REVERSING THE TIDE

Strategies for Successful Rural Revitalization

Summary Paper

Key Findings from 20 Years of Canadian Rural Research

Written in the Spring of 2009

This paper was produced as part of the REVERSING THE TIDE: Strategies for Success Rural Revitalization project. It identifies key findings regarding characteristics and changes in rural Canada, and then suggests strategic options for revitalization for rural communities and policy-makers to consider.

Note that a companion paper has been prepared by Mark Drabenstott, Director of the RUPRI Center for Regional Competitiveness. It provides insights with regards to rural well being and revitalization based on research learnings and best practices from selected rural regions in the United States.

Ministry of Community Development
Mountain Pine Beetle Response Team
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Key Findings from 20 Years of Rural Research

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INTRODUCTION

Rural Canada is in transition. For the past 21 years, the *Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation* (CRRF) has been part of those changes — as witness, participant, and advocate. We have worked with rural people, policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers to understand the bases for the changes, identify the options available to rural people and places, and consider the best strategies for improving the well being of rural people — on behalf of all Canadians (see the Appendix for a brief history of CRRF).[1]

Throughout this period, I have been along for the ride — as interested participant and researcher, President, Board member, and most recently, the Director of CRRF's 10-year research and education program entitled *Understanding the New Rural Economy: Options and Choices* (or in colloquial terms *The NRE Project*). The ride has been stimulating, challenging, and most of all inspiring — providing a source of insights and opportunities that has sustained an international network of talented and highly motivated people, brought together by their common commitment to rural places.

This document identifies some of the most important lessons I have learned in my 21-year association with CRRF. It's neither representative nor exhaustive since it is only one person's reflections on a long history of deliberation regarding complex phenomenon. In addition, I have selected my examples with a view to policy-makers and practitioners — particularly at the provincial and local levels. It is at these levels where action can have its greatest impact — building local capacities and creating conditions for innovation and collaboration that are at the basis of a vital and sustainable rural Canada.

My comments are organized in two general sections: the first identifying key findings regarding the characteristics and changes in rural Canada, and the second suggesting some strategic options for rural communities and policy-makers to consider for the revitalization of rural communities and people.

KEY FINDINGS

It is a major challenge to identify what I have learned as a result of my activities in CRRF — not for lack of insights but for their abundance. Many of these findings are general, but all of them have important implications for local and regional strategies. In fact, one of the challenges for rural places and people is to see how the general changes create obstacles and opportunities at the local level — opportunities for achieving local objectives. I invite the reader to also explore the information and materials on the NRE web site as a further source for useful insights (http://nre.concordia.ca).

1. Rural Canada is diverse

Rural Canada is much more than forestry, fishing, and farming — and it has been changing radically in its composition over the last 80 years. The challenges, options, and opportunities for people living close to major urban centres are dramatically different than those in more distant locations — and even these are different than those in isolated or remote communities. The economies of rural communities are also diverse. Even communities reliant on natural resources often require non-resource incomes to meet the financial or social demands of their residents. Cultural and ethnic differences also contribute to that diversity — frequently across communities more than within them.[2]

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[1] I wish to thank the many people who have been part of the CRRF and NRE activities over the past 20 years. Their insights and contributions are a large part of the findings outlined here. We have also been supported by numerous funders and champions, such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Rural Secretariat of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and 13 universities and research centres across the country.

[2] The Rural and Small Town Analysis Bulletins of Statistics Canada provide excellent descriptions and analysis of rural-related characteristics and changes (http://www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?lang=eng&catno=21-006-X).

Our approach to rural issues, therefore, must recognize this diversity. We may need to adopt strict definitions of 'rural' for our analysis and policy, but these definitions must be constantly questioned in practice since they seldom are sensitive to the many ways in which distance and density affect local options. This is especially important when considering local capacities for action — capacities which are frequently affected by local perceptions of rural and urban and sometimes bear only a distant relationship to the more objective definitions we use.

2. The new rural economy is different than the old

Canada has shared the transformation of rural economies which occurred in most industrialized countries. It has become more diverse, complex, and mobile — shifting from an economy based on primary production to greater emphasis on services and amenities (Freshwater, 2002). Under these conditions, external relations have taken on even more importance, requiring greater demands on knowledge — about local assets, external markets, trade relations, changing political contexts, and the relationships among them all.

