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Rural Community Development – New Challenges and Enduring Dilemmas

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Abstract. Rural community vitality depends on communities maintaining adequate infrastructure, having access to services, enhancing business and economic opportunities and establishing policy settings to foster outcomes. Vitality also relies on communities “rethinking” assets, developing networks, building local cooperation and acting on local passion and motivation. In addressing both these aspects, current approaches to rural and regional development represent a partial approach. Efforts largely focus on service provision, discrete initiatives, information dissemination and provision of resources to meet perceived needs. While these are crucial elements of rural development, a more comprehensive approach is needed. A more comprehensive agenda involves engagement that helps people act on existing motivation, includes greater recognition of frustration and anger in regional areas, and helps people gain better access to information and services. A broader approach would also re-examine agency assumptions, better foster community confidence, provide more coordinated frameworks for discrete initiatives, and establish community relationships beyond those of service delivery. In implementing this expanded approach community developers face five challenges – a greater recognition of community values, new forms of participation, coping with perceptions, fostering community confidence and changes to the role of government. Addressing these challenges raises fundamental dilemmas such as focused action vs. community unity, participative democracy vs. representative democracy, and volunteerism vs. professionalism.

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1. Introduction

Social and economic changes are transforming rural and regional communities. How communities deal with these changes depends not only on the “delivery” of services, the maintenance of infrastructure and economic development, it also relies on local people using assets in new ways, working cooperatively, improving networks, mobilizing existing skills, and putting innovative ideas into action. The outcomes are not only jobs, income and infrastructure but also strong functioning communities, better able to manage change.

To what extent then, are communities fostering innovation, maintaining enthusiasm, supporting “drivers” and helping turn passion into action? How can “external” agencies, community development professionals, and communities themselves better help local people “rethink” assets, develop networks, build local cooperation and foster local passion?

The answers are mixed. Many communities have built networks, cultivated local enthusiasm and developed substantial capability, turning this into very real economic and social benefits. Yet I contend that many initiatives described as community development, often contribute to infrastructure or community organization, but with little change in community “rethinking”, networks or overall capability.

Part of the reason for this is that rural and regional development can easily become subject to a partial approach – an approach focused on the “delivery” of services, discrete initiatives, information dissemination and provision of resources to meet perceived needs. These are crucial aspects of community development, but they represent only half the story. The other portion is processes of engagement and partnership that help local people to:

- act on existing motivation,
- build enthusiasm and confidence
- challenge community attitudes and perceptions
- support “hidden” informal leaders in communities,
- “rethink” apparent needs and redefine community assets,
- gain access to appropriate information and resources, and
- build relationships with key individuals inside and outside their communities

Vital rural communities depend on both “organic” and “delivered” aspects of community development. So how can both approaches be better integrated to better support community capacity? How can we better foster and support passion, enthusiasm, motivation and attitudes in helping communities create real tangible economic and social gains?

This paper discusses the new challenges and enduring dilemmas that these questions raise. It discusses challenges of values, perception, participation, confidence and the role of agencies. It recommends new approaches including the re-working of agency roles and responsibilities, new forms of community engagement and innovative forms of agency accountability.

To explain these challenges and dilemmas we need to revisit the basic principles and approaches to community development.

2. What Makes Community Development Happen

Fundamentally, development is the creation of wealth – wealth meaning the things people value (Shaffer 1989). It involves ongoing economic, social and environmental improvement - sustaining a desirable environment; having a vital social system that fosters collaboration, equity and freedom; and a vital economy that is diverse, competitive and accessible (Christenson, et.al. 1989). Development increases choices, sustains positive attitudes, improves the function of institutions and enhances quality-of-life.

Development within rural and regional communities depends on several interdependent components. First, adequate infrastructure is needed to support economic activity and community life. Second, a healthy economy depends in part on new business starts, access to venture capital, improving the efficiency of existing firms or the establishment of new industries or enterprises. Third, policy settings can help position rural and regional areas in an economically competitive, socially just, and environmentally responsible position. Fourth, the delivery of services in rural communities allows the local economy and social system to function, sustaining employment, population and quality of life in rural areas.

