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Understanding Rural Canada: Context, Challenges, and Opportunities

Canada was born as a trading nation. Its rural areas were settled to export fish, forest products, food, minerals, and energy to a growing and changing world. As a result, we are highly susceptible to events both within and beyond our borders. This presentation will identify some of these key changes and use them as a basis for discussing the challenges and opportunities they create for rural places and people. Mechanization, shifting trade patterns, urbanization, population growth, climate change, ideological realignments, and immigration are some of the changes that have important implications for rural places and policy. Examples from over 30 years of research on rural issues will be used to illustrate policy issues relating to economic strategies for small places, regional governance, rural-urban interdependence, immigration, and rural identity.

This presentation will be based on a chapter Bill co-wrote with Dr. Ray Bollman (Statistics Canada) in a book by David J.A. Douglas entitled "Rural Planning and Development in Canada" (Nelson, 2010). It is available as a free eChapter from Nelson Brain at http://www.nelsonbrain.com/shop/content/douglas00812_0176500812_02.01_chapter01.pdf. Other materials produced by Dr. Reimer can be viewed via http://billreimer.ca.
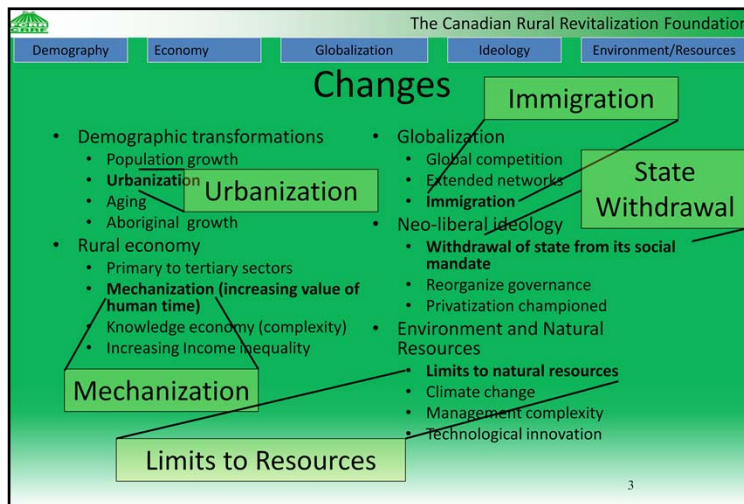
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Understanding Rural Canada

- What are the major changes affecting rural Canada?
- How do we create/develop effective rural policy in the light of these changes?

- Two questions to guide our discussion
  - What are the major changes affecting rural Canada?
  - How do we create/develop effective rural policy in the light of these changes?
- Focus on rural communities and regional policies
  - Rely on you for the Ontario implications

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| Demography | Economy | Globalization | Ideology | Environment/Resources |

Changes

Immigration

- Demographic transformations
  - Population growth
  - **Urbanization**
  - Aging
  - Aboriginal growth

Urbanization

- Rural economy
  - Primary to tertiary sectors
  - **Mechanization (increasing value of human time)**
  - Knowledge economy (complexity)
  - Increasing Income inequality

Mechanization

- Globalization
  - Global competition
  - Extended networks
  - **Immigration**
- Neo-liberal ideology
  - **Withdrawal of state from its social mandate**
  - Reorganize governance
  - Privatization championed

State Withdrawal

- Environment and Natural Resources
  - **Limits to natural resources**
  - Climate change
  - Management complexity
  - Technological innovation

Limits to Resources

3

• What are the major changes affecting rural Canada?

• Try to get it right

• Many changes occurring in and to rural places – outlined here

• I have identified 5 that have particularly important for rural regions

    • Urbanization: Urban trumps rural

    • Mechanization: Commodities trump communities

    • Immigration: Our past is our future

    • State withdrawal: Consumers trump citizens

    • Limits to Resources: Nature trumps growth

How do we create effective rural policy and programs for a Canada where...

- Cities are dominant
- Trade is externally dominated
- Immigration is increasing in importance
- The state is withdrawing from its social mandate
- Natural resources are stressed?

•How do we create effective policy and programs for a Canada where
…

  •Cities are dominant

  •Knowledge economy

  •Immigration increasing in importance

    •But weaker in rural

  •State is withdrawing

  •Resources are stressed?

•**My approach to these issues and questions**

•Future complex and uncertain

•Inspiration from bio-diversity

  •Develop multiple capacities (at all levels)

  •Networks and information are critical

  •Create conditions for flexible alliances

•I have represented these in the form of 7 strategies for rural places and policy-makers to consider when positioning communities for the future.

