

Introduction – JRCD Volume 1(2)¹

The Historical Context of Rural Research

Bill Reimer

Concordia University
Montréal, QC Canada

This issue highlights research results from the New Rural Economy Project (NRE): a national, multidisciplinary research and education project initiated by the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF).

After ten years of meetings, discussions, and presentations, CRRF decided it was time for coordinated, national research activity on behalf of rural Canada. Too often our discussions were hampered by the lack of systematic, high quality data, theoretically grounded insights, and corroborated claims. We could refer to many good detailed community studies (cf. Jean, this issue) and excellent analysis of Canadian conditions in general, but seldom could we find systematic comparative analysis of those communities or rural-specific analyses of the general conditions. What we needed was a program of research that was comparative, collaborative, and comprehensive.

In response to those concerns, CRRF initiated a project entitled “Understanding the New Rural Economy, Options and Choices”. Since its beginning in 1997, it has become a major national project involving over 15 researchers, 11 universities, and 32 systematically selected rural sites. For the first four years (NRE¹) the project focused on describing and analyzing the major changes taking place in rural Canada. Considerable effort was expended to collect and compile appropriate information to facilitate this objective. It was during this period that the foundations for our future research were established. The Rural Canada Database was constructed using available census and survey data from 1986, 1991, 1996, and eventually 2001. The NRE website was set up to enhance the collaboration and dissemination of materials that was so essential to our communication both nationally and internationally (<http://nre.concordia.ca>). We also designed and implemented the *NRE Rural Observatory* during this period – an initiative that was to become one of the most innovative features of our Project.

The NRE Rural Observatory is a collection of 32 rural sites from all parts of Canada. It was established using a sample frame that ensured our ability to make strategic comparisons on five key dimensions: whether the sites were well connected to the global economy or not, whether their local economy was relatively stable or highly fluctuating, whether they were close to or far away from major urban centres, whether they had a high or low level of institutional capacity (schools, hospitals, etc.), and whether they were leading or lagging on a number of socio-economic indicators (Reimer 2002). Since its establishment, we have worked closely with citizens in most of these sites, collaborating in the design of our work,

¹ We thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, Statistics Canada, and the many colleagues and partners who have made this research possible.

seeking their comments on our results, and exploring options for building their capacity. Each year, delegates from the sites meet with us at the CRRF National Conference to discuss the issues and activities of concern to both researchers and citizens.

In 2001 we conducted a detailed household survey in 22 of these sites, collecting information regarding household characteristics, social support, networks, participation in the formal and informal economies, subsistence production, and community relations. Many aspects of this survey were replicated by our Japanese colleagues after they selected field sites in their country based on our framework and approach (<http://nre.concordia.ca/Japan/Japan.htm>). This household information has been supplemented by data collected at the site level on a bi-annual basis. The NRE Site Profile database now provides information regarding the local institutions (formal and informal), enterprises, communication, transportation, services, and historical events from 1997 to 2005. These databases provide us with extensive information – at the level of the individual and household, the local site, the region, and nation. We have also been able to compare our results to other studies in rural Canada using the sample frame structure as a guide.

In 1999, we received further funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council that allowed us to continue our work for another four years. Under the title “Building Rural Capacity in the New Economy” (NRE²) we focused our attention on the opportunities that are emerging from the changes identified in NRE¹. Our emphasis on ‘capacity building’ reflects our conviction that seizing those opportunities will depend on the reorganization of local, regional, and national institutions and networks to better respond to the changes. Our analysis of capacity is organized within four primary themes that emerged from our work in NRE¹. These themes are reflected in the papers assembled for this issue of the Journal.

Bruno Jean’s paper provides an introduction to the historical context in which much of our work takes place. He makes the case for both the in-depth, longitudinal study of communities and settlements as well as the comparison that makes it possible to separate idiosyncrasy from shared characteristics. He follows this up with some of the conclusions from the NRE Governance Theme Team that are emerging from their work in our sites. The new economy means that local communities must develop their capacity to function both locally and globally – a major challenge for many rural sites. A crucial element to this capacity is the ability for private, public, and third sector groups to reorganize themselves into collaborative arrangements to better position themselves for the new conditions. In small communities, this means citizen engagement – a consistent, continual process of learning and decision-making that goes beyond the traditional reliance on business leaders and elected officials. This ‘new governance’ continues to be the object of study for this team.

