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Discussions and Recommendations

Sean Markey and Greg Halseth

Conclusion

The chapters in this report present a story of rural Canada that is tremendous in its diversity and vibrancy. Many challenges exist, but we need a historical and contextual appreciation of rural Canada in order to chart appropriate future directions. The knowledge and intimacy with rural places captured here presents a contrast to a common perception – in the media, in policy arenas – of rural Canada as simply being in decline. The true dynamism of rural Canada is either ignored or simply unknown to an increasingly urban population and urban-based policy makers. As such, rural places are often presented simply as a rapidly depopulating resource bank for our provincial, territorial, and national economies, or as quaint relics of our less developed past.

If you add on discussions about globalization, urbanization, the ‘cities’ agenda, and so on, rural and small town places and rural issues more generally become even more lost within the national conversation. Worse, such discussions may import an implicit view that rural and small town places don’t matter or are not relevant in the 21st Century, beyond being disconnected locations adjacent to sources of oil, gas, hydroelectric power, pipelines, minerals, food, and fibre.

To be clear, the chapters in this report illustrate that rural Canada has, is, and will continue to be viable and to be vital to Canada and its economy. Throughout its history and today, Canada is a trading nation. It is a successful trading economy in an increasingly globalized world. The bulk of the dollar value of our international trade is from the export of natural resources, and those natural resources are almost entirely produced in non-metropolitan Canada. As a complex economic engine, Canada requires vibrant management services, supportive

public policy, a dynamic entrepreneurial culture, urban and port / gateway centres, and the resource producing rural and small town places that power the economy. Urban and rural are not separate. They are partners who together support the quality of life that Canadians enjoy.

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 an erosion of their important community development base. 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, and view infrastructure renewal simply as line item costs that we “can’t afford”. The authors in this report make it clear that there is nothing inevitable about rural decline: where it is occurring, it is largely intentional by virtue of what we choose to do or not to do in our policy decision-making. Urban-based metrics of efficiency fail to capture the net benefit of investments in rural infrastructure and services, where higher relative costs are byproducts of both distance and lower population levels. The metrics that are being employed by our policy makers fail to understand how rural services themselves unleash multiple social and economic benefits. Also, as the chapter from New Brunswick illustrates, we are often simply measuring the wrong things, missing all of the quality of life components associated with why rural residents remain passionate about their communities – and how they contribute to society and the broader economy.

The chapters in this report also make clear that despite perceptions of decline, rural populations levels are either growing or remain relatively stable. They are not growing at the same rate as urban areas, thus representing a lower overall proportion of the Canadian population, which in the absence

of closer examination may give the impression of decline. Despite the positive story associated with rural population resilience, the authors in this report show that rural Canada has been undergoing dramatic demographic, social, economic, and environmental change over the past three decades. And yet, we haven't been paying serious attention to these trajectories of change. A fundamental challenge associated with addressing rural development issues is that the senior government (provincial, territorial, and federal) knowledge base about rural places has withered. Cuts to programs, services, and staff have meant that senior governments simply don't have the "boots on the ground" necessary to truly understand the rural condition. The chapters from Alberta and Saskatchewan warn us of some of the costs of centralization of decision-making, and how the assumed benefits of efficiency and cost savings often don't materialize in practice. Senior governments have also not invested in authentic engagement processes to seek this understanding. This is a shame because, as the chapters in this report illustrate, rural places have much to teach us about building strong communities and resilient economies in the 21st Century:

- In **demographic** terms, population aging and the recruitment of a "next generation" workforce together require investments that build robust new development foundations. Manitoba shows us how an integrated and collaborative approach to attracting and settling new immigrants can lead to vibrant communities. The Yukon chapter tells us about the success of the adult education and training programs at Yukon College that are leading to improvements in educational attainment with direct and positive impacts on employment. We also know that across rural Canada, rural places are employing innovative strategies to deal with ageing populations. They are using their volunteer resources to service and engage ageing residents, understanding how an ageing population can be a vital social, economic and cultural asset to communities.
- In **economic** terms, rural and small town places are proving themselves to be highly innovative in terms of responding to the pressures of low-cost global competitors. The story of economic diversification in Québec is worthy of further investigation. As noted in the Québec chapter, the rural economy in the province shows a gross domestic product (GDP) with a higher growth rate than that of Montreal and other urban areas over the past 15 years. In Newfoundland, we see the success of engaging young entrepreneurs to address, in part, local economic decline. While there are hurdles to overcome, their youth-oriented entrepreneurship programs are helping to revitalize community economies and build important skills for the future. Investment in these programs is critical, as many of the chapters (e.g., Ontario, Nova Scotia) identify that we are facing a critical window for succession planning in businesses across the country.
- **Socially**, the rural stereotype of having a strong sense of community, being places where everyone knows everyone, is supporting new pathways for social organization, community and economic development, and local capacity building. With limited resources, for example, rural communities and local organizations are models of innovation, doing more with less and achieving net positive impacts. These are lessons relevant to all communities and neighbourhoods in Canada. Rural communities are proactively re-imagining and re-bundling their local and regional assets to fit with their community and economic aspirations and service needs. The lessons from PEI about their Rural Action Centres provide an interesting service delivery model for other communities. Nova Scotia tells us a story of a vibrant social economy, where the social bonds and resilience of rural communities provides the foundation for an alternative economic model and social service delivery mechanism that values rural place.
- **Environmentally**, rural places are not artificially separated from, but they are intimately set within, their natural environment - a lesson that is increasingly relevant in urban areas. Issues of sustainability, environmental impact, conservation and engagement with nature are not abstract; they are part of daily life. Rural lessons show how we must transform from where the environment is an un-costed externality or waste sink to one where the environment is a sustainably stewarded foundation for communities, economies, and our quality of life. Northern communities in British Columbia, communities in Nunavut, and elsewhere show us how rural residents embrace a resource economy (and are the people in the country who are closest to the impacts associated with different sectors), but not where the environmental impacts threaten a way of life, opportunities for economic diversification, or functioning ecosystems over the long-term. Rural Canada also has much to teach us as we wrestle with the realities of climate change and climate change adaptation, providing a critical resource for the country.