•These emerge in general from my 30+ years of research on rural issues and specifically from the 11-year New Rural Economy project which I directed (http://nre.concordia.ca)

•Strategy 1: Look to urban demand.

•If urban regions and sensibilities hold the balance of power – and will continue to do so, it simply makes sense for people in rural areas to pay attention to the demands arising from those regions.

   •>In Warner, AB, when they were faced with the rising costs of their arena, they organized a hockey school for girls and marketed it to families all over North America. It has been so successful that they have expanded it to include a residential school that runs all year round. (http://www.warnerhockeyschool.com/) Note innovative use of existing infrastructure.

   •>In Mattawa, Ontario a local businessman noticed the many cores thrown out by the local plywood mill so he used them to manufacture bowling pins that are sold throughout the world.
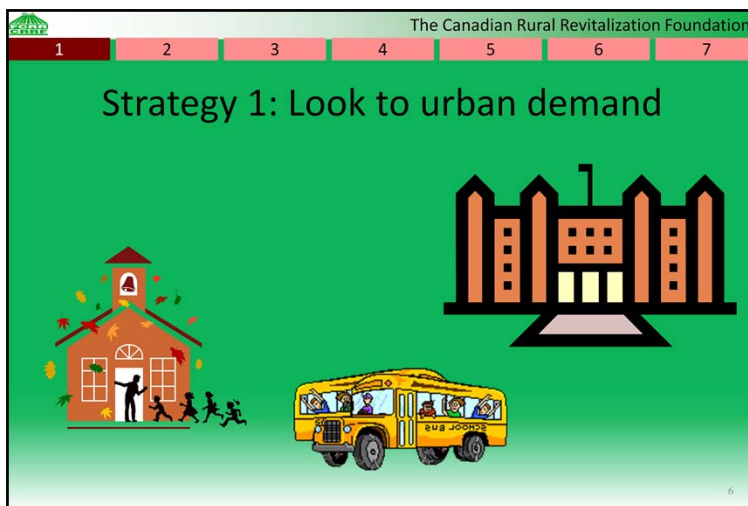
- Ste-Paule in the Gaspe region of Quebec was faced with a school closure
    - First they turned inward in anger and frustration
    - Because they had a very good school
        - Good teachers
        - Good student-teacher ratio
        - Good record in grades and graduation
        - Very nice building and infrastructure
    - >They just didn't have enough students – so their children would now have to be bused to nearby urban schools
    - Someone pointed out that what they liked about their school was what was missing in some of the more urban schools
    - >Why not bus the urban children to their rural school?
    - Went to urban parents in Matane with the advantages of their school and were able to convince them to send their children to the Ste-Paule school.
- These examples illustrate the elements of a strategy that generalizes to most other communities:
    - Community objectives can often be met by
        - Identifying the assets in an imaginative way
        - Looking outside for a demand
        - Figuring out how to meet that demand with those assets
- In the process, Ste-Paule maintained their education infrastructure and expanded the networks for the students in them – thus increasing their asset base

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Strategy 2: Identify niche markets

http://www3.sympatico.ca/remi.rioux/lacledeschamps/

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•This focus on urban demands and interests, blends well with the second strategic direction I am proposing: Identify niche markets.

•To often we have focused our attention on the export of major commodities as solution to community decline: grain, forests, fish, minerals, petroleum.

  •We know now that this will simply exacerbate the population decline and external dependency which has created so many of the problems in the first place

•Instead, look for new goods and services to market – in the process seek to diversify the regional economy.

•Research has demonstrated that rural manufacturing has maintained its relative position in comparison to urban manufacturing.

  •It is built primarily on medium and small scale manufacturing enterprises.

  •In the process this increases the opportunities to diversify the regional economy.

•It means focusing on **competitive** advantage rather than on **comparative** advantage – in development jargon.

  •As in the case of Warner, Mattawa, and Ste-Paule it means identifying local assets (economic, social, institutional, environmental, cultural) and looking for new markets for them – both inside and outside the region.

  •I can add to these examples with many others:

    • >Saint-Cyprien established a Centre for handicapped children (http://www3.sympatico.ca/remi.rioux/lacledeschamps/)

    •>An entrepreneur in Taschereau, QC produces fibreglass trailers for motorcycles

    •>A casualty of the Nortel collapse from North Gower, ON and his wife design and perfect the technology for a couples-focused sex toy that has developed into a million dollar international business.

