not just the short run benefits to a few, but the long-term impacts of policies to the many. The shifts they required were not massive new government investments. Instead they refined the proper role of the state in a capitalist economy: to make it profitable to do what is best for the community in the long term.

The reconstruction and reinvention of the rural Great Plains is based on building strong communities: communities of interest and communities of place. Those communities monitor the impacts of their actions because they understand that there is no such thing as the single, one shot, solution, the silver bullet. Building viable communities is the process where an individual's action makes a difference and where acting together made everybody more effective.

Working toward a vision is problematic. It depends on the thing we measure the least, social capital. It depends on people getting together and working together. And it depends on the absence of perverse incentives that inspire dysfunctional activity on the part of the individual in pursuit of short-term gain.

There is a great opportunity for rural Northern Great Plains communities that is embedded in some radical structural changes in the economy and in policy that we are facing today. It is my belief that those opportunities can be mobilized and, in some parts of the Northern Great Plains, it will be.