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# Community Action and the National Rural Development Agenda

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*A. E. Luloff*  
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## ABSTRACT

*As a result of concern over three related issues—a renewed interest in self-help mechanisms, the farm crisis of the 1980s, and the renewed recognition of rural poverty—an agenda which focuses on rural development has emerged. Central to the formation of rural development strategies is the role of community action. This paper reviews some of the searching questions about the whats and whys of community action, about the distinctive problems and potentials of community action, and about how rural community action can be promoted.*

Rural development has been on the national agenda in the United States since the early 1970s. Despite this, little concrete policy has been formulated. It is only now, at the end of the 1980s, that there is growing momentum toward the development of a national rural development agenda. This resurgence reflects three important and interrelated factors: (1) a resurgence of interest in promulgating self-help and community action mechanisms at local levels; (2) the farm community crisis of the 1980s which put rural America back onto the front pages of national newspapers; and (3) in the wake of the general crisis gripping American nonmetropolitan communities, rural poverty was rediscovered.

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If rural development is to become a national objective in the 1990s, and if community action is to be a key element of rural development strategies, the rural social sciences will be challenged to answer some searching questions about the whats and whys of community action, about the distinctive problems and potentials of community action in rural areas, and about how rural community action can best be promoted. This paper reviews these issues and suggests answers based on one particular theoretical approach to rural sociology. It further outlines some strategies for increasing community action potential in predominantly rural areas.

### **Do Communities Act?**

A major facet of an active local society is the degree to which the field of community actions emerges as a result of "collective efforts to solve local problems and collective expressions of local identity and solidarity" (Wilkinson, 1986b:3; Kaufman, 1959). Charles Tilly (1973), in response to the growing literature of the late 1960s which bemoaned the loss of community, posed the question, "Do communities act?" According to Tilly's analysis, the accumulated evidence suggested that only a loss of local autonomy, not a general community decline, had occurred and, therefore, the use of a "decaying community" terminology was misleading when applied to the shift in the external relations of a group. While the process of urbanization, industrialization, and bureaucratization have contributed to the erosion of local autonomy, they have not sounded the death knell for community. Indeed, to Tilly, a key to determining the answer to his question of whether or not communities act was to be found in the degree to which a group continued to function on its own ground regardless of the presence or absence of connections to the larger society (1973:210).

Generally, Tilly believed that communities acted only under special conditions, namely when unusual events threatened local residents. In the presence of such events, it is not uncommon for a local identity to emerge which acts to coalesce people who share only minimal, if any, common interests. The fact that an all-embracing, *gemeinschaft*-like solidarity is absent does not diminish the ability of the local society to become cohesive in the presence of an event, controversy, or conflict. The more limiting constraints are whether a group can be mobilized and, if so, if that group could then generate and use a set of pooled resources for the betterment of the whole. With growing concern for the plight of the more than 20,000 small and rural towns in America, it is clearly necessary to understand these constraints if a reasoned and relevant national policy is to be generated.

### **Problems of Small Communities**

Today the conditions that suppress community action in rural America are the same conditions that call attention to the need for rural development—namely,

conditions that indicate serious economic and social deprivations associated with rural space. It is important, of course, to recognize the effects of these deprivations; but it is also important to recognize that the potential for community action persists despite their suppressing effects. In the needed analysis, the first task is to recognize the problems facing community action in rural areas and the second is to work out strategies for addressing these problems to facilitate community action.

The problems of small communities in America can be grouped into two sets. First, there are long-term problems such as those described by Kraenzel's (1980) concept of the "social cost of space." Second, there are immediate problems resulting from rural upheavals during the past decade. These problems interact with one another to pose serious challenges to community action and rural development in the years ahead.

Contrary to romantic images about rural life, the social cost of rural living has always been high. That is, from the beginning of European settlement in the New World, residents of rural settlements have lagged behind those of urban settlement in their access to resources for meeting economic and social needs. This is partly explained by the economics of distance and density. The cost of goods delivered to or shipped from remote locations is increased by high transportation costs. Similarly, low density means high unit costs in provision of common goods such as public services. According to Kraenzel, however, the economic costs are only part of the picture. The social cost of space also includes a deficit of outside contacts and this can contribute to conflicts and disruptions within a rural settlement. Extreme individualism, sharp cleavages among local groupings, and problems of mobilization for collective action appear to be prominent features of social life in many small isolated settlements. The problems associated with this social cost of space are not new. They have their roots in the simple harsh reality of human ecology as well as in the spatial inequalities and center-periphery dominance patterns of modern capitalist development. Although much work remains to be done to sort out the specific origins, the reality of deprivation in virtually all rural societies is a compelling one.

