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IFAS EXTENSION

IFAS Community Development: The Continued Importance of Rural Development¹

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This paper is part of a series of discussions on community development. This series includes specialized papers on leadership development, civic engagement, community action, and other topics important to the development of community.

Introduction

A variety of events and conditions have occurred during the past three decades, which directly impact rural areas. Examples of these include declines in rural farm economies, decreases in the number of small rural businesses, and declines in natural resource based economies (agriculture, mining, forestry) (Dillman and Hobbes, 1982; Flora and Christenson, 1991; Brown and Swanson, 2003). Such conditions have had dramatic impacts on the ability of rural areas to remain self-sufficient, and have contributed to the out-migration of younger, more educated residents. It can be argued that such rural locales have changed the least as a result of industrialization, but they face massive pressure from outside interests as they attempt to control local resources and shape local development options. The resulting environment leaves many rural areas with few perceived development options, depleted local

workforces, diminished local support services (education, health care), and often the erosion of local ways of life. Under these conditions, communities may become open to exploitation from outside development and other interests which may not have the best interests of the community in mind.

Equally important in rural areas has been the consistent trend of devolution, where services previously provided by the government or state agencies, have gradually been transferred to local communities and their organizations. The impact of this trend is at best uncertain, with some communities being well prepared to take on such responsibilities, and others facing enormous challenges and obstacles in providing even the minimum level of support services.

In all of these situations, effective local leadership and community development are vital to maintaining and enhancing a rural community's quality of life. Such rural development is a locally planned intervention designed to stimulate social change for the purpose of bettering rural people and places (Summers, 1986). Traditionally, rural development has been represented in efforts to

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improve local economies by focusing on wide ranging sectors (*sectoral development* of supporting regional agriculture, mining, forestry). This sectoral approach has dominated much of rural development history. However, there is an increasing focus on *territorial* development approaches to development that focus on the unique local characteristics, assets, and development climates of individual areas and regions. Both, but especially the latter, can have dramatic impacts on our rural communities. All of these can contribute to efforts that enhance rural well-being.

Why is Rural Development Important?

The justification for rural development policy in an urban society is an increasingly contentious issue facing program and policy developers. The importance of rural communities has been stressed by some and seen as irrelevant by others. This latter argument is based on a belief that because of increased industrialization, technology, and our globally connected world, programs designed to meet the needs of rural residents are no longer necessary and no longer have an audience to serve.

Increasingly, extension and other professionals are arguing that because of such changes in rural areas the need for rural development is more pressing than any time in the past. Along with the traditional needs seen in rural areas, a host of new challenges have emerged in response to our globally connected society. In this setting, rural development and active local leaders are needed not only for public understanding but also for the purposes of public guidance and advocacy. Under such conditions, local leaders and active residents have an important role in maintaining public awareness of the issues and problems facing rural communities. Rural communities do still exist and they face a variety of unique challenges and needs.

Rural development can take many forms. Despite contrary beliefs, rural development is not only concerned with the betterment of the farmer and agriculture. Similar social conditions and needs exist in rural areas dependent on forestry, mining, fishing, and other traditional livelihoods. It is in these types of

areas that rural development is increasingly relevant and often most needed.

While social landscapes may have changed considerably, the cultures, people, and identities of rural communities have remained. The need for rural development and local leadership to address traditional obstacles and facilitate development in the face of new challenges is therefore vital. With outside development increasing, extension and other outreach efforts are vital to ensuring that rural residents have the information, leadership, training, and capacity to act on behalf of their communities. The conditions facing rural areas also shows the need for development efforts to be focused on the community and territorial elements of rural areas as opposed to focusing solely on a specific sector of the economy such as agriculture.

Sectoral vs. Territorial: Approaches to Rural Development

In addition to debates over the need for rural development, there is the disagreement over the shape rural development should take. Some argue that development should focus on specific sectors of the economy, while others argue that rural development should be tailored to the unique characteristics of individual rural areas and highlight their territorial elements.

Sectoral development has characterized much of policy history for rural economic development. Such development efforts have been central to most “top-down” or government led development. Essentially this type of development consists of focusing exclusively on a particular segment of the economy. In rural areas, this has traditionally been in the areas of agriculture. This development can also focus on promising parts of a rural area's economy. Sectoral programs can work to either create jobs (sectoral economic development aimed at the demand side of the labor market) or to help underprivileged persons gain access to jobs (sectoral employment development aimed at supplying support for the labor market). While sometimes offering opportunities, sectoral programs have however received criticism. Such development is often seen as being too broad in scope and application to account

for the diversity and uniqueness of rural areas. Policies organized on a national and sectoral basis, are often seen as inadequate to meet the needs of particular areas or social groups.

In response to shortcomings in sectoral development, a shift to territorial rural development policy has been suggested. This is due to the recognition that rural and urban areas are increasingly diverse. Such territorial responses have also suggested that national and international development policies stress more comprehensive development programs (considering social, environmental, and economic concerns).

Because of the recognition for territorial approaches, more and more attention is being given to local level and “bottom-up” approaches which focus on territory, local diversity, and the optimization of local resources. Territorial approaches seek to enhance the particular strengths of a rural locality by developing the potential of local resources. These approaches are best suited to meet the unique strengths and weaknesses present in rural communities. In this setting, leadership programs, extension efforts, and community development outreach programs can play a vital role in increasing the local capacity of communities for action and civic engagement. Such efforts build on local relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of local people within a common territory. This community action reflects the capacity of people to manage, utilize, and enhance those resources available to help them address local issues (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff and Bridger, 2003; Brennan et al., 2005; Theodori, 2005). Such activities and collective decision making tend to address the interdependencies of people, the environment, and the communities within a locality.

Conclusion

Many rural development efforts have begun to operate under the belief that sectoral policies are only part of the solution for addressing the changing social needs of rural communities. As a result, a desire for more integrated rural policies has been voiced. This is particularly true as decreases in government funding and devolution become more commonplace. With such cutbacks, it is vital that government sponsored

rural development efforts be conducted in ways that maximize economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits. In light of such conditions, territorial development provides unique opportunities to serve the needs of rural communities. Such tailored local level efforts better determine the capacities of rural economies and options for balancing these with the needs of existing social and economic conditions.

Implications for Extension Work

The perceptions of rural areas, their economic bases, and the ways for developing these will need to be more closely considered in future program and policy efforts. This is particularly true when considering the changing character of rural areas and diversity of livelihoods that remain. Local leadership from community members, activists, and others involved in contributing to rural well-being is essential to ensuring that development meets the actual needs of the community.

Extension and other agents of change can aid in the development of applied efforts including focusing local economic development on the unique characteristics, skills, and niche markets of rural places, instead of immediately seeking to recruit outside development efforts. Development efforts can also be encouraged to focus on local culture, history, and heritage. Such characteristics are the things that have made our rural communities special. They are also the things that can serve as the basis for efforts to save rural communities and contribute to their quality of life. Efforts to build local leadership and capacity can contribute to this process.

Extension agents can play a central role in development education by providing leadership training, community development assistance, and other outreach efforts. By doing so, local leadership can be cultivated to tailor rural development to effectively shape the long term well-being of our communities.

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