3. Commodity-based economies have undermined rural communities

Canada has been very successful as an international trader in commodities. We have been able to produce more with fewer people in all our natural resource-based industries and in the process provide the labour for our urban centres as the economy shifted from primary to secondary production. This has been a disaster for many rural communities, however. Populations have declined in the more remote communities and increased in those adjacent to urban regions. The ability of these communities to capture the value of this commodity trade has declined as shipping has been reorganized for regional collection and international transport (Reimer & Bollman, 2006).

This is a treadmill that is difficult to escape. In spite of remarkable examples of growth in secondary industries, our balance of trade rests firmly on the export of natural resources: agriculture, forestry, fish, petroleum, and energy (cf. Figure 1). This is particularly the case for BC.

4. Rural manufacturing and tradable services are holding their own

While primary employment has decreased in rural areas, employment in manufacturing and tradable services has increased — relative to urban growth in these sectors (Rothwell, 2002). This is good news for communities facing primary declines. It suggests that finding niche markets for local goods and services may provide opportunities for communities that face exclusion as a result of the organization of commodity trade.

5. Rural and urban places are interdependent

What happens in rural areas affects urban centres as well — just as what happens in urban regions has important implications for rural places. I find it useful to consider this interdependence as manifested in four general ways: through trade and exchange, our institutions, the environment, and through identity.

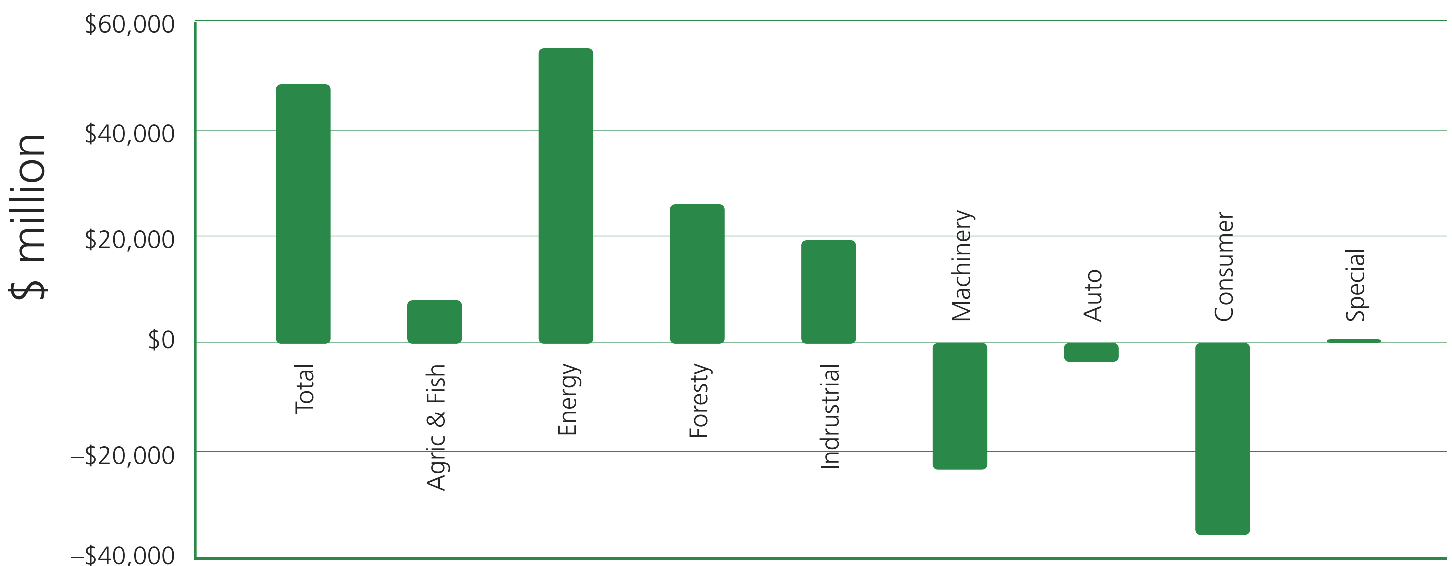

Figure 1: Canadian Balance of Trade 2007

Interdependence through Trade and Exchange
Rural and urban places are interdependent through the goods, services, finances, and people which move among them. Cities provide markets, employment, and capital for rural citizens and businesses; rural provides natural resources, labour, carbon sequestration, and amenities for recreation and renewal. In many cases this provision of goods, services, and labour is direct, but in a trading nation such as Canada, it is often indirect — as when our computers and clothes are paid for by the export of our natural resources in a complex web of multinational exchange.

