

The State of Rural Canada 2015

Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation
Fondation canadienne pour la revitalisation rurale



Executive Summary

We have been neglecting rural Canada. Despite the vital role of rural places in this country, and despite their partnership with urban Canada, we have been neglecting rural places and permitting the erosion of an important community development foundation of Canadian society and economy. Fundamentally, we have forgotten how to re-invest in rural and small town places, preferring instead to simply run down the capital invested by previous generations. The chapters in this report present a story of rural Canada that is tremendous in its diversity and vibrancy. Many challenges exist, but authors are equally adamant that there are also many opportunities to advance rural development in this country.

The idea for this State of Rural Canada report came about in order to draw attention to rural challenges and opportunities, and to provide a source of information and a platform for information sharing. The report contains a cross-Canada overview, as well as chapters that focus on rural trends in each province and territory. The report ends with a discussion of core themes and recommendations for advancing rural development in Canada. Given limited space, the chapters do not cover everything – no report is capable of capturing every dimension and issue within rural Canada. However, we hope this report provides important context and nuance to our collective understanding of rural Canada, and that it serves to stimulate discussion and debate.

Key Findings

The report tells us that rural places have much to teach us about building strong communities and resilient economies in the 21st Century. **Demographically**, we see that population aging and the recruitment of the “next generation” workforce together require investments that build robust new development opportunities. **Economically**, rural and small town places are proving themselves to be highly innovative in terms of responding to the pressures of low-cost global competitors. **Socially**, the rural stereotype of having a strong sense of community where everyone knows everyone is supporting new pathways for social organization, economic development, and local capacity building. With limited resources rural communities and local organizations are models of innovation, doing more with less and achieving net positive impacts. **Environmentally**, rural places are not artificially separated from, but they are intimately set within, the natural environment. Issues of sustainability, environmental impact, conservation, and engagement with nature are not abstract; they are part of daily life. Rural residents embrace a resource economy, but not where the environmental impacts threaten a way of life, opportunities for economic diversification, or functioning ecosystems over the long-term. Finally, the chapters make clear that rural regions are on the front lines of negotiating the new realities of reconciliation and wealth sharing with First Nations and Aboriginal communities.

Recommendations

- 1) **Provincial, Territorial, and Federal governments must develop a new and robust vision and policy frameworks for rural Canada.** In the absence of such visions inappropriate, short-term, and narrowly perceived policies and investment decisions will continue to waste taxpayer dollars and further burden rural places with failed development decisions.
- 2) **Rural communities must be active participants in understanding, planning and investing in their own futures.** The chapters in this report make it clear that local action matters. There are wonderful, inspiring stories of community and regional development from coast to coast to coast. We need to get better at telling these stories, sharing (learning from and celebrating) our failures, and working to adapt and scale-up successful models to other areas.
- 3) **All Canadians must participate in the window of opportunity that follows the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to acknowledge and seek serious corrective steps to heal the “historical trauma” suffered by Aboriginal peoples in this country.** Every author in this report has acknowledged the challenges that face Aboriginal peoples in all regions, but also the historic opportunities, opportunities that are being realized because of the efforts and changes going on within Aboriginal communities themselves, the promise held within their young and growing populations, and emerging patterns of self-governance.

As we approach a re-imagined rural Canada we need to listen to rural peoples, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, about their ideas and aspirations for the future. We cannot re-imagine places and economies without the vision and experience of those who live and work every day in these places. All chapters speak of the necessity of an authentic engagement with rural peoples.

The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF) has a mandate to work to better the lives of rural Canadians. As we can see from the chapters in this report, there is a diversity of “rurals” that this mandate encompasses. CRRF, and our partners, will continue to engage with rural communities, support research, and – most importantly – tell stories to inspire positive engagement and change.

The full report can be found at: sorc.crrf.ca