Indeed, investment in infrastructure or major business development such as irrigation development, transport infrastructure, or industrial development have transformed some local economies. Changes in policy such as national competition policy, GATT agreements, the export enhancement program or welfare reform have also dramatically influenced local communities.

But lasting development within rural communities also relies on less tangible components of development, such as community ownership, local leadership, action, “rethinking”, and motivation. Indeed, the “concrete” benefits of community development, such as employment and infrastructure, often come through local people changing attitudes, mo-

bilising existing skills, improving networks, thinking differently about problems, and using community assets in new ways.

These less tangible aspects of vital communities are both the means and the ends of community development. Rural community development fundamentally involves a process - a series of actions and decisions - that improves the situation of a community, not just economically, but also as a strong functioning community. It is through action, participation and contact that the community becomes more vital, more able to manage change with stronger networks, organisational ability, skills, leadership and passion.

Indeed, the passion and motivation of local people, often only a few, is revitalizing local economies in hundreds of rural and regional communities. Moreover, the “soft” aspects of development often underwrite the “hard” benefits of jobs and infrastructure. For example the effectiveness of major infrastructure investment can depend on how well communities can cooperatively use the resource. The current “water wars” over irrigation allocation and management show the importance of community trust and cooperation in managing the benefits of infrastructure.

Hence, infrastructure, economic development, services and policy are crucial. Yet key drivers of rural and regional development also include the passion and motivation of people, attitudes of self-help, effective local leadership and organization, a commitment to learn and change attitudes, thinking about issues differently, and focusing on action.

If we accept the importance of passion and enthusiasm, how then are communities and support agencies working with local motivation? If we accept the importance of community outcomes, how well are communities and support agencies helping communities develop their networks, rethinking and attitudes? How well are rural development initiatives not only providing infrastructure and services, but also providing a vehicle for people to act on their concerns and interests?

Current approaches to rural and regional development offer insights to these questions.

3. How is Rural and Regional Development Happening?

When you look across rural America, Canada, Europe or Australia there are many effective communities adapting to change and implementing community-led initiatives. Yet we also see many communities struggling to take action. Some community-based initiatives cease after external funding finishes, suggesting a less than genuine connection with local passion and contribution to community capacity. We see a large

investment of community and government resources in planning and prioritization but limited local action. Community leaders and volunteers are “burning out” and struggling to foster broader participation and shared vision. While adequate resourcing is crucial, some communities and agencies can “chase” funding without engaging genuine community ownership.

While there are many successes, I contend that current rural development approaches only partially support community action and improvement. The difficulties some communities are having in organizing and achieving outcomes can be better addressed by expanding and modifying the current partial rural development agenda. Key areas for expansion are as follows.

Partnership, as well as service delivery

Assessing needs and delivering services and infrastructure to meet perceived needs is a central role for government and community support agencies. Agencies need to adequately deliver high quality services and communities have every right to expect them. However, if we accept that community development relies on rethinking, motivation, organization, and local leadership, service delivery represents a partial approach.

The delivery of services to meet needs often does little to challenge perceptions and help people rethink issues. Indeed, on its own, service delivery can reinforce dependency, sustain community focus on deficiencies, and defer power to external “deliverers”. McKnight (1995), warned of a “dependency masked by service”. Yet, I contend that the support of government and other agencies for community development often gets abbreviated to service delivery.

A development agenda needs to not only deliver services and support, but also engage communities in a genuine partnership helping communities to “rethink” apparent problems, investigate how they can use existing skills and resources, and identify motivated local people.

Action, as well as planning

Many communities and regions have developed plans and strategies that have not progressed. Often developed by external specialists, many plans have neither engaged communities genuinely nor fostered local action. Many communities appear to be stalled in planning – with multiple plans developed but with little change in community outcomes.

