SOCIOECONOMIC TRENDS CHANGING RURAL AMERICA

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Three propositions summarize the winds of change now sweeping across rural America.

1. The trends of the times, consistent with dominant historical patterns in this society, are altering the economic and social structures of rural communities.

2. In the wake of these trends there is little question about the overall consequences for rural well-being. Rural America is in serious trouble.

3. In rural policy, we, as a society and through our governments, need to put people first in rural development.

Socioeconomic Trends

A changing rural America has been the call to arms for the applied rural social sciences in this country for nearly a century and a fact of life for nearly five centuries. To be sure, a transformation is underway in the American countryside in the 1980s and many rural people are suffering. But the same could be said about rural America in the 1880s or for that matter in the 1780s.

Change and suffering are among the most enduring qualities of rural life in America. In a general sense, the reasons for rural change are obvious: nothing ever stays the same for long and the pace of change in society as a whole has been continuous and fairly rapid over virtually the entire course of American history. It can be said without exaggerating that few things are as familiar in the American experience as the winds of change.

Still, today's trends have their own features, and many observers see in these trends a rural crisis gathering, if not already boiling—a crisis of rural well-being demanding quick and certain steps by government and other actors to avoid a rural disaster (U.S. Congress). Perspective on these trends and ideas for appropriate policy responses can be gained by considering the broad historical milieu from which they have emerged.

Three broad historical trends have been and are now molding rural America. One is the demise of traditional rural society and the attendant increase in "social cost of space." The second is development of what political economists call "world systems" or the "global economy." The third is a change in the relationship between territory and community.

Rural areas lag behind urban areas in social well-being. Myths aside, the social cost of space has been high and growing in all of the history of the American community (Kraenzel; Richards). In traditional rural society, the fundamental features of rural settlement—small numbers, low density and high distance from other settlements—had their advantages in community solidarity. And if the settlement had good natural resources, it could survive as a self-sufficient community.

The demise of traditional society, however, was well advanced by the beginning of the colonial period. Rural American settlements have always depended upon ties to urban centers, first to those back in Europe, then to the new ones along the East Coast and now to those spread across the nation. Settlements far from major centers and lacking in density have suffered the social cost of space.

Carl Kraenzel first labeled the social cost of space and counted its features—dependency, economic depression, internal conflict and extreme individualism. The economic cost of space, i.e., transport cost, which increases the cost of rural services, adds to it and no doubt contributes to high incidences of rural poverty and unemployment. But the social cost of space is more than an economic cost. It is a cost to the social fabric. Careful observation of social relationships in small remote settlements (Bly) shows the painful human experience of this cost in contrast to the romantic images of rural life that continue to influence national policy.

The social cost of space has increased over the years as society has become increasingly urbanized and, being a social phenomenon depending on the quality of person-to-person relationships on site, this cost continues to increase even in the face of astounding technological breakthroughs in the movement of information and other resources from site to site (Dillman).

The second background factor for understanding contemporary changes is the development of world systems and a global economy. This began during the period of colonization of rural areas by urban-based imperialists. However, the phenomenon of a truly global economy dates to the twentieth century, particularly to the period since World War II when the United States has become a major actor in economic and political networks linking all, or nearly all, nations.

Critical appraisals of the effects of this development on rural America point to two of its important consequences. It shifts the locus of decision-making on many basic matters affecting local life away from

the rural community and away from nearby metropolitan centers to which rural areas have been linked (Warner). It submits rural areas, as "peripheries," to the machinations of footloose power actors, e.g., multinational corporations, whose international activities in search of profits are not easily regulated by the government of any given nation (Howes and Markusen).

Ironically, the argument also is made that urban exploitation of rural resources in the United States began to decline when the nation entered international networks as a "centre" and began drawing benefits from the rural resources of less developed "peripheral" nations (Fox). Clearly, the well-being of rural people and communities in the United States is bound up, to no small extent, with the changing position of the United States in world affairs.