The indirect nature of this interdependency exacerbates the tendency to overlook rural contributions to the economy in the face of urban crises. As urban centres have became politically and economically more powerful they are often identified as "drivers of the economy" and political and public discourse has emerged contrasting urban and rural as if they were clearly defined entities in competition.

But these are old visions where rural regions were seen as a resource hinterland to urban economies and societies — with all the accoutrements of sentimentality and marginalization. In the more extreme representations rural communities are seen as necessary for resource extraction or national security but are in general considered a drain on the national and provincial economies. This vision is out of date and needs to be re-evaluated in light of the evidence (Baxter & Ramalo, 2002; Apedaile & Tsuboi, 2008).

A more accurate vision acknowledges the many ways in which trade and exchange among rural and urban places builds the capacities of both. This is recognized by the city of Edmonton and the Northern Alberta Hub communities with which it has joined for mutual economic, social, and cultural enhancement (http://www.albertahub.com). New York City explicitly recognizes its interdependence with the communities of the Catskill Mountains in a watershed agreement supporting regional development (http://www.cwconline.org/). Japan has recognized the importance of its rural communities for water quality through a surtax on water that is used for such development. France has recognized this interdependence through a surtax on food that goes to regional development.

Interdependence through Institutions
Rural and urban places are interdependent through the institutions they share. Institutions represent structures of rights, responsibilities, and entitlements. By virtue of their charters, rules, and roles, they organize both the people who are part of the institution as well as those with whom they interact — constraining the nature of those interactions and our access to resources — both tangible and intangible. My role as a teacher conditions how I relate to my students in ways that are considerably different than my role as father, senior citizen, or client. In each case my behaviour is constrained by institutional norms and assets. It is no wonder then, that institutions provide a key focus for the consideration of rural and urban interdependencies.

In our research, we focused primarily on the role of institutions in the public and private sectors — both formal and informal. Asking "How do these institutions structure interdependence among rural and urban centres?" we found that access to services and governance has become regionally centralized and urbanized, thereby increasing transportation costs for gaining access to these services and placing extra demands on informal relationships — especially for the young, elderly, and infirm (Halseth & Ryser, 2006).

We also found that since formal institutions most often formulate their policies in general terms (by those who do not have local knowledge), they often remain insensitive to the special characteristics of specific places — especially those which are smaller and more remote from urban centres. The potential for social exclusion of particular types of people or groups is, therefore, high.

At the same time, relating to the more formal urban-based institutions demands unfamiliar skills of those in rural areas. The traditional norms in rural areas are not bureaucratic and formal, but more informal ones: associative and communal — those found within volunteer groups and family relationships (Reimer, et al., 2008). Bridging the gap between the informal and formal norms is often difficult, resulting in advantages to those familiar with the formal norms and exclusion for those with strengths in the informal ones. Voluntary groups with Boards of Directors

Innovations in Governance

- In Nelson, BC, the municipality saw an opportunity when the local hydro-electric dam was being sold. They weren't able (by law) to borrow money, so the town counsellors incorporated themselves, financed the purchase of the dam, and used the assets for regional community development (www.city.nelson.bc.ca/html/hydro.html).
- In Miramichi, NB, the provincial organizational structure was unresponsive to a crisis in the salmon stocks on the Miramichi river. Interdepartmental disagreements made it very difficult to address an issue based on watershed so the local citizens formed a committee of interested parties. Fishers, environmentalists, business-people, industries in the watershed, and municipal governments became involved and developed policies and programs to ensure the sustainability of the salmon stocks — and in the process developed economic and social programs which benefitted the whole region. The committee became so important, that the provincial government had to collaborate with it on many issues affecting the region (www.mwmc.ca).

and financial structures in place, for example, are more likely to receive financial and other forms of support — disadvantaging those with more informal structures as a result of inexperience or volunteer burn-out in small populations (Halseth & Ryser, 2006). As a result, strengths in locally-based governance are not likely to be recognized and supported by more formal (external) institutions. To those in the outside institutions, it looks like inability or resistance to follow the basic rules, while to those within the communities it looks like an imposition and insensitivity to local assets and strengths (undermining social cohesion and identity).

The good news is that there are considerable opportunities for innovative responses to this mismatch between rural and urban norms and regulations. These innovations often emerge as a result of the inadequacy of general policies to recognize and deal with local conditions. Recognizing these opportunities requires input at multiple levels — and across the silos of government organization — something that can be enhanced by ensuring the institutional structures are inclusive of local and regional people and concerns.

