

Rural Development: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Henry L. Ahlgren, University of Wisconsin

In his role as Deputy Undersecretary of Agriculture, USDA, from October, 1970, to October, 1971, Ahlgren provided leadership to efforts in rural development throughout the nation. He professes that "rural development is an important component of an overall policy of balanced growth and must be regarded in that manner rather than something that's apart from and competitive with urban development, urban problems, and urban resources." Where do you stand on this issue?

There are those who say our nation is now confronted with a crisis . . . that we're on a collision course with disaster unless ways and means can be found for its resolution. They refer to the many perplexing and seemingly insoluble problems that are a result of overcrowding and congestion in our metropolitan areas and of deterioration due to out-migration in our rural communities.

Those of us who serve in the land-grant universities and as partners of USDA in the Cooperative Extension Service are confronted with the same challenges and opportunities to serve communities. We have the great resources available to us from the base of these institutions just as they were provided to serve

and meet the needs of the farmer and his family in years gone by.

We have the key ingredients, namely education and the necessary research base from which to perform, to provide basic inputs in triggering and initiating the process of rural development and moving it to an orderly and meaningful implementation.

What Is Rural Development?

Although trying to provide a precise definition of rural development is akin in difficulty to "nailing Jello to a tree," it's clearly not a program. This has been a common misconception ever since the phrase was first coined. In fact, this conception of rural development has

been a deterrent to action and progress. The best we can do in describing what it involves is to point out and emphasize that it's a process . . . a process that involves:

1. Government at all levels—local, state, and federal—and the expertise and resources available to each of them.
2. The private sector as a full partner.
3. Resources—social, political, and natural.
4. People. They represent the most important component because it's through them and by them that rural development will be accomplished.

The process is one of finding the leadership in the community, making it aware of the alternatives and opportunities available, and responding to requests for assistance.

All these components must be brought together to interact and to function in a way that will bring new prosperity and an improved living environment to the thousands of rural communities throughout our nation. In the process itself, the critical desire factor of the people who live in the thousands of communities throughout our nation is by far the most important consideration in determining whether action will or will not result.

The Presidential Task Force, in its report entitled "A New Life for the Country," points out that rural development as a community-wide action program "cannot start unless local people want it, and it cannot

succeed unless local leaders aggressively promote it."

On the other hand, once the people decide what they want for their community, and proceed to form an appropriate partnership with their government and with the private sector, they can very well be on their way to achieving their goals and objectives. This, then, is rural development. It's people motivated to a point of action and their government and the private sector all working together to achieve better communities. The hoped-for result of this process is communities that contain the necessary amenities to qualify them as good places to live and work.

The point should be made again and again that rural development is an important component of an overall policy of balanced growth. In fact, it must be regarded in that manner rather than something that's apart from and competitive with urban development, urban problems, and urban resources.

Growing Imbalance in Population Distribution

Evidence clearly indicates that if present trends in the movement of people in the U.S. continue, as many as 80 percent will reside in 4 areas by the year 2000. These 4 areas would be located: (1) along the eastern seaboard from Virginia northward to Massachusetts, (2) in Florida, (3) along the Pacific Coast from San Diego northward to San Francisco, and (4) in the heartland of

our nation beginning at Green Bay, Wisconsin, and extending southward to Milwaukee and Chicago and eastward to Pittsburgh.

The likelihood of such intensified population concentrations is a matter of great and increasing concern to more and more individuals and groups. In fact, substantial evidence can be found in support of the viewpoint that our larger cities have already reached a size and complexity where they've become politically unmanageable, socially intolerable as places to live, and economically inefficient in their operations. Problems relating to: (1) population control and waste disposal, (2) transportation paralysis, (3) inadequate housing, (4) fire protection, (5) crime, and (6) crowding are becoming so complex that they appear to defy solution.

The situation in rural areas is of equal concern, but for entirely different reasons. The census for the decade of the 1960s indicates that half of all the counties in our nation lost population during that period. Over and above that, another third of our counties just about held their own, neither gaining nor losing significant numbers of people during that period.

As people move away in search of opportunity elsewhere, the capacity to continue to support viable rural communities goes with them. If we are to halt, or hopefully reverse, the current movement of people from rural to urban areas, a major initial requirement will be to find the ways and means of increasing the number

of jobs and of improving the quality of living in rural communities. People will live where jobs are available.

With the increasing efficiency of modern agriculture, the available jobs in many rural areas have been decreasing. What's needed is new industries to locate in rural areas to help maintain a better balance of opportunity between rural and urban areas.

