

## KEY ISSUES IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

by

Daryl Heasley

### OVERVIEW

An essential fact faces most rural localities; as development occurs many small and rural communities are falling behind their metropolitan and suburban counterparts in dealing adequately with the issues at hand. Moreover, policies and practices intended to enhance rural development have been fragmented or ineffectively implemented.

Leaders and policy makers have been confused about the meaning of rural development. To many, rural implies an agricultural arena for food and fiber production, while development implies change, growth, and ready access to the products and services of an urban society. Today, while development still implies better access to goods and services, rural implies low population density and uneven access to the opportunities that are occurring in more highly "urbanized" localities. Enhancement of agriculture and other rural natural resources does not necessarily enhance social and economic development in rural areas.

Rural localities are beset by an increasingly complex set of economic, social, environmental, and political forces stemming from both the U.S. metropolitan and global societies. National and worldwide economic restructuring with or without the complicity of national and local politics, produces shifts in local economic and natural-resource infrastructures. Other forces, endemic to the fabric of American society, place increasing demands on local institutions to provide more effective services while receiving decreasing public support. Institutions for education, health care, youth and family services, families at risk, social equity, elderly and handicapped care, and infrastructural

maintenance and improvement are additional pressures to change and reorganize for greater effectiveness.

While rural localities are affected by these forces, they often lack the individual and organizational resources, expertise, and problem solving skills required to deal effectively with their situations. Many rural localities have volunteer, part-time leaders and managers, while their urban counterparts engage full-time professionals to deal with public issues. Efforts to maintain and improve the viability and well-being of rural areas must be guided by an awareness of such structural imbalances. Rural development programs require strategies sensitive to these similarities and to unique needs.

Structural and economic changes are creating new opportunities for rural economies while at the same time making them more vulnerable. Transportation and information linkages in rural areas are creating new patterns of employment, marketing, and other ties; but the rapidly increasing use can strain the physical infrastructure of these localities.

Environmental pressures, economic opportunities and challenges, and other changes will require greater human capital and institutional capacity. Our most critical resources for managing changes in rural areas are knowledgeable people and the viable groups they form. Based on the preceding here are key concepts driving a strategy for rural development.

1. Constructively Using the Natural Environment in an Urbanizing Region.
2. Enhance Rural Economic Productivity and Adaptability.
3. Enhance Institutions that Contribute to the Well-Being of Individuals, Families, and Communities.
4. Enhance Policy Leadership, Management Capacity, and Strategic Planning to Support Rural Community Viability.

These issues are not the only ones affecting rural areas. But, they are among those that are having the greatest impacts, and they are at the core of rural development strategies. They also provide excellent opportunities for developing, implementing, and evaluating rural development programs. Since the issues are so interrelated, the focus for rural development must be holistic,

encompassing aspects of all four issue areas, and their implications for individuals, families, communities, and institutions serving rural people.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES EXPANDED**

If the quantity and quality of natural resources in the U.S. and world wide are to be maintained for current and multi-future uses, traditional approaches to their management and use must be changed. Attention must be given to a more holistic perspective, one that is guided by and in tune with a multi-objective approach. This approach must accommodate the differing objectives of rural resource owners, urban dwellers, and the general public who rely on rural land, air, and water resources for sustenance, recreation, and aesthetics. New awareness of the severe frictions among competing interests has led to increasing regulation of our rural resources.

We need to shift toward constructive use of these rural resources, incorporating current production uses with regeneration and preservation practices for future generations. This change will require an adjustment from single-use practices to more multiple-use strategies.

### **Economic Productivity**

Major socio-economic changes are under way that will affect the ability of the U.S. to maintain productive and sustainable rural economies. Rural economies face particular problems in adapting to these changes because of their small size, geographic isolation, low population density, lack of employment diversification, and traditional dependence on natural-resource based industries and routine manufacturing. Forces of change include:

- (1) Structural realignments affecting the economic bases of rural economies. Among the key realignments are: integration with the global marketplace, technological innovations influencing the labor, management and capital requirements of rural businesses, need for the value-added industry, which sustains natural resource economies in remote areas of our region.
- (2) Cyclical trends in the national and global economies affecting the stability and growth of local rural economies. These trends include small, industrially specialized (manufacturing-dependent) econo-

mies, which are particularly vulnerable to macro-economic shifts; and new opportunities for businesses to anticipate and plan for such challenges.

