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Abstract

Rural-urban Interdependence as an Opportunity for Rural Revitalization

In this chapter we provide a framework for rural-urban interdependence then consider the implications for rural places in the rural-urban fringe. Four bases for interdependence are identified: exchanges, institutions, environment, and identity. Rural communities adjacent to urban area can consider each of these as potential foundations for alliances with their urban neighbours – thereby providing opportunities for regional revitalization. Several examples are discussed from the Canadian and international context.

Rural-Urban Interdependence as an Opportunity for Rural Revitalization¹

Introduction

Rural and Urban Canada are interdependent. Rural places provide the timber, food, minerals, and energy that serve as bases for urban growth. They also process urban pollution, refresh and restore urban populations, and embody a major part of the heritage upon which much of our Canadian identity rests. In return, urban Canada provides markets for rural goods, much of its technology, financial capital, and

¹ This paper is based on one prepared for a special workshop on Linkages Among Communities - organized for the Minister of Industry, in March 2005. The ideas reflect the contribution of many people in the New Rural Economy Project (NRE) of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF). I thank them for their insights and inspiration. Whereas I have borrowed liberally from their suggestions, the particular formulation here is not an official position of the NRE or CRRF. I would particularly like to thank several of my Concordia colleagues for their valuable comments and Becky Lipton, Victoria Bell, and Angela Briscoe for their support with the background work. Primary funding support for this project has been provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

media-based culture. To understand intercommunity linkages, therefore, we must start with a framework that is not only sensitive to this basic interdependence, but builds on it.

The framework must also be sensitive to the multiple natures of those linkages and the many levels at which they occur. The community of Springhill, NS is not only linked to other communities through the jobs, commerce, people, and services they exchange, but also through the school boards, police services, volunteer groups, and family relationships they share, the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the identities they espouse. At the same time, it is linked to Amherst, Halifax, Toronto, New York, and Europe in a network of commercial and social relations that challenge our current frameworks in myriad ways.

My approach to the challenge is by way of 20 years of research on rural and small town Canada within the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF). This research has confirmed our central vision of rural and urban interdependence and led us to argue that rural communities must look to urban demand and urban alliances as a key part of their strategic plans. Thus, we are particularly interested in the linkages that bind people and communities, the changes in those linkages, and the opportunities they create for rural revitalization. We are also convinced that rural revitalization is a necessary condition for a strong and vital Canada. Rural places must reorganize to compete in the new economy, much as was done at the beginning of the last Century. This time the focus should be on social and knowledge-related infrastructures.

Understanding Linkages

Community linkages occur in four major ways: through the flows of resources, services, people, and information among them; the formal and informal institutions they share; the environments they share;

and their common and complementary perceptions, values, identities, and ideologies. As a result of these linkages, the functional interdependence and complementarities of rural and urban places remain strong.

These distinctions are not meant to be exhaustive, but to distinguish different mechanisms through which linkages may occur. They also suggest a range of strategies for rural communities to consider when exploring opportunities for revitalization. Since the processes driving them are different, we can also expect that policies and programs addressing them would have to vary.²

Exchange and Trade Linkages

Context

Community linkages are most frequently investigated in terms of the movement of goods, services, people, and information among geographical locations as an indication of their interdependence. These flows are dynamic and parts of systems that operate well beyond any specific community – systems that are national or global in nature. Global systems of trade in food, for example, condition community relations at both the national and regional levels.

The extraction and trade of our natural resources has been a basic element of the Canadian economy. Even in 2007, more than 80% of our trade surplus was contributed by primary products from rural areas (CANSIM Table 3760006). The way in which it is organized has changed dramatically over the last 75 years, however. Markets and technology have shed labour in all our natural resource industries – depopulating our rural communities and contributing to the urbanization that has become a key component of the Canadian social structure. During this period, our primary industries underwent considerable concentration and integration. Government policies explicitly encouraged these trends by

² In this paper, my primary focus will be on the relationships between rural and urban settlements. However, most of the arguments apply as well to relations within these two types of places.

supporting programs and strategies that provided basic commodities to the world. It was a highly successful strategy from the point of view of our balance of trade, but one that had severe consequences (often negative) for the many small towns and villages dependent on those primary industries.