Along with new industries and basic to them is the urgent need for the amenities that are available in most urban areas, such as sewer and water facilities, good housing, good schools and libraries, adequate health facilities, police and fire protection, adequate transportation, and opportunities for recreation and cultural development.

Rural America—An Overview

By census definition, 95 percent or more of the total land area of the U.S. is classified as rural. Within this vast area are found:

1. About 65 million people representing about 27 percent of the total population. Many are unemployed. Many more are underemployed. Many of the amenities available to people in most urban areas are either lacking or present only to a degree.
2. The nation's farms . . . about 2,800,000 of them . . . are the best in the world. They provide our nation with an adequate supply of food and fiber.

They are an integral part of the agribusiness complex and account, either directly or indirectly, for about 40 percent of the nation's jobs. They must be considered as a central component in rural development.

3. Business and industry. While there's encouraging evidence of some expansion of this component in rural America, obviously a need for further substantial acceleration exists.
4. Our forests, minerals, and fossil fuels.
5. Fish and wildlife.
6. Rivers and lakes.
7. Open space and the opportunity it affords for elbow room, relaxation, tranquility, inspiration, and self-renewal.
8. Scenery.

The extensive natural resources in this vast area can be used more fully according to approved management practices. Many of these resources, such as forest, fish, wildlife, grasslands, rivers, and lakes, represent underdeveloped—or at the very most—only partially developed resources in an otherwise highly developed, industrialized, rapidly urbanizing nation. Too often in the past these important natural resources have been treated more like nonrenewable resources for immediate economic gain rather than the renewable resources they really are. We know that if properly developed for multiple use, they can serve for recreational use, as well as for direct economic gain.

Governmental Interest and Concern

The following are examples of growing interest and concern of state and federal government in evolving and implementing policies and programs that will lead to a better balance in the distribution of our population:

1. The 1970 White House National Goals staff report entitled "Toward Balanced Growth: Quantity with Quality." This report emphasizes the need for policies and programs that will lead to a better balance in the growth of our nation.
2. The previously mentioned report of a Presidential Task Force, "A New Life for the Country." One of the recommendations of this task force, which was comprised of some of our country's leading citizens, dealt with the urgent need of streamlining federal programs and strengthening state and local participation as necessary components of rural development. In pointing to ways of achieving adequate rural development, the task force stated that:

National policies that lead to full employment, fiscal soundness and control of inflation are essential for an expanding economy and vigorous rural growth.

3. The establishment of a Domestic Council of Cabinet Offi-

cers by the President, and the creation of a subcommittee on rural development within this group. This council is responsible for developing national policies that will lead to the orderly development of the nation's resources with the objective of achieving prosperity for all segments of our economy.

4. The attitude of Congress toward rural development. This attitude is clearly defined in the following statement, which appears in Title IX of the Agricultural Act of 1970:

Congress commits itself to a sound balance between rural and urban America. The Congress considers this balance so essential to the peace, prosperity and welfare of all our citizens that the highest priority must be given to the revitalization and development of rural areas.

It's not surprising, therefore, to find numerous pieces of legislation dealing with rural development that are now receiving Congress' increasing attention.

5. The high priority consideration given rural development by the President in his special revenue-sharing proposals and in his plans for reorganization of the executive branch of the federal government.
6. The strong support of the secretary of agriculture.

7. The interest of the governors of the several states and the actions being taken by many of them to find ways and means of achieving balanced growth.
8. The establishment of rural development committees or councils of public officials and/or private citizens in most, if not all, of our states and the activities which such are generating in the use of resources to encourage balanced growth.
9. The Rural Development Act of 1972 which contains a substantial number of provisions among its several titles aimed at making rural America a better place in which to live and work. Of direct concern to Extension is a section of this legislation that authorizes a pilot program of rural development research and extension to be administered by the land-grant institutions.

Summary

Because of the importance of rural development to the future of our nation, someone will be tapped to provide the leadership role. Any objective assessment of the situation would indicate that it can and should be the staff of USDA and the faculties of our land-grant universities. Clearly, no segment of government is better prepared, more knowledgeable, has more ability or skill, or has a higher level of commitment of service to people through education than we do.

As we move forward in our involvement in rural development and commit our resources to its effective implementation, I know of no better bit of philosophy that can serve as a source of our motivation than that

expressed by the late Charles F. Kettering:

Nothing ever built arose to touch the skies unless some man dreamed that it should, some man believed that it could, and some man willed that it must.