    •>In Springhill, NS a group organizes correspondence and liaison for 3rd world child support. As a result, millions of dollars are channeled through the local bank (Christian Child Care International - http://www.ccare.ca/)

•In all of these cases some key elements to make it possible were the local knowledge, community networks, and social connections with people outside the community (bridging social capital)

  •This provides an important role for regional and provincial governments – as brokers for information about those external opportunities

  •It also hints at another opportunity emerging with my next suggestion.

•Migration and Immigration are a basic feature of Canadian society and will continue to be so into the future

•Almost 70% of our population increase in Canada is due to immigration and after about 2021 we expect immigration to be the sole source of population growth

•This means the introduction of people with different values, interests, and skills.

•The initial response is often uncertainty, suspicion, and stress

•>Cap-St-Ignace faced the problem of anxiety about newcomers with a brilliant initiative.

•It identified 'Godparents' for newcomers and tasked them with making contact and conveying an invitation to a community dinner

•At that event they introduced the newcomers to the community and established a basis for support and future support activities.

•By learning about newcomers, reduce anxiety

•By contacting newcomers, fast track capacity building

•>Seguin, ON significantly improved its capacity by integrating seasonal residents into its administrative structures rather than excluding them.

•The same principle applied to those communities facing an influx of city-dwellers and retirees as they move into rural places in search of a more relaxed style of life.

•This often conflicts with the local concerns for jobs and economic development, visions of rural life, and traditions of local governance.

•By integrating them into the local decision-making they not only informed them of the challenges of running a small town, but they gained access to the networks and resources that the newcomers brought with them.

•>The communities around Winkler, MB have created conditions where the rate of immigration rivals Toronto

•In seeking labour for their local industries they turned to their historical roots in the Mennonite migrations of the past

•Contacting their religious and cultural cousins in Central and South America, negotiating special arrangements with the Manitoba and Federal governments, and setting up numerous local groups to facilitate information sharing, institutional support, language training, and personal integration into Canadian society of the numerous people who responded to their invitation

•These newcomers bring skills, motivation, and perhaps most overlooked – networks that can provide new assets for community and regional development.

•NL has major challenges with respect to this element – primary focus is on your educational institutions as a point of change.

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Strategy 4: Build Social Infrastructure

- The importance of social networks is also reflected in this next strategic suggestion from our research

- During this period of economic decline, the call for more spending on community and urban infrastructure is loud and clear.

  - This most often focuses on the building of physical infrastructure (Canada's Acton Plan).

- However, our research indicates that the building of social infrastructure is as important as the roads, bridges, communication towers, and aqueducts of the physical infrastructure advocates

- This is especially the case in smaller communities and in those which experience the boom-bust economies of natural resource extraction.

- The community of Inuvik in the NWT has made this an explicit policy for their economic development.

  - They have decided that the best way to manage their boom-bust economy is to make their community such a wonderful place to live that people will devote considerable energy to find ways to stay there – even during the bust periods.

  - It also has that advantage that these highly motivated residents are proactive in mitigating some of the negative aspects of the boom times – providing a long-term perspective in their planning.

  - For example, they committed considerable energy and funds to build community, health, and education facilities in their community.

  - >When they got a new arena they decided to convert the old one to a community greenhouse – that has now been a source of local produce and knowledge – plus a social centre for many of the community members.

- This social infrastructure in turn becomes an important resource for many other conditions.

  - >In Barriere, BC when wildfire threatened the town, it was the local Quad Squad (a group of ATV and snowmobile enthusiasts http://www.quadsquad.ca/) that provided critical communication, evacuation, and security services for the community.

  - Regional-area churches provided shelter, food, and rehabilitation services both during and after the disaster.

Strategy 4: Build Social Infrastructure

Tumbler Ridge Examples

- Health
  - Public health nurses
  - Alcohol/Drug counseling
  - Safe House Project
  - Victim Assistance
  - Block parents
  - Al-Anon
  - Literacy Group
  - Take-Off-pounds
- Education
  - Books Lapsit Program
  - TR Children's Centre
  - Northern Lights College
- Recreation
  - Darts club
  - Minor hockey
  - TR Boards, Bikes
  - Curling club
  - Happy Hookers
  - Red Hat Society
  - Quilt Guild
  - Museum Foundation
  - Ornothology Group
  - Legion
  - Community Arts Council

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•The list of groups and activities in this overhead is an indication of the variety of social infrastructure that helped Tumbler Ridge weather the storm of a major mine closure in 2000