- (3) More effective transportation and information linkages, which have increased rural-urban and regional economic integration. Such integration provides opportunities for employment, marketing, tourism, and inter-local cooperation.

Activities should focus on ameliorating problems and taking advantage of potential opportunities to help public and private decision makers adjust to the changes.

### Institutions

Consistent with the premise that all people, regardless of age, race, ethnic origin, or location, should have equal access to the services they need for social well being. The U.S. and local areas must respond to the fact that existing services are not meeting the special needs of some population groupings, especially in rural areas. In particular, federal, state, and especially local entities are challenged to perform three key tasks: to assess the delivery of services to rural communities, families, and individuals; to inform policy makers and others of the unique and pressing needs of rural groupings for human services; and to join with other groups and organizations in the search for ways of meeting these unmet needs.

Among the many population segments in the rural areas of the U.S. and among the many service needs that affect rural well-being, some groupings and services stand out as deserving top priority in rural development planning and programming. Groupings in urgent need of special attention in small and rural areas include age-related population segments (youth and the elderly), poor and disadvantaged individuals and families, and the culturally diverse groupings now found in many rural communities. Service areas that require special attention include housing, nutrition, health, education, transportation, and communications. The objective of information providers in responding to these needs is to present an improved understanding of issues, choices, and possible policy initiatives to service providers, service consumers, policy makers, and the community (including voters and taxpayers)

## Leadership and Management

Agendas of local leaders and decision makers in small and rural localities are becoming more controversial, complex, and technical. Increasing societal awareness of various issues places new burdens on rural leaders and administrators and requires a breadth of decision making on a scale not previously faced in rural localities.

These issues include concerns about the environment and natural resources; roads, highways, and infrastructure; environmental impacts; waste management and water quality; fire protection and law enforcement; health care and recreation; education and social service; liability insurance and risk management; and changing local economies and changing local economic export and tax bases.

The ability and effectiveness of local officials to provide public policy direction in response to societal demands represented by federal and state mandates, and to provide appropriate and adequate public services, depend on the adequacy of local institutions and their decision making and implementation methods. Part-time citizen politicians, high turnover in leadership and policy positions, shortage of staff to provide for technical expertise and administration, and increased financial pressures to meet growing internal and mandated demands all leave rural localities at a disadvantage relative to more urban places. If rural localities are to function effectively in dealing with the issues they face, sophisticated and workable planning and policies that require access to considerable expertise must be generated. Plans and policies must then be managed and administered efficiently to take advantage of available local resources and future opportunities.

If policy leadership, management capacity, and strategic planning to support rural community governance are to be enhanced, information must be useful, timely deliverable, workable, affordable, and have utility for users.

So, what are some roles for libraries and librarians in helping to ameliorate rural development issues?

- ◆ *Publicize* the types of information you can make available to agencies, organizations, local governmental units, institutions, special interest groups and communities which are addressing the four key rural development issues. Many of these established entities, especially, are not aware of the range of information local libraries, through the county, state, and national systems can access.
- ◆ *Initiate* special information packages for such entities. Do not wait for a visit, you be the visitor!
- ◆ *Feature* a local public issue and the accompanying resources you can access to "tease the curiosity" of library patrons.
- ◆ *Suggest/Offer* the library meeting room for such purposes.
- ◆ *Involve* yourself as an interested citizen and as a librarian in an issue of your choice.
- ◆ *Balance* proactive, assertive roles with reactive, passive roles. This point summarizes the above points.

The task demands the highest level of scholarly research as well as delivery of useful products to support and maximize the local educational outreach effort. The library systems are uniquely well adapted and explicitly chartered to serve rural America. These units must work together with other units that may be interested in rural development. If a balanced strategy is to result, this effort must focus on the relationship of individuals, families, institutions, and communities with the environment. In the end, a viable rural community is one that has strength demographically, socially, and economically. Such strengths depend on equitable distribution of and access to goods and services. They also depend on sustainable environmental conservation practices among people in the rural and metropolitan areas of the U.S.

---

*Daryl Heasley is Director of the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development and Associate Professor, Rural Sociology, The Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pennsylvania.*