Planning is essential. Long term planning is crucial to communities in maintaining a vital economy, environment and social situation. Establishing priorities for development through planning is also critical - with limited resources and volunteer hours available a key question is “what

will we do?”. However, in many communities planning and prioritization is being revisited rather than progressed. There is a culture of deliberation, a deferral of confidence, where communities and support agencies overemphasize the establishment of priorities and needs, rather than focus on action to pursue an issue even if it is a minor priority, within the context of an overall plan.

Opportunities to engage people in action are needed to start action and organization. From this action, confidence and networks grow, allowing communities to take action on “bigger” priorities. This “just start” approach lends itself to relatively small self-interested groups, such as local business, that can see a clearer benefit in their participation.

Assumptions, as well as initiatives

Governments in many western countries are currently expanding funding and services for rural and regional development. Largely in response to accelerating change, growing discontent, and perceived or real voter backlash; governments have initiated new programs, altered policy and established new service delivery entities. For example in Australia the Regional Solutions Program has been established, a series of Rural Summits have informed new policy, and state governments have initiated efforts such as the Community Capacity Building Cluster, the Regional Communities Program and the Office of Rural Communities.

However, I contend that while the relative priority of rural community issues has increased; the basic assumptions behind this expanded government focus has not. And they need to change. Basic and outdated assumptions about the role of government still pervade government’s recent response to the “rural crisis”. These are assumptions of capacity “building” rather than capacity appreciation or extension; of government consultation and “delivery” rather than true partnership; of development *in* the community rather than *within* the community; of dissemination of knowledge and resources rather than access to them.

An expanded rural development agenda requires renewed focus, extra resources, and expanded services. However it also requires a fundamental re-evaluation of the mission of community development support agencies and new assumptions. These new assumptions should better recognize existing community capacity, establish a partnership relationship rather than that of “deliverer”, conciliation with communities of the motives behind government initiatives, shared kudos, and a focus on community capacity outcomes.

Access, as well as dissemination

While there is a wide range of funding and support services available, few communities can access them easily. Many communities find it difficult to know what is available, to discriminate what suits them best, to understand information and available services. Furthermore, many application and communication procedures are complex and lengthy.

Community development initiatives clearly need to provide information and services. However, development agencies need to do more than disseminate information and services. Staff is needed to partner communities to help them gain access to services and information. This means training, coaching and working with community groups to help them access appropriate information and help them improve their capacity to navigate the broad array of services available.

Communities also need access to key individuals with rural development expertise and community trust. Access to networks has also allowed communities to gain new ideas, build confidence and accelerate local initiatives.

Coordination, as well as specific initiatives

Much rural and regional development support is provided as specific initiatives. Programs clearly need to be targeted to specific issues, but they require a more coordinated framework. Rather than providing a formal coordination structure, I feel that programs and services can be best coordinated within informal rural development networks that function well at the regional level. Experience has shown that personal relationships and common issues at the regional level overcome institutional boundaries.

Ultimately rural community development occurs within a “system” of communities, sub-communities, individuals, external agencies and internal organizations. Each entity makes decisions and takes action under the influence of each other through a dynamic set of relationships. Rural development agencies therefore not only have a responsibility to deliver their function to their “constituency” or “clients”, but to also contribute to the function of the whole “system”. For example, in the Central Queensland region in Australia, rural development workers deliberately initiated an informal regional development network which is enhancing communication and cooperative work between a range of individuals and organizations.

Emotion

Many rural people are angry, frustrated and upset about low commodity prices, eroding rural infrastructure, cutbacks in services, the deterioration of communities and a perceived lack of government attention. (Pritchard and McManus 2000.) Many people feel that their life chances are deteriorating. In looking to identify the causes, they often find scapegoats (Gray and Lawrence 2000; Lawrence and Gray 2000). At times this has led to political fundamentalism. Many rural people blame government and other external influences, they feel “workshopped” and “meeting” out, and have strong expectations of government-sponsored assistance.