The third broad background trend is the changing connection between place and community. Just as urban observers in the 1950s and early 1960s began to discuss "The Exploding Metropolis" (Fortune), so rural social scientists in that era began to write about "The Expanding Rural Community" (Anderson). Since the earliest studies of rural areas in America (Galpin) it has been obvious that rural communities are large rather than small if community is defined as the territory over which a local population moves as it meets its daily needs (Hawley, p. 150).

With changes in transportation and communications technologies, the community territory has continued to expand for rural people. It has expanded now to the point that students of the community are asking whether the territorial conception of community has any real utility in explaining how people live and the actions they take in public affairs in rural areas.

No one argues that this is strictly a rural phenomenon. The spatial element in community definition is questioned for urban and rural areas alike. At issue are the implications of the tendency for most Americans to be members simultaneously of several community-like networks, few if any of which coincide with local territorial boundaries.

Does this mean we each have several communities and are that much better off for it? Does it mean the local community is dying out as it becomes merely a local stage on which multiple outside networks impinge upon one another without being articulated into an integral unit? What are the consequences for community development and social well-being? Key questions about the future of rural America hinge on the projected consequences of this bifurcation between place and the organization of local social life.

Against these background patterns—the growing social cost of space, the growth of world systems and the changing role of territory in community life—some specific trends and rural conditions in the 1980s can be appraised. The main trends are well-known and need

only be enumerated before moving on to discuss the problems and policy issues they pose for rural America. Demographic and economic trends are revealed in analyses of readily available data.

The demographic trends are generally clear. The nonmetropolitan population grew more rapidly than the metropolitan population overall and in most states during the 1970s, but by the late 1970s this "turnaround" had slowed down; and in the early 1980s it almost has turned back around in most states. There is no evidence, however, of a return to the earlier pattern of massive rural to urban migration. While the reasons for these trends are still under investigation in demography (Fuguitt), it seems apparent that economic factors, such as the energy boom of the 1970s and the energy bust of the 1980s, have been important contributors.

The 1980s began with a severe economic recession ending a period of strong rural (or, more precisely, nonmetro) economic growth (Brown and Deavers). The 1980s slowdown in the rural economy can be attributed to the convergence of a number of influences.

Mark Henry and associates discuss some of the leading forces: international trends, the shift to services, deregulation and agricultural change. At the international level, increased foreign competition, the strong dollar and weak world markets have had negative effects on manufacturing, agriculture, energy and forest products industries. Rural community economies often depend on these—and often on a single one of them. The shift to services, as the booming sector of the national economy, has been of relatively little benefit to rural areas because the kinds of services that have been growing rapidly, such as business and computer services, and their markets are concentrated in urban areas. Deregulation of banking and transportation industries, according to Henry, has removed some of the protection rural areas once had from the high interest rates associated with the costs of urban banks and from the true market costs of transportation. Finally, Henry notes, structural changes in agriculture in the first half of the 1980s created severe economic pressures in many rural communities. Taken together, these trends paint a bleak picture of the situation in rural America.

Rural Problems

Recent upheavals have exacerbated problems associated with prevailing rural patterns—with the growing social cost of rural space, the increasing importance of world dynamics affecting rural community life and the changing role of territory in rural social organization. The upshot is a cluster of severe rural problems.

Five problems in particular deserve attention as challenges for national policy. These are the income (or poverty) gap; the gap in services, infrastructure and amenities; economic and social inequality;

personal and social disruption; and a social crisis that truly can be called a crisis of community.

The income gap between rural and urban segments of the national population apparently is not cyclical and it is not receding (Henry et al., p. 35). In fact, there is evidence of an increasing gap in the 1980s. In 1985, the poverty rate for nonmetropolitan counties (Brown and Deavers, pp. 1–6) was one-third higher than for metropolitan counties (18.3 percent compared to 12.7 percent). A gap is shown both in estimates of per capita income and in survey data on unemployment and underemployment (U.S. Congress, pp. 144–157).