Impacts

Not only did rural places lose their population as a result of declining labour demands, but they became more isolated from the production and distribution chains and relegated to a smaller role in the policies and programs of provincial and federal governments. Both private and public sector institutions reorganized with less presence in small towns and a diminished awareness of, or concern for, their special conditions. The divide between rural and urban political representation that we see today highlights the continuing impact of these changes.

Trade and exchange relations between rural and urban places have followed these general trends. Primary sector goods often flow from the farms, forests, and oceans directly to central processing locations, bypassing the smaller towns as they move in bulk form to national or international destinations.

Processing, packaging, and marketing chains take a larger portion of the profits, leaving a smaller share for those in the communities of origin. One consequence is that rural producers must pay attention to a greater range of more volatile markets far from their local areas for both inputs and products. Under these conditions, urban and international markets, decisions, values, and perspectives become more important to economic success than local activities and organizations. It also means that global trade has veiled the link among rural and urban places, reinforcing the perception that the degree of interdependence is less than it really is and concealing areas of common interest.

Trade in services has followed a similar path to trade in resources. In Canada, both private and public services have become centralized and concentrated in urban areas. The replacement of local financial,

commercial, and government services with franchise outlets or ‘big box’ stores has shifted many of the interactions to a regional basis, requiring rural residents to travel further to get consumer goods, education, health services, or recreation. Both risks and transaction costs are transferred to smaller places in the process. This has placed considerable stress on local services and created a plethora of institutional structures that may bear only a slight relationship to the ‘community’ with which rural people identify.

As local services become regionalized, rural people must travel greater distances. Under these conditions, commuting and shopping flows transform the social relations, available time, and opportunities of rural people and organizations – typically leaving less time and energy for local relations. Similarly, urban to rural travel for jobs, recreation, or services creates pressures on old social structures even as they open new opportunities. Our current governance structures are frequently unable to respond appropriately to these new conditions.

In addition to goods, services, and people, the exchange of information among rural and urban places has increased significantly. The Canadian government has given high priority to the infrastructure that permits telecommunications to all regions of the country – including the allocation of significant financial resources to broadband services and satellite communications in rural areas. This has created opportunities for economic and social linkages that have been eagerly developed particularly by youth and some entrepreneurs. A rural-urban digital divide remains, however, both with respect to infrastructure and ability. This means that any program using the internet as a sole method of delivery is particularly exclusive of rural people.

Most cultural production takes place in urban centres. This often results in the representations of rural issues and life being stereotypical and inaccurate: on the one hand idealized and on the other, crisis-focused. It also makes it difficult for rural people to gain access to media for local interest purposes and reduces their ability to learn about new forms of communication that may facilitate such objectives.

Institutional Interrelations

Context

Institutions structure relationships, bring certain people together, and keep others apart. They also direct many of the conditions under which those relations should operate, with regulations and sanctions to increase the chances that it will happen. As a result, they become key components of the interrelationships among communities, both rural and urban.

Before World War II, rural communities relied heavily on local organizations for governance and social support. Churches, professional organizations, co-operatives, and ethnic-based groups provided the institutional manifestations of the social capital that supported their economic and social lives. After WWII, however, provincial and federal governments took over many of these functions – first in education and justice, then in health and welfare. In doing so they provided employment opportunities for primary sector workers who were victims of the shrinking demand for labour in the face of mechanization.

By the 1980s, the situation had changed considerably. Governments were cutting back on most of their services under fiscal and political pressures. In many rural areas, this meant job losses and greater distances to schools, hospitals, and other support services as the institutions were rationalized on the basis of efficiency and population criteria. The costs of getting access to these services were passed to rural people and the procedures for doing so required a level of bureaucratic sophistication that was foreign and intimidating to those rural people who were accustomed to more informal relations.

These changes reflected the increasing importance of market and bureaucratic-based relations over those of an associative and communal-reciprocal nature {Reimer, Lyons, et al. 2008 #20670}. This fragmented

and de-valued the traditional rural strengths in voluntary associations, families, and local networks and placed rural people at a disadvantage in negotiations with urban-based institutions.