This anger and frustration is an understandable and natural response to the impacts of change in many rural areas. Gillard (2000), described a series of emotional responses to “unchosen change” in rural areas such as denial and self justification. The current rural and regional development agenda has yet to truly understand and engage with people who are starting from a position of anger and cynicism.

Connecting with passion

Community passion and motivation form the “fuel” of rural and regional development. Emotion and perception mediates communities taking action as much as organization, resources, or leadership.

Flora (1997), described five community “capitals” – physical, financial, human, social and environmental. These are assets or resources that can be used by communities, as well as characteristics that communities can aim to enhance. I contend that there is a sixth capital – “emotional capital” – the level of motivation, enthusiasm and positive outlook that both sustains community effort and benefits from it. Community development efforts need to not only foster the physical or social infrastructure of a community, but also the positive emotional state of local people and the passion they have for community improvement.

To what extent then do current community development efforts support or at least acknowledge community passion? I feel that many current initiatives largely see passion and enthusiasm as either a by-product of service delivery, or only intuitively recognize its importance as a driver of community action. Indeed, many development projects implemented inappropriately have suppressed local enthusiasm and motivation (Loney 1983; Moynihan 1969; Putnam 1993).

A broader development agenda needs to better recognize and foster passionate people in communities, better understand the influences on community enthusiasm and motivation, and more overtly include “emotional capital” as a real component of community development.

In summary, there are several areas where a rather partial community development agenda can become more comprehensive. These include greater emphasis on access, action, coordination, partnership, changing assumptions and engagement with emotion.

How then can we extend the current partial approach? How can a comprehensive rural development agenda be put in place to better support communities implementing positive action? How can we better support a complete process that better engages motivation, rethinking and capacity building? In expanding current rural development approaches, community development practitioners face five major challenges. These provide the basis for the following discussion.

4. The Challenge of Values

Community development is fundamentally based on values. Development – whether it focuses on infrastructure, business expansion or the environment – will only be an improvement if it is consistent with the values of the community.

Community development starts with citizens fundamentally considering how do they want their community to be. Strategic regional planning and community-level visioning addresses this question. It is a difficult question for communities to answer because it involves the expression of community values.

Values determine development priorities. For example, the condition of the environment or the quality of infrastructure receive different priorities in communities depending on local values. Tourism development or industrial recruitment for example, may not be seen as desirable development opportunities in some communities.

Values also underlie how local people perceive assets and opportunities. For example, people in Emerald, Australia want their community to be known as a “reconciliation community” between aboriginal and white societies – an espoused value that has encouraged local action.¹

A more complete rural development agenda needs to more overtly incorporate community values and provide more robust processes with which local people can raise, discuss and manage conflict around community values. This is a difficult challenge for three reasons. First, community values are ill defined, complex, emotive, and clouded by cultural “rules” and local power. Although values underlie opinion and behavior, they are rarely overtly expressed. It is difficult for people to agree on a set of values that might underpin future prosperity and how those values may be harnessed.

¹ Personal communication with P. Bell.

Even at the national level, many countries are struggling with value-based decisions about rural development and the meaning placed on rural and regional hinterlands. Should rural towns be allowed to 'die' if economic forces dictate they should? Should the economic forces reducing rural viability be mitigated by governments? What is the right balance of resources and policy between urban and rural areas? Should this distinction even be made? These are all value-based questions.

Second, community values are diverse and inherently involve conflict. Community members hold very different values based on their own experience and background. The expression and conciliation of values involves managing conflicting views and community power. Indeed, I contend that the communities that are successful at community development are those that do not necessarily have greatest access to resources or expertise. They are communities that are inherently good at reconciling or managing conflict over community values.

Third, community values are changing rapidly. Forces such as globalization and "de-traditionalization" are re-moulding the value systems of past generations; altering patterns of communal authority, and transforming social engagement and commitment to local institutions (Gray and Lawrence, forthcoming). "Agrarian" values, such as self-reliance, hard work, independence and the importance of family and community, are declining (Halpin and Martin 1996).