In the case of rural America in the 1990s, the long-term effects of the social cost of space can be said to exacerbate the effects of a cluster of recent trends, beginning with population and employment turnarounds in the 1970s and culminating in the current situation of extreme rural instability. Contrary to previous trends, the nonmetropolitan population grew more rapidly than did the metropolitan population (overall and in most states) during the early 1970s, but by the late 1970s this turnaround had slowed, and in the 1980s it disappeared. While there is considerable local and regional variation, the overall pattern today is consistent with the overarching trend of the past century and a half in that urban areas are growing more rapidly than are rural areas.

The national recession at the beginning of the 1980s ended the rural boom. In many ways, the recession was more devastating to the rural economy than it

was to the urban economy, and the rural recovery has been much slower. The reasons for such differences can easily be seen when reasons for the recession are examined. In particular, increased foreign competition, declining attractiveness of American exports, and weak world markets had a negative effect on the industries that rural areas depend on—agriculture, energy development, forest products, and manufacturing. Likewise, in the recovery period during the 1980s, the shift to services as the growth sector of the national economy was less beneficial to rural areas than to the urban areas where the growing service activities, such as business and computer services, are located. In addition, government policies of the 1980s, which produced deregulation of transportation and banking industries, for example, are viewed by some observers (e.g., Wilkinson, 1984) as impediments to rural development. Finally, problems in American agriculture in the 1980s—including widespread bankruptcies and weather-related crop failures—focused attention on the plight of America's small and rural towns, thereby helping to bring the rural community crisis to a head.

The upshot is a cluster of rural problems that demand policy action if rural well-being is to be achieved. National data summarized by the Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Brown, 1987) raise serious questions about the ability of rural areas to adapt to changing national and international conditions. Slow job growth and high unemployment have been prominent characteristics of the rural economy during the 1980s. Rural employment grew by only 4 percent during the national recovery in the 1980s compared to 13 percent growth in urban employment. More than 1,000 rural counties had annual unemployment rates of 9 percent or more in 1986. Reduced population growth, as noted above, has been one obvious consequence of the rural economic depression, with nearly half of all nonmetropolitan counties losing population in the 1980s—more than two and a half times the number losing population during the 1970s.

Underdeveloped human resources are another consequence. The poverty gap, for example, has been increasing: in the mid-1980s the nonmetropolitan poverty rate was 18.3 percent compared to the metropolitan rate of 12.7 percent, and the former was increasing while the latter was falling. The gap in high school completion persisted at about 10 percentage points during the 1980s and the gap in college completion widened. Particularly in the South, low educational attainment and high illiteracy rates are all too common in rural areas, especially in minority communities. Exceptions to these patterns, of course, must be acknowledged as some rural areas are experiencing growth and prosperity. Still, the overall patterns paint a grim picture of the contemporary rural development situation.

What do these patterns portend for the future of the community and community action in rural America? An answer can be found in an analysis of the effects of economic and demographic conditions on the fundamental elements of the

community, as discussed above. Jobs and income are necessary to support a sufficient population for a local society to develop, and without a local society, community action is retarded. The overall situation in rural areas points to crucial needs that must be addressed if the conditions to support community action are to be put in place. In order to enable community actions to materialize, rural settlements need to improve both job and income opportunities and to increase their share of services and amenities. The keystone of any new rural development legislation must, therefore, focus on the removal of many of the above mentioned major impediments to action.

### **Empirical Studies of Rural Community Action**

Despite these limiting conditions, some evidence exists to support the idea that when latent common interests are aroused, local citizens are capable of responding in a more-or-less unified manner. There is no question that people live together in local settlements, and if local residents can act together in community projects such action will contribute to community well-being. The key question, we would argue, is whether community action can still occur in local settlements; and we would argue that the answer is yes, notwithstanding problems of local mobilization associated with rurality.