Impacts

We are now in a situation where fewer people are called upon to provide more services, often with less available time. This is exacerbated by the increased participation of women in the labour force, high levels of youth out-migration, and the aging of the population through natural processes. The social infrastructure that served as the basis for community resilience is now severely stressed. We know, for example, that aging at home is better for an individual's health and cheaper for the health system – but to make it work, investments are needed for both physical and social infrastructure. This includes informal support networks, respite care, transportation, and day care options that are appropriate for low-density regions.

Unlike its physical counterpart, social infrastructure takes much longer to rebuild once it has gone – and its impacts are more extensive. Social infrastructure provides the means by which we identify opportunities, reduce risks, pass information, and act collectively: all critical elements for both economic and social goals. At the same time, it provides a critical basis for personal identity and welfare. Aboriginal communities with self-government, control over education, police services, health services, cultural facilities, and land claims all show lower rates of suicide over those without, for example.

Social institutions link communities. On the one hand, they bring rural and urban people together. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, for example, has the resources and mandate to bring together agricultural producers, processors, transporters, marketers, and traders from both rural and urban contexts to deal with challenges relating to agricultural production and trade.

On the other hand, in both policy and practice, these same institutions may work against the identification and sharing of common interests among rural and urban people. By focusing on agriculture production and marketing alone, agricultural departments tend to exclude many other actors who are significantly implicated in such production. Municipalities, consumers, social workers, NGOs, foresters, and construction trades are just some of the many types of people who have an interest in the identification and enactment of agricultural-related policies and programs. In addition, such institutions may exclude important concerns that cut across multiple sectors and groups, making it difficult for alliances to occur and undermining those that may have already been established. By organizing for agriculture alone, the institution may remain insensitive to the food, pollution, environmental, and health-related interests that could serve as a useful basis for rural-urban alliances.

In many of the institutions where rural and urban interests are joined, the predominance of urban participants has meant that rural conditions are weakly represented. Health policy, for example, is largely organized to take advantage of medical specializations that can emerge in large agglomerations. As a result, the training, financing, and evaluation of medical personnel favours specialized fields. In smaller centres or regions, the populations and infrastructure cannot support multiple specializations, however, leaving them without a pool of medical personnel who can manage the multiple demands of general practice. Similar effects occur in education, social services, business development, and financing. The uncritical application of a population criteria for service provision makes sense in a context of high density where costs are low for transportation, but it will usually put smaller, more remote places at a disadvantage, undermining their institutional completeness, social cohesion, and capacity.

The division of government powers in Canada places few powers in the hands of municipalities. Even though each province has independent responsibility for organizing municipalities, their allocation of powers tends to be limited to property taxation and services. In many provinces, municipalities are forbidden to borrow money for local development projects. As a consequence, most municipalities are

unable to respond quickly and effectively to local opportunities or crises. It also means that they typically have difficulty building social capital to enhance such responses.

We must reorganize our governance institutions to meet these new conditions. This means including the private and civic sectors, respecting the principle of subsidiarity, and empowering local and regional groups to participate as equal partners. Regional corporations, community forests, economic development co-ops, Community Futures-type programs and watershed committees provide examples where joint rural and urban investments are possible.

Sharing the Environment

Context

With our increasing awareness of the environment, we have come to recognize how communities are linked through our shared natural resources. Water, air, natural resources, and life forms are all drawn upon and affected by people and communities, creating interdependencies that are vast in their impacts and implications. Urban sprawl and the subsequent loss of agricultural land, resistance to rural industry by urban visitors, and campaigns for environmental preservation are current examples where these interdependencies become visible in a dramatic way.

Most of the mechanisms by which the environment links communities have been treated as externalities by traditional economic models – often to the detriment of both our understanding and the environment itself. A new framework for linkages must, therefore, include the environment as a key component with strong recognition for the multiple functions it serves.

As this recognition grows, we trust it will be integrated into our relations with rural producers and citizens. If so, it promises to open up numerous opportunities for rural revitalization as many currently

invisible goods and services become acknowledged. Clean water, carbon sequestration, pollution processing, bio-diversity, recreation opportunities, personal rejuvenation, and preservation of natural amenities are all contributions of rural places that remain largely uncounted in our current economic and social assessments.