Interdependence through the Environment
A third basis for rural-urban interdependence is the environment which we share. Water, air, food, amenities, and global warming restructure our sense of inter-dependence and in many cases open economic opportunities for both rural and urban-based interests. For example, community-based forests allow local capture of value and control and natural amenities provide tourism and recreational opportunities. But we have few mechanisms by which this interdependence is addressed and integrated into our economic and social organization.

My examples about New York City, Japan, and France illustrate the potential, however. The BC government has recognized the importance of watersheds as a uniting force as reflected in the Fraser Basin and the Columbia Basin Trusts — the latter crossing international boundaries. NGOs such as *Ducks Unlimited* and *The Nature Conservancy* are other ways in which these interdependencies are recognized and the efforts of rural people compensated rather than indirectly taxed through the imposition of environmental regulations. These examples show how strategic alliances can be formed around shared recognition of environmental inter-dependence to the benefit of all.

Our national survey showed that rural people share the urban concern with environmental stewardship (Kennedy, Beckley, McFarlane, & Nadeau, 2008). However, the existence of available services condition the manifestations of this concern. Recycling programs at the scale found in urban regions are unlikely to be found in rural ones — not because of the willingness to recycle, but because of the added cost of collection and transportation.

Interdependence through Identity
The fourth basis for interdependence is not usually on the agenda, but our research has made clear how it remains a powerful unifying and dividing feature of our social relations — and one that is particularly tied to the rural-urban distinction. People's choices are largely guided by the way they understand the world and their place in it. A major component of that is their perception of their own identity vis-a-vis others — whether they see themselves as similar or different to others, how they are viewed by those others, and the ways in which their future prospects are linked to the prospects of particular people and groups around them. This is the realm of identity: its formation, change, and continuity.

Identity analysis recognizes explicitly two important features of the distinction between rural and urban. First, it recognizes that no matter how we formally define the difference, people develop a sense or vision of rural and urban that guides their behaviour in many ways. Second, it recognizes that people form attachments to place — attachments that are strong enough to create intense reactions when they are challenged. Globalization and mass culture have not eliminated the importance of family, ethnic, cultural, and local ties for people's understanding of the world and their place in it. The tragic failures of Canadian Aboriginal integration and community relocation programs and the tenacity of many rural communities in the face of economic decline provide strong testament to the strength of these identity-based processes. Policies that fail to recognize how places and people-in-places form an important basis for our sense of self, view of the world, and our capacity to act in it, are liable to undermine the social and human capital on which those policies rely.

This will become increasingly important as immigration continues to play a part in our future. Just as urban places have had to learn how to deal with the cultural diversity implicated, so do rural places (Reimer, 2007b) Our immigrants are largely uniformed about the Canadian rural experience and rural areas have not been particularly welcoming to newcomers — except for some remarkable exceptions. To meet these challenges we require considerable attention to appropriate representations of rural and urban people and places — both nationally and internationally.

STRATEGIES FOR RURAL REVITALIZATION

The changes outlined above set the context for eight strategic suggestions for enhancing rural economic and social well being. These are selected with a view to rural-focused policy-makers, but they all carry important implications for urban, provincial, and federal policy. I don't assume that they are exhaustive.

1. Look to urban centres

First, rural communities must look to urban centres when considering their options. The population, institutions, services, and financial control of urban centres has given them a level of power in Canadian society which is unsurpassed.

The economic benefits of agglomeration appear to remain even as communication and transportation have become easier and less costly (Bollman & Prud'homme, 2006). The density and interaction intensity of urban places give them an advantage for innovation and creativity, particularly in knowledge-based activities (Florida, 2005). Rural places and regions do not, in general, have the critical mass to support major markets, and except for those that are adjacent to urban areas, they are often unable to provide a full range of services on their own.

Our research has demonstrated how following the route of the commodity treadmill is not a long term solution for smaller communities — it will simply exacerbate the population decline and external dependency which has created so many of the problems in the first place. Instead, rural places must look for new goods and services to market — and by so doing diversify their regional economy.

The examples in the box (Urban Opportunities) illustrate the elements of such a strategy — one that generalizes to most other communities: identification of local assets, searching outside for a demand, and figuring out how to meet that demand with those assets. In the process each community was able to capture value and expand their asset base through new networks and connections.

