

Urbanization of Rural America Alters Extension Responsibilities

C. E. BISHOP

There is some question whether Cooperative Extension's thrust, image, and personnel orientation are sufficiently flexible to permit it to function effectively in the role ascribed by the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee. A perspective to this conclusion, as it relates to Extension's potential contribution to present-day rural poverty situation, is provided in this paper. This is accomplished by identifying the emphases and describing the settings for two comprehensive national reports (the American Country Life Commission Report of 1909 and the 1967 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty).

IN CREATING the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, President Lyndon B. Johnson voiced essentially the same concerns that were voiced by President Theodore Roosevelt when he created the American Country Life Commission. Both Presidents focused attention on the low incomes and discontent among people in rural areas and expressed concern that there was mass migration from rural areas to cities. Both Commissions delineated a long list of deficiencies in rural areas and suggested numerous steps that should be undertaken to improve the quality of rural life. But, the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, *The People Left Behind*, contained distinctly different recommendations for coping with low incomes in rural America than were contained in the Report of the Country Life Commission in 1909.

In this article I shall identify the emphases in each of these reports and describe the setting from which each evolved. From such a perspective, I shall appraise the potential contribution Cooperative Extension might make to the present-day rural poverty situation if recommendations of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee were implemented.

C. E. BISHOP is Vice President of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

The Country Life Commission recommended actions to redirect rural schools to place emphasis upon education that would prepare people for more effective living in the rural areas, including (1) vocational agricultural education for youth, (2) a system of extension education for rural communities to be carried out through Land-Grant Colleges in order to provide technical assistance and scientific information on improved production practices for farmers, (3) changes in financial institutions to provide longer term and lower cost farm mortgage credit, and (4) expansion of farm supply and marketing cooperatives.¹

In contrast, the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, in its Report in 1967, placed emphasis upon (1) creating equality of access to public services for rural Americans and others, (2) more vigorous national action to achieve and maintain full employment, (3) income maintenance programs that apply to farm and nonfarm persons alike, (4) reorganization of government in the sparsely settled areas of the United States, (5) public investment in the development of the infrastructure in potential growth centers, and (6) a massive program of human resource reclamation and development.² Special consideration was given to preschool programs and to effective coordination of the youth programs of the Extension Service and the Employment Service's programs of testing and counseling. Relocation assistance to help guide migration to areas where opportunities exist for better employment was also given special attention.

Why are there such sharp differences in the recommendations of two Commissions established by two Presidents to study essentially the same problems? The answers are to be found in the differences in the state of economic development in the two periods of time, and improvements in knowledge relative to the operation of farm product markets and resource markets.

Setting for the Country Life Commission Study

When the Country Life Commission Report was submitted in 1909 the United States was largely a farm-based society. The well-being of farm people was closely correlated with conditions on

¹ James G. Maddox, "An Historical Review of the Nation's Efforts to Cope with Rural Poverty," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, L (December, 1968), 1351-61.

² *The People Left Behind*, Report of the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), pp. 103-105.

farms. The economic health of rural communities was equated with the economic strength of farms. Almost one-third of the population lived on farms, and more than one-half were rural residents. A spirit of Jeffersonian agricultural fundamentalism dominated the thinking of the period. Farming was regarded as the good life. The farming industry was by far the largest employer in the nation, and it was believed that its capacity for increased employment was very great.

In this context, *the Commission chose to offer recommendations that were designed to increase the supply of farm products*. The recommended government subsidies would reduce the cost of mortgage credit to farmers, provide vocational agricultural education to prospective young farmers, develop scientific information, and provide technical assistance to farmers in using this information. These measures were all designed to decrease the cost of producing farm commodities. Each of these programs, therefore, would encourage an increase in production. The recommendations concerning cooperative marketing were offered in the hope of decreasing the cost of items purchased by farmers, thereby decreasing the cost of producing farm commodities and providing incentive for increased production. It was hoped that cooperative marketing associations would strengthen the bargaining power of farmers in the market place. However, an increase in returns to farm resources from increased product prices or more efficient product marketing would have provided incentives for expansion of production. Implicit in each of the major recommendations of the Commission, therefore, was an increase in the production of farm products.

The recommendations of the Country Life Commission were very effective. From these recommendations there emerged new institutions and new programs, including the Cooperative Extension Service, the Federal Land Bank System, vocational agricultural education, modifications in Land-Grant University curricula and programs, and other significant changes. This Commission should be credited with developing the institutional structures that transformed American agriculture into the vastly productive machine that it is today. There is no doubt that the highly developed agriculture of 1969 is in large part the result of the recommendations of the Country Life Commission.