Impacts

Many of these environmental issues can serve as strategic foci for building inter-community alliances and economic opportunities especially among rural and urban people. Models for how this might take place can be found in numerous locations. Camrose county maintains a regional landfill for surrounding communities on a fee basis, Ducks Unlimited pays farmers for preserving wetlands, New York City has a contractual relation with those in the Catskills Mountains for the protection of water supplies, and Japan levies a surtax on water that goes strictly for rural development purposes. As the Kyoto-initiated protocols are developed, we may use carbon-credits for a similar purpose. Revisions of Crown land policy could help direct benefits to the places that are sharing that asset with the industrial economy. By developing innovations of this type, we not only respond more appropriately to these interdependencies, but create opportunities for new linkages and economic development.

Rural and Urban Perceptions and Values

Context

Rural and urban people have perceptions, values, and identities that can integrate or divide them. In Canada, this is most clearly seen in linguistic, ethnic, or regional identities, but it is also reflected in the current debates regarding communities. If smaller communities are perceived as the remnants of inevitable urbanization, they are likely to be overlooked in the quest for global competitiveness. If they

are seen as actual or potential partners in that quest, their revitalization would be a priority. If they are also seen as key elements in the social and environmental health of the country, this revitalization would be even more important.

Impacts

The dominance of commodity trade, urbanization, and institutional centralization have tended to make rural diversity and contributions invisible. Canadians are generally not familiar with the complex (and international) web through which they are fed, clothed, and housed – including the role of rural Canada in this web. Nor are they aware of the diversity of conditions that rural communities face. The results are health, education, and economic programs that are unsuitable for local conditions, social friction based on inappropriate expectations, and the loss of important elements of our cultural heritage.

New Functions for Rural Places

Context

As conditions change in rural and urban areas, the relative importance of their traditional functions is altered as well. These shifts change the nature of the relationships among rural and urban places and, by extension, the challenges and opportunities they face.

In Canada, for example, the functions of rural places as sources of urban food, water, and recreational opportunities have grown to the point where they conflict in some important ways with their functions for commodity extraction and production. The Kyoto Accord discussions, in addition, have increased the value of rural areas for carbon sequestration and pollution sinks.

Both the bio and socio-diversity traditionally provided by rural areas have also been challenged. Standardization of production, large-scale forest management, and efficient methods of resource

extraction have reduced the diversity of biological species. Mass production of commercial products and culture has also threatened the social and cultural diversity among smaller places. The recent urban demand for more specialized products may create opportunities for niche markets, however, justifying a policy shift to support smaller rather than larger enterprises.

At the same time, the importance of rural areas as habitats, reserves, and escapes from urban stresses appear to be increasing. Locations nearby major urban centres attract commuters, those near natural amenities attract retirees and vacationers, and more distant places provide relative isolation for those dissatisfied with urban lifestyles.

Impacts

If we examine how these various functions are represented, negotiated, and addressed we find it is seldom done with rural and urban interests clearly represented. In Canada, for example, the task has usually been left to economic players with a primary focus on commodity production and trade. From the very beginning, Canadian governments have been major players in these mercantile considerations, often deferring their service and governance obligations in pursuit of expanding international commodity trade. In the process, the key negotiators have represented commodity sectors, economic corporations, and regional governments rather than rural or municipal interests. This has worked against our ability to respond to the multifunctional nature of the rural economy, create governance structures that are more appropriate for these functions, and investigate rural-urban co-investment opportunities.

Toward an Analytical Framework

Even this brief survey makes clear that the issue of community linkages is vast, complex, under-researched, but very important. There are, however, some important guidelines that can be used when developing an analytical and strategic framework.

- The framework must recognize that communities are inter-related through multiple, complex links – not just through a few dominant centres.
- It should be sensitive to the diverse nature of community linkages. We have identified four dimensions to consider, and there are likely to be many more.
- Our research affirms that distance and density still matter, but both high and low densities carry their own advantages and disadvantages.
- The first three points imply that any decisions must be made with a consideration of the different ways the issues may be understood and the multiple impacts they may have. This means we need to establish appropriate forums for the consideration of key decisions where inputs from all stakeholders are included.
- The fact that community linkages are simultaneously relations of power, obliges attention to the less powerful. Those who are likely to be adversely affected by changes in those linkages should be welcomed to the table – and supported to get there, if necessary.