Urban Opportunities

- Ste-Paule in the Gaspé region of Québec turned to the nearby urban centre of Matane when they were faced with a school closure. Rather than bus their children to Matane, they mounted a campaign informing Matane parents of the advantages of their smaller school, better student-teacher ratio, and more tranquil environment. They were able to keep their school open due to the students subsequently bussed from the larger centre.
- The citizens of Warner, Alberta used their threatened arena as a basis for an international hockey school for girls — attracting students from all over North America. It has now become a year-round residential school, rejuvenating the community as the reputation spreads (http://www.warnerhockeyschool.com/).
- An entrepreneur in Mattawa used the waste cores from a plywood mill to manufacture bowling pins.

Using local assets

- When Cap à l'Aigle, Québec was searching for a development initiative, they turned to a local lilac club. They discovered that this club had international connections through conference and internet activities so they used these connections as a basis for an international lilac festival which now attracts visitors from all over the world. It took local knowledge to identify the lilac club as an asset for development, external network connections to the regional and provincial governments to identify seed money for support, and international contacts to learn about potential markets (www.villagedeslilas.com/index_e.php).

2. Take initiative

A second suggestion is for rural places to take the initiative. Urban centres are increasingly preoccupied with the challenges of rising population and are unlikely, therefore, to see the opportunities provided by rural-urban alliances. This means that capacity-building in rural areas should become a critical focus of attention for governments. In order to identify niche markets, explore new models for service delivery, and reorganize governance structures, local communities must learn about their local assets, regional opportunities, national options, and international markets. These are demanding challenges, but ones which can be met if local and regional strengths are recognized.

3. Welcome strangers

Migration and Immigration are basic features of Canadian society and will continue to be so into the future. Almost 70% of our population increase in Canada is due to immigration and in 25 years we expect immigration to be the sole source of population growth. This means the introduction of people with different values, interests, and skills will be a major challenge, particularly for rural areas (Reimer, 2007a). As the "Integrating strategies" box illustrates, however, rural areas show considerable innovations for meeting this challenge.

4. Build social infrastructure

The importance of social networks is also reflected in the next strategic suggestion from our research. During the current period of economic decline, the call for more spending on community and urban infrastructure is loud and clear. However, our research indicates that the building of social infrastructure is as important as roads, bridges, communication towers, and aqueducts (Reimer, 2006). This is especially the case in smaller communities and in those which experience the boom-bust economies of natural resource extraction.

By first of all building and then maintaining the services and venues for people to meet on a variety of bases (from formal to informal), conditions are created where social cohesion is fostered, commitments are formed, and people become motivated to continue those relations over time. The resiliency and growth of towns like Tumbler Ridge, Elliot Lake, Inuvik, Springhill, and Twillingate are all reflections of these dynamics: people devoting time and energy to seek ways to survive and thrive in the face of difficult conditions. It provides lessons which are relevant to large cities, provinces, and the country as a whole — there are just as many economic and social benefits to investing in social infrastructure as in physical infrastructure (Gyarmati, de Raaf, Palameta, Nicholson, & Shek-Wai Hui, 2008).

Integrating strangers

- *Cap-St-Ignace, Québec*, faced the problem of anxiety about newcomers with a brilliant initiative. They identify 'Godparents' for newcomers and task them with meeting the newcomers and conveying an invitation to a community dinner. At that event the Godparents introduce the newcomers to the community and establish a basis for support and future support activities. By learning about newcomers, they reduce anxiety and by contacting them, they fast-tracked capacity building.

- The municipality of *Seguin, Ontario* faced considerable frustration since each time it asked for tax increases to extend services to the rising number of seasonal residents, it found that these newcomers would resist. The municipality revised its institutional practices to include the newcomers on municipal committees. They discovered that the resistance diminished as these newcomers came to understand the challenges that small towns faced with respect to service delivery, and made use of their urban-based personal and professional networks to search for innovative funding initiatives (Jacob et al., 2008).

- The communities around *Winkler, Manitoba* have created conditions where the rate of immigration rivals Toronto. In seeking labour for their local industries they turned to their historical roots in the Mennonite migrations of the past. They contacted their religious and cultural cousins in Central and South America, negotiated special arrangements with the Manitoba and Federal governments, and set up numerous local groups to facilitate information sharing, institutional support, language training, and the integration of the many newcomers into Canadian society. These people brought skills, motivation, and perhaps most overlooked — networks that provide new assets for community and regional development.