Recent literature shows that many of today's small communities do act and act in particular ways. This research, informed mainly by an interactional perspective, makes use of relatively large comparative data bases and examines responses to an array of programs and/or opportunities including participation in the National Flood Insurance Program (Luloff and Wilkinson, 1979), rural manufacturing development (Lloyd and Wilkinson, 1985), and participation in the federal grant system (Martin and Wilkinson, 1984).

For example, Luloff and Wilkinson present evidence that supports the utilization of a field perspective of community action as an approach to the study of action outcomes. Using data on 2,463 municipalities in Pennsylvania and a model incorporating structural and interactional factors as potential explanates of a community's decision to enter the National Flood Insurance Program, support for the influence of both sets of factors is generated.

The most significant factors in their model were indicators of previous community actions and of previous flood experience. The authors interpreted these findings as evidence of the fact that structural measures, at least in this study, were most useful in positing potentials for action. The presence of direct measures of community activeness, which suggests that lasting patterns and capabilities are developed through engagement in community actions, and experiences with past floods, were the best predictors of participation in the flood insurance program.

Similarly, in their study of local participation in the federal grant system, Martin and Wilkinson make use of the structure-conduct-performance framework

(Schmid, 1972) to predict the independent effects of community conduct on per capita receipts of funds for community and economic development. Their model was tested on 640 municipalities in the state of Pennsylvania.

They found that the measures of general ecological structure were significant predictors of the receipt of both community and economic development funds and that the conduct variables contributed relatively little to overall model explanation. However, upon further examination via testing for an interaction effect, a significant relationship was discerned. In communities which were not distressed (a variable comprised of housing, income, population, and employment trends) community action had no effect, but in those places where these indicators were high, community action had decided effects. In essence, Martin and Wilkinson found that in places where community distress was coupled with high levels of community activeness, receipt of federal funding for community and economic development was high. Thus, this study also provided support for the argument that both structural measures (indicators of local ecology) and measures which purport to indicate levels of activeness contribute to a community action model.

Likewise, in their study of rural manufacturing development, Lloyd and Wilkinson present evidence of the role and place of community activeness in the process of location and/or expansion of manufacturing firms in such areas. Using 160 central places in Pennsylvania (which included multiple minor civil divisions per central place area), they built a model which included structural measures (what they termed vertical linkages) and measures of community activeness and solidarity.

The results of the model, in general, supported the earlier work of Luloff and Wilkinson as well as Martin and Wilkinson in that both the structural measures and the community activeness and solidarity measures contributed independently and significantly to an explanation of manufacturing development.

One important implication in Lloyd and Wilkinson's work is that it may not be enough for rural and small communities interested in increasing their manufacturing base, either through expansion of existing firms or attraction of new ones, to make use of outside resources and to make improvements in the local infrastructure. Indeed, this study points to the strong positive relationships between levels of community activeness and solidarity and manufacturing development, and concludes that "the level of local economic well-being tends to increase with community activeness and solidarity" (1985:35).

The finding that local levels of activeness play an important role in the attraction of new or expanding manufacturing firms is also established in the work of Kuehn, Braschler, and Shonwiler (1979), Williams, Sofranko, and Root (1977), and Luloff and Chittenden (1984). Recognizing this pattern helps to highlight the importance of the locality in the industrial capture decision-

making sphere and relates clearly to issues which are internal to the local society.

Our view, in contrast to those who suggest that collective action is neither typical nor a regular occurrence at the local level, is that the community has not disappeared and has not ceased to be an important factor in individual and social well-being (Luloff, 1989; Wilkinson, 1986b). Despite the fact that the community has always been a turbulent field of self-seeking special interest games (Long, 1958), a general sense of well-being emerges when local people act on the real bond of common interest that exists among them by virtue of the shared investment they have in a common place of residence and in their common social life.

### **How Can Community Action be Cultivated in Rural Areas?**

Much of the rhetoric of rural development in contemporary policy and programs at the federal level emphasizes community action as the key to a better life for rural America. For example, the Extension Service's National Priority Initiatives process (Extension Service, 1988) stresses empowerment of rural people, through education on crucial issues, as a means of improving their life chances in the world of tomorrow. The cornerstone of these new initiatives, entitled "Revitalizing Rural America," offers education on six issues to help revitalize rural America "community by community" (Extension Service, 1988:18). The issues include: (1) the diminishing competitiveness of rural areas; (2) dependence on too few income sources; (3) growing service demands accompanied by diminishing resources; (4) adjusting to the impacts of change; (5) need for skilled community leadership; and (6) quality of the natural resource base. The implication is that through education, people in rural communities will be able to address the problems that now threaten rural well-being. While the potential benefits of community education need not be challenged, the underlying assumption that informed residents will mobilize to reverse pervasive patterns of rural decline deserves critical scrutiny. Larger forces than those addressed by the new initiatives stand behind the problems of rural America; these forces will require attention at the societal level prior to the successful implementation of local action. Clearly, education such as that being delivered under the new initiatives is needed, but to be fully useful it must be combined with initiatives at other levels as well.