We must build the social infrastructure in smaller communities – both formal and informal. Our research has shown that informal networks and organizations provide critical links to formal organizations, and information, flexibility, and resilience to all forms of communities. Strong and diverse social capital can offset the challenges of distance – but it cannot do so without resources and nurturing. Recent attention to the social economy is encouraging in this regard, but it must include small organizations as well as large.

Capacity must be built in all forms of social relations: market, bureaucratic, associative, and communal.

We must explore and experiment with new forms of governance relations to better respond to changes in community linkages. Moving decisions and support resources to the lowest possible level (subsidiarity) is one example. As our research shows, many small rural communities are weak with respect to market and bureaucratic relations, but strong with respect to associative or communal/reciprocal ones. Trying new

ways to build on these strengths for representation and accountability would not only make our programs more responsive to local conditions, but would simultaneously help to increase the variety of capacities that create resilient and innovative communities. Successes with Aboriginal peoples in establishing new governance relations should provide both inspiration and potential models for how this might be done.

It is clear that the future means greater, not less interdependence – among people, communities, and the environment. We are therefore assured that research to better understand the nature and implications of interdependence will be a wise investment. This should be done using the traditional approaches and indicators of social science research as well as those better suited to the analysis of more intangible factors of interdependence and complexity. It should also be done with the recognition that interdependence is not always desirable.

We need a framework that does not marginalize rural and remote locations, but recognizes their actual and potential contributions to Canadian society. Such a framework would include linkages that go beyond trade and exchange to highlight the new functions, institutional and governance innovations, sustainable environmental management, and the importance of local identities for social cohesion and community health. It would also direct our attention to the elements of our rural social infrastructure that can make it happen.