5. Identify common interests

I have illustrated the many ways in which the fate of rural and urban regions and people are strongly linked. This interdependence is not always visible, however, in our perception, in our institutional organization, and in our sentiments. In order to make more appropriate policies, programs, and actions, therefore, it is necessary to increase this visibility so that we can get our choices and organizations working appropriately. One of the best ways is to start with our common interests.

Both rural and urban people are already concerned about the security of food, water, and the environment, so these provide a strategic place to start. We need to teach urban people about food production — as they are doing at the Prairie Swine Centre in Saskatchewan, or through farm visits and vacations as developed in Québec, or with direct marketing as found in most of our major urban centres.

We also share a concern about water. This means teaching about the link between rural development and the water running out of the taps in downtown Vancouver or Toronto. Neglecting the obvious link between rural stress and endangered water is dramatically illustrated by the tragic results in Walkerton, ON where seven people died and 2,300 became ill as a result of improper chlorination and structural problems linked to federal and provincial cutbacks (O'Connor, 2002). Improving our knowledge and sensitivity about water can be done in our schools by visits, science programs, and mass media. Even simple programs linking sewage and fish as illustrated in the photo can help to adjust people's perception in a more positive fashion.

We can also teach our children how air, water, and soils are shared issues — how air pollution connects to acid rain; global warming to the pine beetle; the pine beetle to our ability to purchase ipods. We could establish centres of learning such as they have done in Springhill around geothermic energy. We can invest in research and production of environmentally friendly goods and services — especially those that can be produced in smaller centres thereby reducing transportation costs. We can support green communities (www.gca.ca). All of these are strategic examples of what I mean by building social infrastructure and revising our vision of rural and urban interdependence.

6. Build social networks — all types

Recognizing this interdependence means building networks across communities. There is often not sufficient critical mass within a single community to serve as a market or provide sufficient labour. However, it can be done by looking to the region. This type of regional view works well for larger centres as well — as demonstrated by the Edmonton-Northern Alberta Hub initiative, the Toronto green belt, or the Fraser Basin Trust.

Dancing the policy

- The Carcross/Tagish nation of the Yukon was faced with the challenge of creating policy for their newly negotiated government without losing their culture. Rather than abandoning their roots in narrative to meet the requirements of bureaucratic policy-making, they started with the stories told by the elders and used them as a basis for the policies guiding their decisions. They then developed a dance to represent those policies.

Our research has demonstrated how such networks are most effective when they include multiple types of normative systems — those reflected in business, bureaucracies, voluntary associations, and even families or cultural groups (Reimer, 2006). The challenge is to find ways in which the different expectations and requirements of these various types of network can be integrated — building on the strengths of each. Communities which are able to do this show important advantages for both economic and social outcomes. Governments which are able to do it create a new set of local assets that are often excluded by the formal rules and regulations of bureaucratic normative structures.

7. Support regional infrastructure

I have watched with considerable interest, the variations in approaches to rural development that are reflected by our provincial governments. In many respects, most have articulated the principles of governance that I have outlined, but with very different programs and with very different results. Perhaps the greatest contrast in my mind is between Alberta and Québec. Both of these governments champion a bottom-up approach and encourage local municipalities to engage in an expanded mandate over local decision-making — moving beyond the maintenance of roads and water to include economic development and environmental stewardship.

Building regional capacities

- When Tweed, Ontario, was interested in hosting the CRRF national conference, they realized they could not do it alone, so were forced to overlook years of animosity with three other local towns in order to make it work. This success inspired them to establish a regional ‘brand’ (Comfort Country) which now attracts people to the region as a travel destination. Subsequently — I was pleased to discover — the Comfort Country initiative has become an inspiration for people in Walliston and Hastings counties as well.

But the institutional contexts of the two provinces are considerably different. Under the Levesque government, Québec established a number of regional boards (MRCs) (sometimes against substantial opposition) composed of mayors and municipal representatives with a mandate for development and resources to support it. The emphasis was on regional development — across sectors and inclusive of social development. In Alberta, the approach was more laissez-faire — where regional collaboration was encouraged, some resources were allocated to regional groups if they requested and justified it, but there was little consistent pressure for such collaboration. The focus was clearly on economic development.