This is a matter of crucial importance given the logical requirement that jobs and income be the initial focus of any analysis of rural problems. Rural development or rural revitalization simply cannot start if it does not start with jobs and income. While there are exceptions, such as in the Northeast where poverty tends to be at a higher rate in urban areas than in rural areas, the national picture is one of rural economic distress. In many rural areas, jobs simply are not available to meet local needs. Furthermore, the rural economy is highly unstable, as shown in the recent histories of the two predominant rural industries, agriculture and manufacturing. At the heart of the problem is the lack of diversity in local rural economies. Diversity is needed to give stability in the face of shifts caused by global economic and political forces.

Jobs and income, however, are not all. Services and amenities also are sadly lacking in rural areas, and the rural infrastructure for economic development of roads, bridges, communications facilities and the like, is far from adequate to meet the current and future needs of people. Problems of distance, density and poverty have combined to deny adequate levels of health care, child care, education and related services to many rural Americans.

In the rural South, for example, rates of illiteracy and infant mortality are at Third World levels and a big part of the reason is inadequate resources and services to meet human needs (Beaulieu). Where services are lacking, deficits in human capital are profound, as shown by the problems of attracting jobs and venture capital to areas such as the rural South.

In all regions, distance from urban centers increases the cost of service delivery, and for many people it decreases the likelihood that services will, in fact, be delivered. Rural communities therefore must struggle to provide police and fire protection, sewage treatment and disposal and other municipal services, not to mention planning and management services to meet local problems and plot the future of the community. Increasing demands for services—an almost universal theme in municipalities today—are not matched in most rural communities by any increase in resources to provide services.

Inequality is another rural problem, one receiving far less atten-

tion than it deserves in analyses of rural social life. In American society, there are two major sources of inequality, one resulting from the distribution of resources in the economic order and another resulting from the circumstances of one's birth, i.e, race, ethnicity, sex, location, etc. The former, indicated by measures of income inequality, tends to increase as the average income increases. Accordingly, in rural areas, where the average income tends to be lower than in urban areas, inequality tends to be higher. Inequality of the other kind, that based on noneconomic factors, can be particularly disruptive because it directly contradicts egalitarian ideals. As it happens, the most severe inequalities based on such factors as race and ethnicity are in the rural population. Frequently the consequences are hidden in the countryside by spatial isolation and masked from national consciousness by the more visible concentrations of minority populations in cities. The evidence for American minority groupings such as Black Americans, Native Americans, persons of Spanish heritage and others shows that the most severely depressed families live in rural areas (Durant and Knowlton).

These problems, we now can say with some certainty, are strongly associated with patterns of rural social disruption (Wilkinson). In contrast to the idea that rural life is inherently more peaceful, harmonious and healthy than urban life, the weight of evidence, while far from conclusive in a causal sense, generally shows the opposite, at least for some key indicators.

For example, consider rural mental health. The debate about how best to measure rural-urban differences in mental health continues, but the best evidence available shows a higher incidence of the most severe psychological disorders, specifically psychoses, in rural urban areas (Wagenfeld). Recent research on county rates of suicide and homicide in the Northeast (Wilkinson; Wilkinson and Israel), shows these rates increasing with rurality and there is good reason to think this may be only the beginning of what will be found when rural researchers turn their attention to drug and alcohol abuse, incest, family violence and other problems that have been neglected in rural research. In the specialized literature on these problems, theories and findings tend to implicate as prominent contributing factors the very conditions that abound in rural America, namely poverty, isolation, inadequate services and inequality.

These problems converge to form what I call a crisis of community in rural America. The background factors previously discussed—social cost of space, world systems and the loss of a clear territorial base for community life—set the stage for this crisis. They contribute to a situation in which it is difficult to sustain the image of the rural community as a place where people identify with and help one another in times of need and where neighbors work together smoothly and effectively to face common problems. The contemporary trends producing rural distress and malaise call for far more cohesion and

leadership capacity than most of the distressed communities in rural America could be expected to possess. Consequently, we find a negative association rather than a positive one between rurality and the effectiveness of local mobilization for development (Wilkinson et al.).