•Much like Elliot Lake did in Ontario

•These stories illustrates the importance of a well-established social infrastructure as a basis for surviving the bust period

•By first of all building and then maintaining the services and venues for people to meet on a variety of bases (from formal to informal) conditions are created where social cohesion is fostered, commitments are formed, and people become motivated to continue those relations over time

•The resiliency and growth of towns like Tumbler Ridge, Elliot Lake, Inuvik, Springhill, and Twillingate are all reflections of these dynamics: people devoting time and energy to seek ways to survive and thrive in the face of difficult conditions

•It provides lessons which are relevant to large cities and even provinces or the country as a whole – there are just as many economic and social benefits to investing in social infrastructure as in physical infrastructure
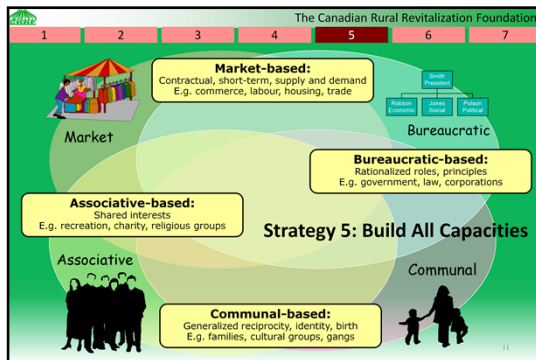
- Strategy 5: Build all types of capacity
- Our research has also made clear how important the range of different types of networks are to the revitalization of rural communities
- They play an important role in the institutional linkages between rural and urban as well
- Identified some important lessons:
  - Social relations come in many forms (>market, >bureaucratic, >associative, >communal)
  - These forms link people and groups in different ways and to different institutions
  - To access the resources and services of these institutions, it is necessary to develop the capacity to function well in these different types of social relations
  - The new economy favours market and bureaucratic over associative and communal
  - Most rural communities are traditionally stronger in associative and communal than market and bureaucratic
  - But we did find that associative and communal networks can and are used to build market and bureaucratic under certain conditions
- By recognizing these different types of strengths and the complementarities between them, numerous options are opened for business, policy, and local action
  - [Public utilities or transportation companies might contribute their organizational skills or networks to facilitate access to markets for local entrepreneurs or municipalities
  - Municipal, provincial, or federal governments may invest in communal relations to compensate for policies that undermine associative ones (e.g. greater mobility)
  - Businesses may better recognize the economic benefits of investment in associative or communal relations (directly or indirectly through the sharing of facilities or expertise)
  - Bureaucracies might compensate voluntary organizations to meet the accountability demands that undermine the associative relations]
- Primary thing to note: All forms are necessary in a complex, changing environment - The more agile a group or community is in being able to use all systems, the greater will be their capacity - especially under conditions of change. Each of them forms a basis for people working together.
- This is why a focus on economic policies alone so often fail or are inadequate to sustain communities for the long term – education, health, social services, and recreation are all important elements of economic capacity and sustainability.
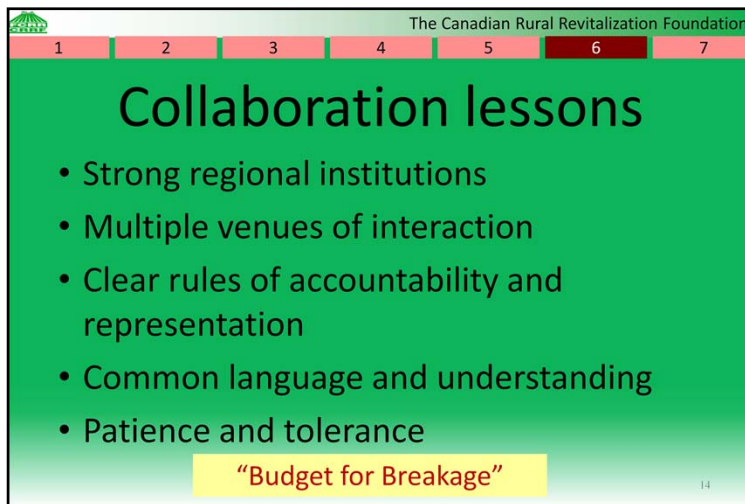
• Increasing local capacity to meet the new conditions often means building networks across communities (bridging capital).

  • There is often not sufficient critical mass within a single community – must look to the region.