Perspective on what is needed can be gained by recognizing that community action, though a natural tendency in local social life everywhere, is seriously impeded, if not ruled out entirely, by extant trends in many rural areas. Initiatives are needed at three levels to encourage community action in the face of these trends. The first level is that addressed by the Extension initiatives—efforts to assist local actors. This is an essential level because community action, when all is said and done, consists of the actions of local actors. Here, improvements in human capital resources are a necessity. In part, this may require transfer of funds, in terms of



training and assistance programs. It will also require efforts aimed at enhancing the local community's ability to retain its native citizenry—that is, increased efforts will be needed to stem outmigration of those in the entry and mid-life work groups. In order to accomplish such a goal, cooperative partnerships between the private sector and county, state, and federal governments will need to be formed to increase local job opportunities. Further, creative initiatives, including tax incentive programs for the training and hiring of unemployed and underemployed personnel as well as guaranteed postsecondary education for those who finish high school would help address the growing discrepancy between rates of illiteracy and low educational attainment characteristic of rural and urban areas. Where an educated labor force is available, opportunities for enhancement of local economic conditions will occur.

The second level is in the larger society. Initiatives are needed to articulate and implement community action in rural areas as a policy goal. This is to say that intervention is needed at the federal level to counter the forces that depress rural well-being. The traditional “bricks and mortar” approaches of past federal programs will no longer suffice. Rural America needs more than an infrastructural transfusion; new buildings and capital improvements alone will not contribute to successful rural development. Rather, attention must be given to the removal of existing impediments. This includes the decoupling of traditional agricultural policies from those aimed at helping rural communities and a reexamination of the results of previous deregulation policies as major first steps.

The third level is in science. We simply know too little about the processes of rural development and community action to advise actors at local and national levels on appropriate actions and interventions. The rekindling of interest in community action as a rural development strategy calls renewed attention to gaps in the research base. Closing this gap is a necessary step toward articulating an appropriate policy at the national level to provide backup and support for efforts at the local level. This will require evaluation research to be included, from the onset, as a stated objective in all rural development efforts. It will also necessitate the development of a menu of activities as opposed to the development of one master strategy for all of rural America.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the development of strategies to promote community action and social well-being in rural America is more a question of will and commitment than of means. The means exist or can be made to exist, we would argue, if the national will were to be focused clearly on rural well-being as a goal. The fact that this has not happened is displayed clearly in the history of rural policy in the United States. Government has responded from time to time to particular rural problems and pressures, but there has never been a coherent statement of long term goals and

objectives. Foremost among reasons for this is the lack of a clear rationale for a policy to promote rural welfare in an essentially urban age. Potential rural contributions to national economic well-being and to other national concerns (such as protection of rural heritage and environment) might be cited, but without a clear vision of optimum distributions of economic activity and population in space such arguments are likely to evoke little consensus. Urban malaise stimulated rural development legislation in the early 1970s, but the effects were shortlived. Equity—for 63 million rural Americans—becomes a call to arms for rural development now and then, but it appears that its value has little staying power in competition with other forces that dominate the modern policy arena. Also, as numerous observers have lamented, in the political arena rural America no longer can be counted as a major power. What then can be the rationale for insisting that ways be sought to promote community action and social well-being in the troubled countryside?

The answer should be sought, we maintain, in the idea that the community is a central element in social well-being but one threatened by contemporary trends in both rural and urban settings. In this paper we have concentrated on rural problems, but an equally grim picture could be painted of prospects for social well-being at the other extreme of spatial agglomeration. The optimum range for community action and social well-being probably falls somewhere between these extremes—in rural-urban fields of medium scale. Yet, this is speculation; what is needed is a serious investigation to give direction to national policy.

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