The problem of community in rural America can be seen from many angles. The rural-community territory tends to be so large—measured by where residents actually meet their various daily needs—as to limit the connections among the various networks through which specific needs are met. Many rural peoples' contacts are located in distant centers and residents of a given rural area travel to several different centers regularly. Consequently, rural residents typically meet few of their needs together in the place of residence they share and this limits the potential for community cohesion and community action.

Another way of seeing this is with concepts from network theory. Community depends on both weak ties and strong ties (Granovetter). Weak ties are formal and passing contacts between strangers or near strangers. Strong ties are intimate and recurring contacts between family members or friends. Community needs the weak ties to bind the strong ties into a larger community structure, otherwise the strong ties can become overly intense in their isolation and disruptive to the community as a whole. Applying this idea to the rural setting reveals a community problem. Rural areas have probably about the same number of strong ties per capita as urban areas, but a shortage of weak ties. Rurality restricts the number of strangers or near strangers in local social networks and the rural ties that do occur tend to be strong and isolated. Thus, if this thesis has validity, rural areas have a problem of community structure.

At another level, the community problem in rural America is a matter of vulnerability to what can only be described as exploitation. There is a debate in the literature (Browett) about whether spatial inequality (i.e., rural-urban and regional inequality in economic well-being) is a product of development or simply a boon to those who invest in developing underdeveloped areas and regions. Clearly, it is the latter if not also the former. Rural communities typically are ill-prepared by virtue of the trends and problems noted earlier to protect their members against profit seeking firms that have little or no vested interest in community well-being. The free market system, whereby community and firm interests are protected in the deals they strike between themselves after proper negotiation, assumes an ability of the community to act in its own self-interest. This condition is rarely met in rural areas today. Problems of community solidarity limit the potential for community self-protection and self-help in rural America.

Finally, this problem is seen at close range by those who seek to stimulate rural community development with the policy tools available under the governing philosophy of the current federal

administration—a policy premised on confidence in the ability of rural people and communities to use private sector resources to solve their own problems. This policy, as many critics points out, is at loggerheads with the reality of rural conditions today.

Toward Rural Policy

There are many definitions of policy—the governance process, a wise and worldly management of affairs, a statement of goals, an actual course of action and so on. A most useful definition is one that requires both words and action by a governing body: a policy is a settled course adopted and followed in practice. It is more than mere words and more than simply what a government does. It is a course of action formulated and adopted consciously and then followed consistently in action.

Reviewing rural policy initiatives in the United States, Long and associates make the following summary observation:

> The federal government has operated a changing mix of programs aimed at helping rural areas for many years. Agricultural programs, multi-state and sub-state regional development programs, and special programs for small communities, in addition to national programs available in rural as well as urban areas, seem to serve many, sometimes inconsistent, goals. Together with state and local programs to encourage development, help people enter (and leave) farming, and generally improve the quality of rural life, these programs are the implementation mechanisms for rural policy. While such programs have waxed and waned over time, there is no agreed assessment of what they were intended to accomplish or just what their effects have been (Long et al., p. v).

Strictly speaking, therefore, we do not have and have not had a real rural policy, rather we have had a "changing mix of programs" aimed more or less at helping people and communities in rural areas. Moreover, given the array of actors in the policy formulation process and the fluid and dynamic character of that process, it seems doubtful that we ever could have a rural policy in the strict sense—a settled course, consciously formulated and consistently followed by government actions.

Still, the history of government efforts to help rural people and communities in this country is a long and rich one and much can be learned about our national will and capability from study of recurring issues and themes in these efforts. Drawing upon a well-documented historical record (Rasmussen), we find diverse sets of federal programs pursuing many specific rural development objectives for nearly one hundred years (Drabenstott, et al.).