- Finally, the chapters make clear that rural regions are on the front lines of negotiating the new realities of **reconciliation and wealth sharing** with Aboriginal communities. The settlement and redefinition of title and treaty rights, and the day-to-day realities of living and working together, represent opportunities to address historical wrongs and revitalize regional economies with development opportunities that are grounded by an intense commitment to place. In community development work, rural communities illustrate that cultural strength just as much as any other factor supports both community and economic resilience. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers Community Economic Development Initiative (CEDI) toolkit (profiled in the Manitoba chapter) provides examples of communities working hard toward reconciliation and mutual, respectful development. These lessons are relevant to all regions across the country.

Recommendations

How are the opportunities and challenges associated with these issues to be addressed and reconciled? In our rural and small town places, there are options being explored and paths being illuminated every day toward potentially meaningful opportunities for policy investment. Rural places are about adaptability and resilience, with many showing strong leadership in environmental protection, commodity production, new information technologies, and others. The authors in each chapter tell us that communities want economic development, but economic development without long-term degradation to the community and environmental assets that underscore the high quality of life they enjoy. They also want a “fair share” of the resource wealth, as we see in BC, particularly as they bear the greatest impact to their quality of life from the resource activities and an increasingly mobile workforce (where employment benefits flow to other jurisdictions) that are employed within each sector.

For generations, rural Canada has been part of the fabric for creating the Canadian cultural identity. If we are to imagine a successful country and economy into the heart of the 21st Century, we must imagine a new rural Canada. To start down the road to a re-imagined rural Canada, both senior governments and rural communities have responsibilities to make this more than just talk – we need a commitment to change that will create a lasting legacy, and

foundation for development, well into the future.

For senior governments, we need a new and robust vision and policy framework for rural Canada. In the absence of a vision for rural Canada, and in each of the provinces, a legacy of 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. Québec’s internationally recognized national rural policy is the exception within the country, and we can see from the Québec chapter how it is working to shape and influence rural development in the province in a myriad of positive ways.

Importantly, a rural policy framework must be founded upon recognition of the indivisibility of the economic, the social, the cultural and the environmental. The dominance of an economic imperative for centralized political and corporate decision-making undermines the community development foundations upon which rural economies depend (and residents increasingly demand). We need a commitment to a truly integrated rural development strategy.

Rural communities themselves must be active participants in understanding, planning and investing in their own futures. If communities don’t have a plan, how do they expect to engage constructively with senior governments when opportunities for engagement do arise? If communities don’t cooperate with each other at the regional level, or worse, act in a negative competitive fashion with each other, how do they expect to re-build their critical infrastructure? If rural communities are unwilling to invest in their own future, how can they expect senior governments and corporations to play their part? David Douglas refers to this as the necessary shift for rural Canada from case making (i.e., repeatedly making the case that rural communities deserve more help and attention), to place making (i.e., getting on with the task of planning and building communities with a high quality of life that will attract and retain both residents and capital)*. The chapters in this report make it clear that community and regional 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.

* Do, D. (2011). Place Making – An Antidote for the Endemic Case Making. Canadian Rural Research Network (CRRN).



For all Canadians, with the recent release of the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report[†], there is a window of opportunity to acknowledge and seek serious corrective steps to heal the “historical trauma” suffered by Aboriginal peoples in this country, as explained particularly within the Nunavut and Northwest Territories chapters. 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 the emerging patterns of self-governance. For rural communities and economies, reconciliation holds the promise of enhanced clarity and certainty for economic development, and, the opportunity to anchor wealth and principled development within rural and regional economies.

Most importantly, as we approach a re-imagined rural Canada, we need to listen and understand rural peoples, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, about their ideas and aspirations for the future. We cannot re-imagine our places and our 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. Ontario positions this approach as a commitment to place-based policy, “whereby policy is created that allow communities to respond to economic opportunities and challenges by capitalizing on local and regional assets.” This

challenges governments to formulate policy that provides the necessary support to mobilize local resources and assets.

These recommendations offer a constructive and inclusive pathway to a more diverse, viable, resilient, and sustainable rural Canada. They support a future where the strengths of the rural economy and its importance to Canada are fully recognized, a future where the intimately interwoven relationships between social development and economic development, and between cultures, communities, economies, and environments are not just passively or falsely recognized, but fundamentally inform and shape our choices. We need an inclusive vision, broad place-based policy supports, and an investment minded approach so that both communities and economies across rural and small town Canada have the tools to compete and succeed in the 21st Century.

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, including communities that choose to identify themselves with cultural and traditional territories, instead of a binary of rural and urban. We, and our partners, will continue to engage with rural communities, support research, and – most importantly – tell stories to inspire positive engagement and change. We thank our partners from across the country for working with us on this initiative, and look forward to collaborating with the opportunity presented by the Rural Policy Learning Commons project to seriously advance our collective knowledge about how policy can make a positive difference to rural and small town Canada – and the entire country.

[†] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future. Ottawa: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.