RURAL COMMUNITIES IN AN INDUSTRIALIZED AGRICULTURE

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Agricultural social scientists and rural policymakers have been concerned about the welfare of small towns, small farms, and the rural life in general. The rural community is believed to be a good and desirable place to live and rear children because of low crime rates, friendlier atmosphere, lower levels of pollution, and many other features. The preservation of the rural community has been a frequently stated goal of agriculture and rural development legislations.

Post World War II saw many structural changes take place in agriculture and the rural community. The development of petroleum energy, mechanization of production processes, and farm and tax policies encouraged farm sizes to increase and the structure of the agricultural sector reflects the transition to more larger farms and fewer intermediately-sized and small farms. As technology developed and size of farms increased, human labor was displaced by capital investments in technology. These led to much of the rural farm population being surplus labor [9]. The Bureau of Labor Statistics data for 1980 show that agriculture employment dropped from 7.2 million in 1950 to 3.5 million in 1970 [12, p 23]. By 1979, agriculture still employed 3.5 million. This suggests that the huge displacement of agricultural workers was leveling off.

The transformation of the agricultural structure to fewer and larger farms between 1950 and 1970 is a major factor cited for changes in rural America. Areas that were heavily agricultural, such as the Great Plains, Cotton Belt, and the Southern Appalachian Coal Field, suffered great losses in the rural population during this period [1]. Rural communities in the nonurbanized "agriculture interior," suffered the greatest decline in population and failure of trade centers because larger farms and increased mechanization tend to undermine sales of local trade centers [6, pp. 38-41]. Over the past two decades, there has been a slight turnaround in the out migration from rural communities. Many small rural towns and communities went from heavy population loss to minor loss [1]. In others, a moderate loss may have changed to gain. Factors that led to growth in rural communities were better transportation (people commuting to work), growth of the retired population, spread of rural retirement areas, and the urban crisis.

Population shifts and changes in rural America have caused changes in the rural economy. Bradshaw and Blakely noted three significant changes in the rural economy. (1) In virtually every sector of the country, agriculture is no longer the dominant employer. (2) Manufacturing employment has grown in rural areas. (3) Services have expanded to employ nearly 60 percent of the rural labor force and to provide the new economic base for the growing rural population. The new rural economy is linked closer with the national economy. As a consequence, the rural economy now suffers the same economic problems and trends as the national economy.

Development of rural America has not been uniform and without problems. There are still many underdeveloped rural areas in America. Deavers and Brown noted that almost all the nation's poorest counties are rural [6, pp. 38-41]. They noted that these areas suffer from underinvestment in roads, health care, education, job opportunities, and social programs. There is a great diversity among rural communities and regions in the United States. There are rural communities that depend heavily on agriculture for survival. Other rural areas depend mainly on nonfarm income sources. Still there are other areas where nonfarm jobs subsidize agriculture. Finn noted that the heterogeneity of the rural population dictates that there cannot be a simple strategy or a single policy to deal with issues of farm structure and community welfare [7]. Policies designed to improve the welfare of rural America are twofold. There are rural problems that can be solved through developing national policies, but there are some rural problems that can be alleviated only through policies developed at regional and local levels.

There have been two basic national approaches to community development for maximizing the welfare of the rural population. The conventional approach focuses on the impact of changes in size and number of farms on community characteristics and well-being. The thesis of much of this research has been that the social and economic dimensions of local rural communities were dependent on the agricultural sector. Changes in the agricultural structure would lead to changes in the community. This approach is closely rooted in a 1946 study done by William Goldschmidt of two agricultural towns in California. The towns were similar except that one was surrounded by corporate farms and the other primarily by small family farms [8, pp. 416-417]. Goldschmidt concluded that increase in farm size led to changes in occupational status and resulted in decreased attachment in the local community. This led to decreased memberships in community voluntary organization, churches, and political and educational systems. As farm sizes increased, the community became more dependent on outside sources of funding because of decreased population, high unemployment rates, and an eroded local tax base. The implication from Goldschmidt's hypothesis is that policies that encourage small family farms would be a potent rural development policy as well. Agricultural policy that would lead to reduced farm size and related desired characteristics could not be implemented without problems [5]. There would be much opposition from larger farmers and their powerful commodity groups, consumer groups for lower food prices, political groups for less government involvement, and urban groups arguing for urban-rural equity.

The second approach to rural development begins with the premise that policies to improve the well-being of rural people must be viewed within the context of nationwide policies to improve the well-being of all people [10]. The thesis of this approach is based on the fact that the farm population supplies a relatively small proportion of the total rural labor supply. The economies of rural communities and regions are linked with national and world economies, thus sharing in the overall national economic conditions. They lose jobs during general recessions and benefit from national growth during recoveries. Advocates of this approach believe that the best way to improve conditions in rural America is to improve the condition of the national economy. Policies must be developed to improve the general economic conditions of the nation as well as to provide incentives for industries to invest in rural communities. Policies must be implemented to improve education, transportation, and health and social systems in rural communities in order that they can be competitive in attracting industries. Programs on such a broad scale do not take into account the diversities that exist in rural America.

The diversity of rural America dictates that many rural development programs must be initiated and developed by local and regional policymakers. These programs can be targeted to alleviate specific problem pockets.

Policy educators can play major roles in assisting local leaders design programs to develop the community's economy and develop its human capital. To attract industry and improve the community's economy, policy educators can assist with developing: (1) community resource profiles (human capital, land and facilities, and amenities) to determine strengths and weaknesses and (2) policy alternatives and their consequences.

The development of human capital is a key to any successful community development program. Policy educators can assist community leaders in designing and evaluating policies to improve the community's educational system. Also, policy educators can conduct educational programs to improve the leadership skills of local elected officials and the general population. These programs would improve the overall efficiency of local government. Policy educators must continue to tailor programs to solve unique problems that exist in rural America.

In summary, policymakers must be sensitive to the great diversity that remains in the rural sector. Agricultural interior rural economies are still dependent on the agricultural industry, whereas other rural areas depend heavily on manufacturing and service industries. Because of diversity, no single type of rural development policy will improve all rural communities. In order to improve rural conditions, policies and programs must take into account the unique attributes and limitations of rural areas and the rural population. With present national trends toward less government involvement and support, more rural development will have to be initiated on community and state levels.

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