Early in the twentieth century the Country Life Commission identified rural population needs and suggested a national agenda for

research, education and other action to improve rural living conditions. In the 1930s, the Rural Electrification Administration was organized to bring power and light to the dark countryside and the Resettlement Administration was established to assist disadvantaged workers in rural areas. Rural Development Committees assisted community education and leadership development in the 1950s. Interest in a formal rural development policy grew in the 1960s, stimulated by the report of the National Advisory Committee on Rural Poverty; and in 1972 the Rural Development Act gave broad authorization for programs to assist and stimulate rural development efforts.

The history of formal rural development policy statements dates more recently to documents issued by federal administrations in 1979 and 1983 (Long, et al., pp. 22–23). The 1979 statement by the Carter administration was the first formal attempt to clarify the federal rural development goals. It committed the government to aiding the rural disadvantaged and to assisting local jurisdictions in carrying out their own rural development initiatives. As we all know, very little implementation of these goals actually followed. In 1980, the Rural Development Policy Act established a requirement that each federal administration produce a policy statement. The act also requires an annual report to Congress on programs and accomplishments under the strategy. Accordingly, in 1983 the Reagan administration produced *Better Country: A Rural Development Strategy for the 1980s.* This document calls for a reduced federal role in rural development and the policy—a policy of retrenchment, not development—has been followed more or less consistently with some remarkable exceptions in particular programs such as the Extension Service's new Rural Revitalization program.

Reflecting on these initiatives and the programs they have generated over the years, one can gain an appreciation of some central questions about rural policy if not a clear insight into what our policy is or should be. The recurring questions are in two groupings, one raising issues about the national commitment or will to address rural problems and conditions and the other raising issues about our capability to accomplish whatever goals we might resolve to pursue. As to will and commitment, we ask what and why; and as to capability, we ask how. The answers are confusing.

Consider commitment. Much discussion about rural policy centers on the issue of whether we want a transition policy to relieve present suffering in the transformation of rural economic and social structures or whether we want a long-term policy to stimulate and facilitate rural economic growth and community development. Obviously the two could go together, but they express quite different perspectives on the role of government in community development.

Transition policy expresses a "minimalist" perspective similar to that expressed in social welfare policy before the 1960s. The mini-

malist approach helps the needy through a temporary crisis but with assistance to tide them over until the immediate crisis has passed.

A long-term approach, on the other hand, seeks to build strong and vital communities. In the present situation rural workers need help preparing for and finding jobs outside shaky primary industries. For the long-run, rural communities need help pulling themselves together to lay the foundation for sustained prosperity.

A related question about commitment is that of responsiveness to the rural clientele. Stated bluntly, there is an unresolved issue about whose interests should be served by rural policy—farmers and other managers of traditionally rural industries, the rural poor, potential investors in rural development schemes, the local power elite, urban citizens? Ambiguity has produced a dilemma in the distinction between farm policy and rural development policy. Without the support of agriculture, rural development has little hope of receiving even a hearing in the policy formulation process. Yet it is quite apparent that resources now invested in farm programs could be better spent on more general rural problems.

Confusion as to clientele also takes its toll on the level of citizen participation in the policy process. Who speaks for the rural poor at local, state and national levels of government? Lack of access of rural citizens to the policy formulation process is a most glaring deficiency in a democratic society.

There also are questions about the underlying philosophic basis or justification for rural policy. Is the aim to promote equity in well-being between people living in rural and those living in urban areas? If so, what comparison in welfare would be equitable? Is equality the goal? If so, where is the equity in a geographic transfer of income to achieve spatial equality? Is the aim efficiency? That is, are there "market imperfections," as some economists call them, which, if corrected through strategic investments or by calling attention to strategic investment or employment opportunities, would increase the economic vitality of rural areas? Or is the aim some other more esoteric one such as preservation of traditional values and lifestyles or protection of rural ecology for the recreation and appreciation of urban America? Or, at its core, is rural policy simply an object of political maneuvering, a largely rhetorical device for squeezing votes out of what is perceived to be a vast, vaguely defined reservoir of positive sentiment in the national consciousness toward things rural?