5. The Challenge of Confidence

The difficulties many communities have in taking or maintaining action is not necessarily due to lack of venture capital, poor access to funding, or limits to community engagement. More importantly, difficulties exist because individually, or as communities, people struggle to discern a clear direction for action and lack the confidence to act.

Some communities are very successful at taking action. However, the scope and extent of development options can overwhelm others. They can lack the confidence to start and maintain action. Part of the reason for this may be that facilitating community action involves a risk for community leaders and participants – not just a financial risk, but a social risk. For example, there are social sanctions if an initiative fails, or is seen to fail. Leaders are also open to criticism and to considerable, rather thankless, work. These risks, borne individually and collectively, can contribute to a lack of community confidence in conducting local development.

A rural and regional development agenda needs to better address community confidence. As part of a partnership relationship, community support agencies need to not only provide tangible support but also more deliberately encourage, coach and support community confidence and morale.

6. The Challenge of Perception

Community development agencies need to interact with communities in a way that helps local people recognize local perceptions and beliefs. Attitudes towards the community and its future often determine action, rather than the reality of what is possible. There appears to be four components to the inertia that communities must overcome to take positive action. Communities struggle to change because:

- They can't change an issue because it is outside their sphere of influence, or because they don't have the resources or assistance to be effective,
- They don't want to change,
- They don't know how to change (lack of direction, organization or expertise),
- They *think* they can't change.

It is this final component that is a crucial challenge. Local people simply perceiving that they cannot make positive steps can ensure that indeed they won't. These perceptions include views about the current community situation, future prospects, and the image of a community development initiative itself.

This challenge of perception is important for three reasons. First, the current strong emotion in rural areas can easily reinforce perceptions of self depreciation, victim mentality and negativity. Community members can "stall" in self justification and denial (Gillard 2000). Second, perceptions can easily limit or skew development options. For example, the perception that what is limiting community vitality is funding or assistance from "outside" clearly focuses development efforts on "acquisition" and possibly limits opportunities, such as redefining existing assets or fostering existing businesses.

Third, perceptions can become institutionalized – culturally constructed and associated with local power arrangements. Community developers can subtly and unconsciously influence or reinforce perceptions in communities.

7. The Challenge of Participation

An expanded rural agenda involves new approaches to community participation. First, I contend that the traditional forms of community engagement no longer work. Experience is showing that in organizing for community development, people are tiring of committees, public meetings and other "traditional" forms of participation, which often ap-

pear to be used by default. People are seeking more informal, temporary and social ways of participating in their community.

Second, government responsiveness to communities is mediated through unempowering “consultation” processes and a complex system of agency-based decision making. Many rural citizens express confusion and frustration about these processes.

A more complete rural and regional development agenda needs to firstly embrace new forms of community involvement, such as coalitions, temporary commitments, and networks of existing community groups. These are more likely to engage people with very limited volunteer capacity and to encourage a broader spectrum of community participation. Secondly, a wider approach needs to involve local people in prioritizing issues based on the level of local motivation, and also create easier ways for people to act on their existing concerns. This greater participative democracy must retain legitimacy and add value to representative democracy.

8. Challenges for Government

A wider development agenda also involves some specific challenges for government. How can government best foster rural and regional development? How can a state bureaucracy, become more responsive to the “grass roots”, implement policy according to the elected government, and act within its often constrained budget? How can government “trust” community when community may be misrepresented by groups that want to speak for all, but often represent narrow interests (Gray 1991). What will “accountability” mean in any devolution of power and resources?

Government agencies have traditionally seen their contribution to community development as the delivery of services, support for infrastructure, and policy adjustments. Changes in rural areas are increasingly challenging government to develop a dual role of service delivery and support for community capacity. This dual role involves changes to agency accountability, networking and local relationships.