Why then are we still as concerned about rural poverty in 1969 as we were in 1909? Does this mean that the Country Life Commission and the institutions created subsequently have been ineffective in coping with rural poverty? Indeed not! Unquestionably, many people who might otherwise have remained in poverty have escaped

as a result of the programs emanating from the recommendations of the Country Life Commission. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that the recommendations of this Commission were oriented toward the development of commercial agriculture; the agencies that were created to administer the new programs were organized and operated in ways that encouraged working with those who had the greatest capacity to increase production.³ Performance criteria that assigned a heavy weighting to increased production at the farm level were adopted for professional personnel. Resources were allocated to those uses where it was expected that the pay-off would be greatest in terms of increased production.

Setting of the Rural Poverty Commission Study

Between 1909 and 1969 the rural areas of the United States experienced unparalleled structural changes. During this period the extension of the urbanization processes of mechanization and specialization to rural industries resulted in greatly increased production capacity and vast changes in resource requirements. There were sharp declines in manpower needs in the natural resource-based industries—farming, forestry, fisheries, and mining—and a substantial reorganization of economic functions among communities. Many economic functions were transferred from villages and small towns to larger towns and cities. Many rural communities formerly providing service functions for rural families experienced an eroding away of their economic base. In association with these structural changes, the largest migration of human resources in history moved from the farms and small communities of the nation to urban areas.

As the urbanization process transformed farming it also transformed rural communities and altered their relationship to urban centers. In the resulting system, rural and urban are inseparable. The structural changes that have taken place were stated succinctly in the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty as follows:

Developments in transportation and communication systems along with the expanding network of roads and highways have confronted many villages with competition from larger towns and cities. The result has been an extension of the trade areas of the larger towns and cities into areas once served by the villages. The same developments have made it possible for rural people to commute farther to jobs in towns and cities. . . . In varying degrees rural areas are now parts of larger economic communities with a dominant town or city at the center, the

³ Maddox, *op. cit.*

community encompassing several counties. The linking of rural to urban areas is continuing and indeed, the rural-urban distinction is becoming meaningless. . . . In short, country, town and city are one. They cannot be separated.⁴

The urbanization of rural America brought many changes that could not possibly have been foreseen in 1909. Perhaps the most significant of these is the fact that urbanization is accompanied by less dependency upon tradition and greater reliance upon the discovery and use of knowledge. Frequently, this knowledge is complex and highly specialized. To be used most effectively it must be related to other knowledge in a meaningful whole. In the traditional agrarian society organization was simple, and most economic activities were conducted in a direct and verbal manner.

In the urbanized society, on the other hand, emphasis is placed upon specialization of function and many activities are conducted by specialists through highly structured organizations and agencies. In such a society, effective linkage among firms and among communities assumes great importance. Consequently, the optimal location of population and economic activity is altered by changes in production, transportation, and communication technology. It was necessary that the structure of rural America change in order to reap the benefits from technological improvements. It must continue to change as additional technological changes occur.

The urbanization process in the United States has given us vast and rapidly expanding productive potential. Indeed, productive capacity has increased so much that concern over the burden of survival, particularly of obtaining sufficient food and fiber for this nation, has been removed. Consequently, instead of promoting policies designed to *increase* the supply of farm commodities, for the past 35 years United States farm policy has been directed toward ways to *control* the increase in production.

In 1909 we were not yet mindful of the very low price elasticity of demand for farm products. We did not understand why substantial increases in production often were accompanied by disastrously low prices. Neither did we fully understand that as the nation became more affluent the rate of increase in the demand for farm products would fall. Nor did we understand the implications of such a demand. However, these lessons have been learned well in the intervening period. It would have been sheer folly, therefore, for the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty to ignore the knowledge that has been developed over the last 60 years and to have recommended programs to increase farm production.

⁴ *The People Left Behind, op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

The urbanization of the United States has had other effects that called for a change in policy directions. Urbanization gave rise to an increase in the demand for highly skilled manpower relative to low skilled manpower. It also increased the return from investment in human capital relative to investments in machinery and other forms of nonhuman capital.⁵ This increase occurred both in the industrial sector and in the farm sector. But, because the demand for human resources in an industry is derived from the demand for the products of that industry, the low rate of increase in demand for farm commodities—taken in conjunction with the rapidly expanding productive capacity—has kept the increase in the return for human resources in farming relatively low.

Consequently, urbanization has been accompanied by an increase in the premium on preparation for nonfarm employment. This increase in returns for manpower in nonfarm employment has increased the costs of impediments to entry into nonfarm occupations. As a result, the costs of racial and residential discrimination, differences in accessibility to education and training programs and other barriers that impede labor mobility increased.⁶ The increase in the cost of these barriers and the more widespread recognition of this cost, resulting from improved communications, undoubtedly have been important factors underlying the recent resurgence of demands for equal access to economic opportunity.