Once the goals are clear, attention can turn to the question of how to achieve them. Take rural development. How could we achieve or even encourage that, even if we knew how to define it, and even if we were resolved to promote it? Hundreds of instruments have been tried. Which ones work?

There is much talk of rural development policy mechanisms to encourage diversification of local economies—through infrastructure in-

vestments, incentive programs and information dissemination. These have much appeal in theory based on what we know about the contribution of diversity to adaptivity in ecological systems. But do such mechanisms work? Will they work in rural America?

In fact, we have little hard evidence of what works and what does not work in rural development policy. One reason is we do not have clear goals. Another is that the resources actually invested in rural development have been so meager that there is hardly enough experience to support a conclusive evaluation. Another reason is that for all of the documentation on rural conditions and trends, research—particularly research in the social sciences—has a long way to go to understand exactly why rural areas lag behind urban areas on most indicators of economic and social well-being. Long-term patterns and recent trends are assumed to have important effects, but these effects have not been modeled with any precision. We all have our pet theories, and some theories are supported more than others by data, but the field has much to learn before it can turn with confidence to the task of specifying a research-based model of rural development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to give my pet theory. I want to explain what I think is wrong with rural America and what might be useful in trying to fix it. The problem is a community problem and the answer can be found in the process of community development.

Michael Cernea has outlined a perspective on Third World development that he calls "Putting People First" (Cernea). The basic idea is to use human needs and human capacities as the basic building blocks of a planned rural development program. Putting people first is consistent with the "human capital" approach in development economics, but it has a broader meaning. It also is consistent with the use of a needs assessment as a planning tool in research and extension, but it is broader than that. Putting people first actually means putting people up front, in the driver's seat. It is a philosophy of empowerment or, more precisely, a philosophy of capacity building.

Putting people in the driver's seat does not mean much unless they have driving skills and unless there is fuel in the engine. *Better Country* is an example. With appropriate support, however, the people—the people in rural American communities—can be most effective advocates for their own well-being.

Without denying the usefulness of policies and programs that help people develop their skills and take advantage of opportunities as individuals, one can see easily that the greater usefulness of this concept of putting people first is in community development. Community development is the process of building self-help capacity *among* people. In community development, an aggregation of people who happen to share a territory become an integral unit for self-help.

Putting people first in this context would mean designating community development as the rationale for a rural development policy and as the justification and focus of investments in rural economic development. It would mean helping people organize for community action and providing development assistance with community level impacts and processes in mind.

One justification for putting people first through rural community development is the fragile relationship between economic development and community development in rural areas. Far from being synonymous or inherently linked to one another, these can be in sharp opposition. Specifically, economic development without community development in a rural area can be exploitative and divisive, and the result can be loss rather than gain in rural well-being. On the other hand, economic development can support community development; and, when it does, rural social well-being tends to increase.

I want to stop on a practical note—how best to promote community development in rural areas. Ironically, a program designed expressly to promote community development is not a very good means of promoting community development. A much better way is to make community development a secondary objective of efforts to reach more visible goals, such as jobs or services. This is true for national policy and for local extension education. Community development can occur best when people are doing other things, particularly when they are working together for their communities

Take entrepreneurship, which was promoted widely last year as a rural development strategy. Some critics are skeptical about how much rural development can really be expected to come from entrepreneurship, but others continue to promote it vigorously. Assuming it is something to encourage as a means of rural development, there are two ways to go about encouraging it. One way is to set up educational programs and other aids for individuals who want to become entrepreneurs. Another way is to set up a community group or organization to encourage entrepreneurship. A small difference, but one way promotes community development and the other does not. The same could be said for alternative methods of teaching management skills, planning skills and leadership skills or for providing venture capital and other resources to support rural development projects.

The main idea is to get the community into the act. At the local level, community action is the key—the practical key—to rural community development.

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