New forms of accountability

New forms of accountability are needed to allow agencies to not only account for tangible outcomes and efficient delivery of services, but also for their contribution to community organization, cooperation and attitudinal change. Cavaye (1999), proposed two additional forms of accountability – for the process of interaction with communities, and for community capacity outcomes. These involve criteria and performance indicators that measure the “quality” of the process with which agencies engage communities, and the resulting impact on community capacity.

Fostering regional networks

Communities and practitioners work within local and regional networks involving community members, local government, private businesses and government agencies. A practitioner's role is not just to interact solely with communities but to enhance development outcomes by helping regional networks function coherently. This requires investment in relationships, trust and communication.

Redefining "real work"

Local agency professionals are best placed to contribute to community capacity because of their local community relationships and their existing, largely intuitive, contributions to community. How government develops a dual "service delivery" and community role depends, not only on specialist "community developers", but on how a local police officer, nurse or teacher defines their "work".

What policing, educating, or nursing is now will need to continue. In addition, however, an agency's work will also involve conducting delegated work in a way that fosters community relationships, shares power with local people and supports communities in becoming more organized and able. The skills of some public servants will not only be technical expertise, but will also include the ability to facilitate a process that engages a diversity of people, supports community "champions", helps people plan action, networking, and conflict resolution.

I have raised five challenges involved in expanding current rural development approaches. How then can these be addressed? What is involved in implementing a more comprehensive agenda and managing these challenges? There is no one clear policy or strategy that can manage these challenges. Rather the expansion of rural development approaches raises persistent dilemmas that can only be traded off, rather than reconciled.

9. Dilemmas

1. Focused Action vs. Community Unity

Most community development efforts are made up of various groups of community members eager to pursue a specific issue or action. Given the diversity of interests and motivations in communities, it is important that these individuals or groups are "given their head." In other words, they should be encouraged to pursue their action as strongly as possible. However, at the same, time many community members and leaders express concern about community unity, overall vision and joint action. In

addressing issues such as values, passion and action in an expanded agenda, community developers need to balance focused action and community unity.

2. Involvement vs. Elitism

The challenge of participation raises the difficult judgement of the extent of community participation. On one hand, community development demands the involvement of as many citizens as possible. On the other hand, not all citizens can, or may want to be involved. To what extent then do community workers support the “motivated few” or spend effort engaging the broader community at the expense of action. This dilemma parallels the paradoxes between altruism and self interest, and participative democracy vs. representative democracy.

3. Maintenance vs. Improvement

Just like renovating a house that you are living in, communities engaged in development must not only maintain day to day business activities and personal and community life, but also work on improvements. Keeping day-to-day activities going, as well as engaging in development initiatives, can limit participation and confidence.

4. Provision vs. Empowerment

Development agencies must balance the provision of resources and expertise from “outside” with the importance of maintaining genuine community ownership and self reliance.

5. Volunteerism vs. Professionalism

Volunteers and professionals interact in community development. The attitudes and culture of often differ from the assumptions and norms of the institutions that interact with communities. An expanded community development agenda must value both approaches, and manage the cultural rules and expectations of each.

6. Tangible vs. Intangible

People must deal with both the tangible and intangible aspects of community development. An expanded agenda must continue to simultaneously address jobs, infrastructure and income as well as community motivation, perceptions and values.

10. Conclusion

Current approaches to rural and regional development are incomplete. A more comprehensive agenda needs to go beyond service delivery, information dissemination and discrete initiatives to include additional approaches. These involve access, partnership, coordination, new assumptions and fostering local motivation.

These approaches involve greater recognition of community values, new forms of participation, dealing with local perceptions, fostering community confidence and new approaches by government. Addressing these challenges raises fundamental dilemmas that can only be managed, not resolved.

The same barriers to action that occur in communities occur within community development agencies. The main limitation to them moving beyond a partial approach to a more integrated and supportive role is not necessarily funding or organization. It is having the confidence to make a change – being willing to start an uncertain process and to challenge our own views of rural and regional development.

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