    • When Tweed, ON was interested in hosting our national CRRF conference, they realized they could not do it alone, so were forced to overlook years of animosity with three other local towns in order to make it work.

    • This success inspired them to establish a regional 'brand' (Comfort Country) which now attracts people to the region as a travel destination.

• Subsequently – I was pleased to discover – the Comfort Country initiative has become an inspiration for people in Walliston and Hastings counties

• >This type of regional view works well for larger centres as well – as demonstrated by the Edmonton-Northern Alberta Hub initiative in which the city partners with many of the small towns and regions surrounding it.

• Regional collaboration is not easy, however.

  • The perceptions of the world and individuals' place in it are often very different, and

  • Such collaboration is made more difficult by large power differentials (e.g. the city of St. John's and its outlying regions).

• Therefore I would like to dwell on these aspects to give you an idea how they might play a part – and might be overcome.
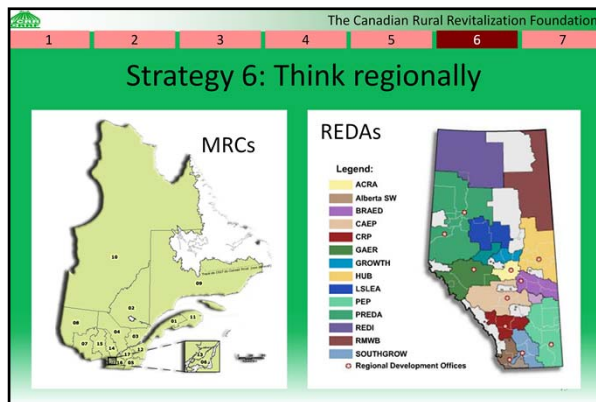
- The second major challenge of rural-urban relations is the significant power differential between large and small places.
  - Typically we find that across-community consultations are not conducted (then the points of interdependence become sites of conflict), or
  - Urban regions develop their own plans – with perhaps some subsequent "consultation" with outlying areas.
  - These both become (often correctly) perceived by the outlying communities as tokenism and insincere attempts to coopt the smaller communities under the guise of consultation.
- It is clear that regional collaboration is a major challenge – as demonstrated in St' John's, but without addressing it at the beginning of the process it will inevitably fail.
  - What is even more discouraging in the cases we have examined – is that many opportunities for mutual benefit (urban and rural) are lost as the result of fear to address these challenges or assuming that independent decisions can be made without long term negative consequences.
- Regional collaboration is that it requires well-designed and long-term structures to make it effective.
- I have watched with considerable interest, the variations in approaches to regional development that are reflected by our provincial governments
- In many respects, most have articulated the principles of governance that are commendable (bottom-up, collaborative approaches), but with very different programs and with very different results
- Perhaps the greatest contrast in my mind is between AB and QC
- Both of these governments champion a bottoms up approach and encourage local municipalities to engage in an expanded mandate over local decision-making – moving beyond the maintenance of roads and water to include economic development and environmental stewardship
- But the institutional contexts of the 2 provinces are considerably different
- >Under the Levesque government, Quebec established a number of regional boards (MRCs) (sometimes against substantial opposition) composed of mayors and municipal representatives with a mandate for regional development and resources to support it. The emphasis was on regional development – cross sectors and inclusive of social development.
  - I am not familiar enough with the Economic Zones or Rural Secretariat Regions in N and L to know how they compare to these MRCs
- >In Alberta, the approach was more laissez-faire – where regional collaboration was encouraged, some resources were allocated to regional groups if they requested and justified it, but there was little consistent pressure for such collaboration (Regional Economic Development Alliances). The focus was clearly on economic development.
- The results have been dramatically different at the local level.
- In Quebec there are many examples of regional initiatives – tailored to local conditions and themselves providing a basis for second-order activities in small places
  - Over the 20 or so years of their operation within this new regime, local municipalities have learned how to use the regional structures to voice their concerns, debate, negotiate, compromise, and collaborate with other municipalities, and in turn, to negotiate with the provincial government on behalf of their region and village or town
  - In turn, the provincial government has discovered the value in subsidiarity – now allocating responsibility to the regional boards for a wide range of economic and social policy and programs, and (most importantly) showing confidence in the decisions and accountability of the MRCs – making the governance of the province both more efficient and effective
  - This system of consultation has even become more elaborated with the recent emergence of regional round tables – with more issue-focused objectives
- In Alberta the situation on the ground is very different
  - A few regions have taken initiative, formed their own corporate bodies, and moved ahead, largely on their own steam
  - Most municipalities, on the other hand, were unable to get beyond their protectionist traditions to reach agreements with their neighbours around the complex challenges they faced – either denying that conflicts of interests existed or refusing to discuss them in any but the most limited terms
  - In the end, the provincial government simply made the decisions for the municipalities, pointing to the failure of regional collaboration, lack of accountability, and the pressure of time as a justification for top-down management
- What are the lessons here?