Opportunities

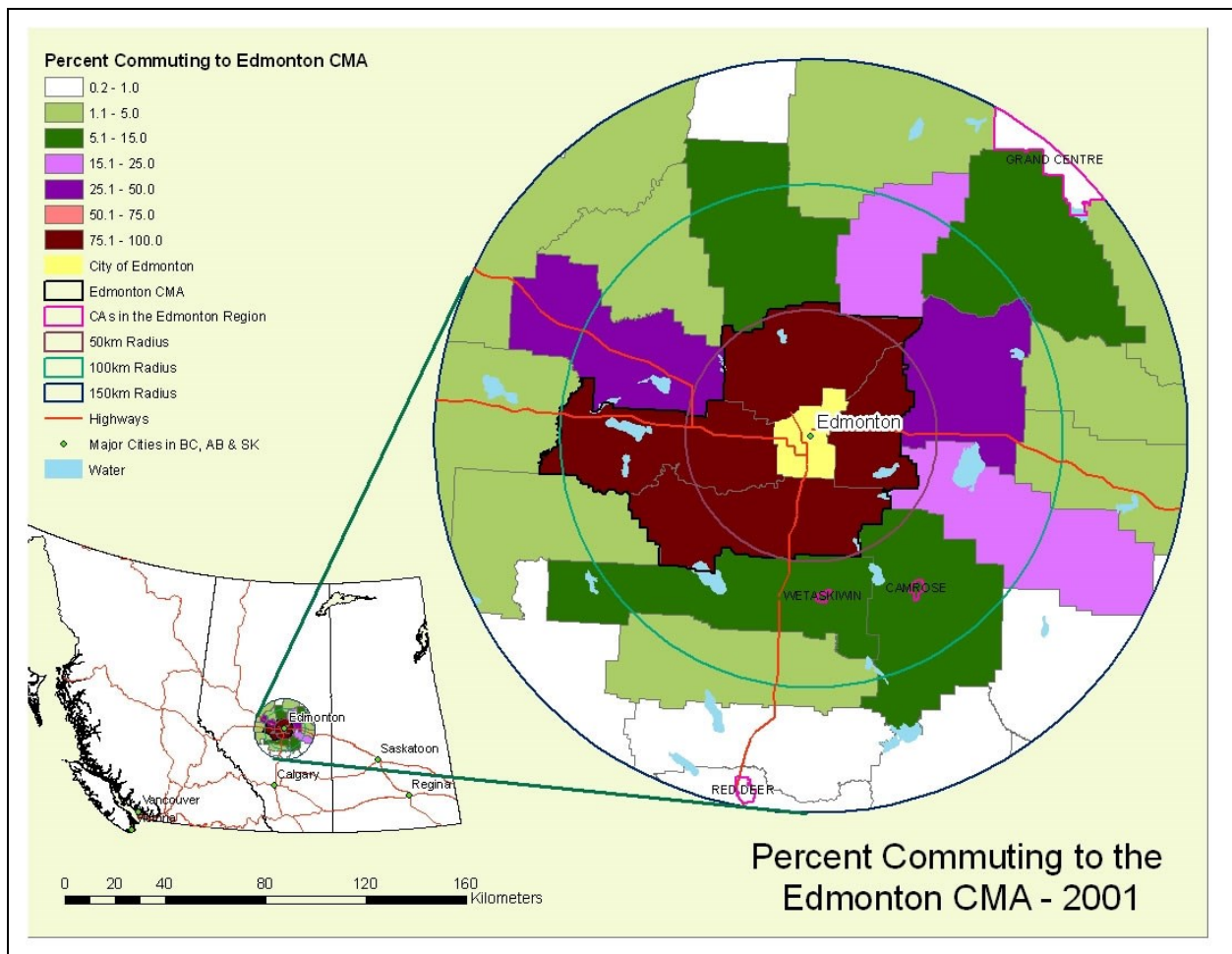
For urban places

Urban places can strengthen their economic and social position by recognizing and building on their interdependence with rural places. In most cases this will be with adjacent communities and regions, but there may be productive alliances established with distant communities as well. The city of Edmonton, for example has signed a Metro-Rural Accord with the 35 rural municipalities of the Northeast Alberta Hub

to share resources, collaborate on projects, and exchange information and concerns of mutual interest (<http://www.albertahub.com/index.html>). As with most urban centres, Edmonton draws labour from a large region (cf. Figure 1), benefits from the lifestyles and tourism opportunities in the regional communities, and depends on resources provided by those regions, either directly or indirectly.

Neglecting or placing stress on nearby communities jeopardizes those assets and endangers the long term sustainability of the urban centre itself. On the other hand, supporting their physical and social infrastructure enhances the attractiveness and productivity of the urban core.

Figure 1: Commuter-shed for Edmonton AB (2001)



Source: Canada Rural Economy Research Lab, 2008

For rural places

Rural communities and groups would also be well served to seek alliances with urban centres – nearby and at a distance. Urban centres are clearly sources of markets for products and services, but they are also potential sources for skills and infrastructure support in the form of administrative aid, equipment, and the sharing of public officers. The financial and capacity constraints faced by many small communities can often be significantly mitigated by sharing agreements with local urban centres. These benefits can also be acquired through more informal strategies.

After many years of frustration with the large number of seasonal residents over issues of infrastructure and taxes, one of the Northern Ontario communities in our Rural Observatory decided to integrate these people in all aspects of the municipal administration. They nominated them to municipal committees and developed a system of absentee voting that made it easier for the seasonal residents to participate in local issues. After a few years, they reaped the benefits of these actions when they found that discussions of tax changes became much less conflictual (even if it meant an increase in those taxes) since the residents were more familiar with the demands of managing a local municipality and the outcomes of those taxes became more visible. They also found that the networks and contacts of these largely urban people provided a valuable source of social, political, and even financial support in their negotiations with regional and provincial organizations, governments, and businesses. By opening up their structures to a wider network, they even discovered business opportunities and markets that became useful for local enterprises.

These examples illustrate the way in which recognizing and building upon the rural-urban interdependence creates opportunities for both rural and urban development. Rather than treating this interdependence as a burden for local enhancement it can be seen as a source of opportunities for increasing the sustainability of communities, even within times of considerable change.

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