The results have been dramatically different at the local level. In Québec there are many examples of regional initiatives — tailored to local conditions and themselves providing a basis for second-order activities in small places. Over the 20 or so years of their operation within this new regime, local municipalities have learned how to use the regional structures to voice their concerns, debate, compromise, and collaborate with other municipalities, and in turn, to negotiate with the provincial government on behalf of their region and village or town. At the same time, the provincial government has discovered the value in subsidiarity — now allocating responsibility to the regional boards for a wide range of economic and social policy and programs, and (most importantly) showing confidence in the decisions and accountability of the MRCs — thereby making the governance of the province both more efficient and effective.

In Alberta the situation on the ground is very different. A few regions have taken initiative, formed their own corporate bodies, and moved ahead, largely on their own steam. Most municipalities, on the other hand, were unable to get beyond their protectionist traditions to reach agreements with their neighbours around the complex challenges they faced — either denying that conflicts of interests existed or refusing to discuss them in any but the most limited terms. In the end, the provincial government simply made the decisions for the municipalities, pointing to the failure of regional collaboration, lack of accountability, and the pressure of time as a justification for top-down management.

8. Take a long-term view

What are the lessons here? First: Bottom-up development needs an institutional context of strong regional governance to make it work. Second: The inevitable conflicts of interest that emerge

require multiple venues for expression, negotiation, and the compromise that are necessary for action. Third: Relations of accountability and representation are necessary ingredients for establishing an adequate level of trust for the system to work. Fourth: This requires the development of a common language and understanding for collaboration. Finally: all of this requires a spirit of patience and tolerance by people and institutions that are not favourably disposed to either of these. It took Québec 20 years of stressful and sometimes acrimonious work to get to the point they are today. When I spoke to the Carcross/Tagish elders about their plans for the reorganization of their people in the Yukon, they reminded me that it took 7 generations to get into the mess we are today — so they felt that 7 generations was not an unreasonable time frame to think about getting out of it.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I will take the risk of suggesting some implications of these findings for policy and program development in BC. It is risky since my knowledge of BC is rather distant — both in time and geography. My birth and childhood in this province suggest that this knowledge will be out of date and my residence in Québec ensures it will be a long distance view.

First, since rural and urban regions and places are interdependent, we must understand the nature of that interdependence and find the opportunities it provides. Both are necessary for a strong economy and society. This should be obvious in BC since its urban centres are heartily endowed with natural amenities that attract and refresh their populations in unique ways. Recognizing and preserving those amenities should be a high priority for all sectors of the society since they provide both the economic wealth for the province and the justification for people to devote considerable energy in their maintenance and preservation.

Second, our reliance on commodity trade — although essential to our national wealth — creates a millstone for resource-dependent rural communities. Finding new goods and services to export must be a constant preoccupation if these communities are to endure. In BC, as in all rural places, this requires the enhancement of both local and distance knowledge: local knowledge to identify the assets unique to each place, and distant knowledge to identify the potential markets for those assets. Governments can play important roles at both those levels.

The challenges posed by commodity trade also suggest we need to reconsider the entitlements and property rights that support it. Regulations regarding stumpage fees, for example, can impede or enhance the ability of rural communities to capture the value of their local assets and thereby their capacity to deal with the changes they face. The current negotiations over Aboriginal land claims provide opportunities for reorganizing these assets in new ways. Redefining new functions for old assets provide similar opportunities, as when forests become identified as carbon sinks or whales as tourism objectives.

Third, agglomeration economics and population migration place urban areas at an advantage — at least for now. Our urban centres have more access to the mechanisms of power and influence, and this is likely to grow in the immediate future. This means that identifying the communities and regions with which they are interdependent becomes even more important and exploring the mechanisms by which they might help each other becomes critical. Sharing of services or facilities, secondments, exchanges of personnel, and regional branding are some examples of a repertoire for alliances.

Fourth, since urban areas are preoccupied with the challenges of density, rural areas must take initiative and build their own capacities. This means focusing on local assets and the competitive advantages they provide. Local citizens and groups are in the best position to know this — and are most committed to it. But they need to know about external opportunities. Governments can help this process in a number of ways — by facilitating the development of that local capacity and providing access to information about the external possibilities.

Fifth, regional collaboration is essential to improve critical mass and increase competitive advantage at the local level. When developing this collaboration, however, considerable care is necessary to avoid the dominance of larger centres over the smaller ones and respect regional idiosyncrasies. This is a major challenge in BC because of the significant differences among the regions within the province. It means that policies will have to be different among them — reflecting the diverse conditions and demands of such regions as the lower mainland, Vancouver Island, the central interior, and the coastal areas.