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Collaboration lessons

- Strong regional institutions
- Multiple venues of interaction
- Clear rules of accountability and representation
- Common language and understanding
- Patience and tolerance

"Budget for Breakage"

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•First: Bottom-up development needs an institutional context of strong regional governance to make it work

•Second: The inevitable conflicts of interest that emerge require multiple venues for expression, negotiation, and the compromise that are necessary for action

•Third: Relations of accountability and representation are necessary ingredients for establishing an adequate level of trust for the system to work

•Fourth: This requires the development of a common language and understanding for collaboration.

  •As I illustrated with the Carcross/Tagish example, some of the perceptual differences are subtle but manageable once they are recognized and addressed.

•Finally: all of this requires a spirit of patience and tolerance by people and institutions that are not favourably disposed to either of these

  •It took Quebec 20 years of stressful and sometimes acrimonious work to get to the point they are today

  •When I spoke to the Carcross/Tagish elders about their plans for the reorganization of their people in the Yukon, they reminded me that it took 7 generations to get into the mess we are today – so they felt that 7 generations was not an unreasonable time frame to think about getting out of it

  •From an institutional point of view this means >'budgeting for breakage'

- I have tried to elaborate the many ways in which the fate of rural and urban regions and people are strongly linked
- I have also argued that this is not always visible – in our perception, in our institutional organizations, and in our sentiments
- In order to make more appropriate policies, programs, and actions, therefore – it is necessary to increase this visibility so that we can get our choices and organizations working appropriately.
  - Rural areas would be well advised to identify and articulate the ways in which they contribute to urban regions and the national economy, but
  - People in urban regions are more preoccupied with their own challenges.
- My suggestion is that we should start with our common interests.
- Work from those things that both rural and urban people are already concerned about
  - > **Food**
    - Teach urban people about food production – as they are doing at the Prairie Swine Centre in SK
    - > Farm visits and vacations
    - > Direct marketing (St-Damas)
  - > We also share a concern about **water**
    - This means teaching about the link between rural development and the water running out of the taps in St John's
      - It can be done in our schools by visits, science programs, and mass media (Canadian Gov't – teacher kits)
      - > It can also be done by urban street art as shown in this example (sewerfish: http://www.canadiandesignresource.ca/officialgallery/index.php?paged=2&s=symbols)
        - It reinforces the connection between sewers and fish – urban and rural
  - > We also share a concern about the **environment**
    - > We can teach our children how air, water, soils are shared issues (air pollution and acid rain; agricultural stress and chemical use)
    - We can establish centres of learning such as they have done in Springhill around geothermic energy
    - > We can invest in research and production of environmentally friendly goods and services – especially those that are distributed
    - > We can support green communities (www.gca.ca)
  - All of these require strong rural communities – as producers or stewards of the assets they represent.
    - And we don't have to convince urban people that they are important.
      - New York city realized that if it didn't keep the rural communities in its watershed in good shape, then the water supply would be jeopardized by people having to make compromises on environmental protection.
      - So they worked out an agreement with those communities in which the water supply would be protected in exchange for community development funds and services.
- How are similar interdependencies reflected in the relationship between St John's and its surrounding communities – or St John's and Gander, Cornerbrook, or even Twilligate and St Anthony?
  - How can the benefits of those places be better represented in the governance structures of the city?
- These are important questions to consider – not only for the smaller communities, but for the long terms sustainability of St John's.

7 Strategies for the new rural conditions

1. Look to urban demand
2. Identify global niche markets
3. Integrate strangers
4. Build social infrastructure
5. Build all capacities
6. Consider regional opportunities
7. Make interdependencies visible

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- These 7 strategies emerge from the NRE and CRRF research over the last 20 years.

- They also emerge in the belief that Rural Canada and Canadians have reached the limits of their influence and power and will continue to experience decreases in that power.

- I would also argue that in spite of the tensions, suspicions, and animosities, rural and urban places are inevitably interdependent.

  - Without the accurate recognition of this interdependence our efforts to build capacities, economies, and a better society will be unsustainable in the long run.

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