It was in this context of a highly specialized, highly organized, rapidly urbanizing, vastly productive economy that the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty undertook to make recommendations to combat rural poverty. Between 1909 and 1969 technological and structural changes altered conditions in rural America to such an extent that different policies than those recommended in 1909 to combat poverty clearly are called for. The programs of existing institutions must be altered or new institutions must be created to provide the necessary programs. Our institutions have fallen woefully short in adjusting their programs to the rising economic value of man and to the changes in the economic and social structure associated with the vast urbanization of rural America.

Cooperative Extension Reexamines Its Role

Cooperative Extension was established during the period when the American Country Life Commission Report was developed. The

⁵ T. W. Schultz, "Institutions and the Rising Economic Value of Man," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, L (December, 1968), 1113-22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1119.

report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee, *A People and a Spirit*, recognizes that the technological, economic, social, and political environment in which Extension operates today is distinctly different from that which existed at the time of its creation.⁷ This is one of several reports that have been developed periodically in an effort to update and modernize the philosophy and programs of Cooperative Extension. In many respects this report goes far beyond previous reports in breaking the shackles that have concentrated Extension's efforts on programs oriented toward increased production of farm commodities. The report places emphasis upon the goals and priorities of Americans and calls attention to the people and communities that are left behind because of inability to keep in the mainstream of society. It is admitted that "with a limited staff it (Extension) has served those who were most accessible. The response by those who participated gave them an advantage in our competitive society which either pulled them into or kept them in the ranks of the middle classes."⁸

Although the report calls attention to the changes in the structure of our economy, it presents a weak case for efforts by Extension to help to modify the structure or to change its programs to reflect changes in resource values emanating from technological and structural changes. Far too little emphasis is placed upon the development of the human resource, while special emphasis is placed upon working with farm families—an occupational group. The increasing value of the human resource in our society implies some specific changes in program emphases in Cooperative Extension. Clearly, greater emphasis should be placed upon human resource development programs, including family planning, housing, nutrition, health, and career choice. When program objectives call for increased farm production and farm income, those who cannot make large improvements are left behind. Many people will continue to be left behind unless different criteria of performance are established.

In the chapter dealing with social and economic development, consideration is given to community resource development, natural resources, and low-income farmers. But no specific consideration is given to human resource development; and in the discussion of low-income families it is not recognized that the number of low-income nonfarm families far exceeds the number of low-income families on farms.

⁷ *A People and a Spirit*, A Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee (Fort Collins, Colorado: Printing and Publications Service, Colorado State University, November, 1968).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

The report calls attention to the impracticability of delineating rural and urban areas in our society, and it makes a valiant attempt to convert the Cooperative Extension Service into the off-campus educational arm of the university. It advocates flexibility in organization to enable Extension to fulfill the multiple roles proposed for it. It is clear that much greater effectiveness can be achieved by organizing many programs on a multi-county basis. However, primary consideration should be given to improving accessibility to programs, and personnel should be located in areas that would provide greatest accessibility and efficiency in program operation rather than on any particular geographic basis.

If Cooperative Extension is to become *the* off-campus educational arm of the university it must meet the educational needs of the general public. It cannot cater to the needs of a particular clientele. The educational needs of the general public must be clearly identified. Programs to meet these needs must be developed and, perhaps most important, *criteria of performance of staff must be developed which will reflect progress made toward meeting these needs*. It is important to emphasize that if Extension is to be effective in achieving the multiple objectives it is striving to achieve, it must have different criteria of performance for each of its programs. For example, if Cooperative Extension is to continue educational programs to meet the needs of commercial agriculture, criteria of production efficiency are appropriate for such programs. In programs pertaining to career exploration, on the other hand, emphasis probably should be placed upon criteria of performance such as decreasing the dropout rate from schools and effecting a smooth transition from school to work.

Finally, if Cooperative Extension is to undertake the role proposed in the Study Committee Report, it must broaden its role far beyond that normally ascribed to the United States Department of Agriculture and to colleges of agriculture. Indeed, it must relate its programs to the total needs of the general public, serving as an arm, not only to the United States Department of Agriculture but of other federal and state agencies and other colleges of the university. In the proposed role the changes implied in organization and administration of programs at the national, state, and university levels are far-reaching indeed. One cannot help but question whether Cooperative Extension's thrust, image, and personnel orientation are sufficiently flexible to permit it to function effectively in the role ascribed to it in the report.