Sixth, provincial governments are in a strong position to facilitate capacity-building. It requires a serious approach to local involvement, however, and the strategic use of regional bodies to cut across the sectoral and institutional interests that get in the way of collaboration. Place-sensitive approaches are likely to help in this regard, since local regions and municipalities are where multiple interests come together and the quality of life depends on collaborating among those interests. Quebec's integration of health, social, welfare, and other services in the regional centres has gone a long way to reducing the emergence of inconsistent policies and programs within each of the traditional departments, for example. As a result, the coordination of cases which cut across these jurisdictions is easier and more holistic than before — resulting in more appropriate placement and treatment.

Finally I wish to emphasize how support for social infrastructure is as important as support for physical infrastructure. Making our places attractive for economic, social, and cultural objectives relies on the quality of the social relations within them. This means recognizing the diversity of relationships that exist in

rural communities and finding ways to have them represented in government institutions and programs. Without this recognition, we will cut ourselves off from some of the most powerful sources of rural revitalization simply because they do not match the more bureaucratic structures of our government organizations.

We are facing radically new conditions from even 50 years ago. Our ways of thinking, the way we organize our institutions, and ways of meeting these new challenges must better reflect the new conditions or we will simply exacerbate the problems. New alliances among our rural and urban regions will go a long way to overcoming some of the major obstacles to that change. They will help us get a better understanding of the opportunities emerging in those regions, they will help us get beyond the differences in interests and conflicts that will be an inevitable part of the process, and such alliances will help us develop more accurate and sustainable visions of the interdependence between rural and urban regions. The goal, after all, is not to build a stronger urban Canada or a stronger rural Canada, but to jointly build a strong Canada that combines the strengths of both.

FURTHER READING

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APPENDIX: A BRIEF HISTORY OF CRRF

The *Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation* (CRRF) was born as the *Agriculture and Rural Restructuring Group* (ARRG) in Regina in 1988. It was composed of several researchers and policy-makers who felt the need for a more comprehensive rural research agenda than was found in the sector-dependent labs and hallways of our government and university institutions. The first meeting planned a workshop in Ottawa to prepare a national conference that has become an unbroken tradition continuing today (cf. http://crrf.concordia.ca/his/).

In 1991, ARRG changed its name to the *Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation* in recognition of our own research highlighting the negative impacts of a sectoral focus on rural development. By this time, we had a record of spring workshops and fall conferences that was unique in Canada — supported by government departments and granting agencies such as the Donner Foundation and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). We had also discovered the value of holding our meetings in rural places, with significant involvement of rural people in the planning and implementation. This was to become a feature of our meetings that continues to today — resulting in a record of collaboration with over 35 rural communities for our national meetings alone.

CRRF quickly established itself as an internationally respected organization with working contacts in the USA, Europe, Japan, Mexico, and Australia. It became clear that Canada lagged behind several of these other countries with respect to systematic rural research, so in 1997, we launched a national project entitled *Understanding the New Rural Economy: Options and Choices* (NRE). This project was to become a 10-year endeavour, setting a high standard for collaborative research that remains a fundamental basis for our understanding of rural Canada. It included over 15 researchers from 11 universities across the country and 32 systematically selected rural communities (the *Rural Observatory*) within a network of research, education, and practice that became a model for similar research in Japan, USA, and Australia.

Inspired by our international colleagues, we changed our name to the *Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation* in 1999 since 'restructuring' had by this time become an euphemism for government and corporate cutbacks. This was also the year that the NRE project received a major grant from the SSHRC for a 3-year study on social cohesion — which was followed by a 4-year grant for research on the new economy. By the time of its completion in 2007, the NRE had received over $4 million in funding, produced more than 250 publications, participated in more than 350 presentations, panels, and other public events, and trained more than 125 students from over 25 institutions. More than 200 people and organizations from our Rural Observatory field sites have been included in our education and mentoring programs (http://nre.concordia.ca).

In sum, this project provided a wide range of important insights for understanding rural society, specific policy proposals for practitioners and policy-makers, a pool of informed and highly motivated rural advocates, and a significant increase in the capacity of researchers, students, practitioners, policy-makers, and rural citizens to better position themselves for the future.

CRRF has followed the achievements of the NRE projects with several other research and knowledge mobilization activities stemming from the insights gained by the research activities. This includes activities addressing rural immigration, place-based policy, and rural-urban interdependence. Our latest conference in Inuvik, NT focused attention on boom-bust economies — continuing a tradition of policy-relevant research that guides decision-makers at all levels.