Halseth and Ryser’s paper adds to this message by focusing on the changes and innovations in service provision within the rural context. The Services Theme Team has made good use of the NRE Site Profile database to track the changes in services over the period of the project and they have supplemented that general data with detailed studies of selected sites. They document how local availability has declined for health, education, protection, government (all three levels), business, and recreation services. Their data allows them to identify, however,

some of the specific services that appear less vulnerable and those that are most in jeopardy.

Their analysis also introduces the importance of one of the sample dimensions from the NRE sample frame – the distance from urban centres. Once this is taken into account, they show that a simple interpretation of central place theory is inadequate to explain the results. Rural sites that are distant from metropolitan centres appear to show less vulnerability to the decline of services. They also provide evidence for the way in which service availability has regionalized. It may be more difficult to find the services you need within the community, but in most cases they can be found within the region.

The argument that Halseth and Ryser make for the importance of services is reinforced and elaborated in the paper by Sanderson and Martz. Their two community surveys document how public services provide more than jobs for the local economy. Their calculations suggest, for example, that people in direct public service jobs provided about 39% more indirect jobs, high levels of voluntary participation (often in leadership positions), and a strong commitment to the community. The loss of these jobs is more than an economic loss, therefore. It also means a significant decline in the social capacity of the community – threatening the downward spiral of population to which Halseth and Ryser refer.

Sanderson and Martz also introduce the capacity framework that has guided much of the NRE analysis. They focus particularly on social capital, its manifestation in the activities of their survey respondents, and on four of the capacity outcomes that have been of special interest in our work: the capacity to maintain economic vitality, to subsist or persist, to access resources from the state, and to create a vital civic culture. They demonstrate how public service jobs contribute to all four capacity outcomes, particularly the first and the last.

As illustrated in the capacity framework, the natural capital of rural people and communities can make a significant difference to their level of capacity. The commodity basis of much of the Canadian economy means that this is often influenced by external decisions – through markets or policy. But it is also a type of capital that is accessible to individuals and households on a piecemeal basis. The paper by Teitelbaum and Beckley provides an excellent illustration of this aspect of their analysis – a part that focuses on the management of those resources within households.

By looking at the nature and extent of self-provisioning in rural households, we come to understand, not only the way in which people use the natural resources around them, but the motivations and conditions under which they are used. Teitelbaum and Beckley document how the assumption that self-provisioning is driven solely by need requires modification. Economic need may play a part, they find, but life-style choices provide the most compelling explanation for the relatively high levels of self-provisioning found among those at the middle range of incomes. It does not appear to serve as a significant safety net for the lowest income households – potentially exacerbating their exclusion from access to natural resources as well as their social isolation.

The integration of rural people and places is a major preoccupation of the fourth NRE² Theme Team: Communications. As outlined in the paper by Romanow and Bruce, the metaphor of a web is used to highlight this function of communication. At the same time, they make the point that it can function as well as oil: a type of

lubricant to facilitate the interaction and engagement of people – potentially reducing transaction costs. It may also function as glue: a means through which social cohesion is established and maintained. Each of these functions has undergone significant change with the dramatic developments in communication technologies over the last 50 years.

The review of the literature by Romanow and Bruce illustrates some of the ways in which communication technologies are likely to make a difference to rural capacity. At the same time they identify where rural people and communities may be at a disadvantage as the new technologies become diffused throughout the population. Communication infrastructure, they argue is critical to all the elements of capacity-building – from access to assets, leadership development, dialogue, conflict resolution, social cohesion, learning, and action. They highlight the particular importance of communications for youth and government relations as well as some of the particular inequities in communication access and use between rural and urban places. This paper makes a convincing case for the importance of communication for capacity building and points us to several key areas where attention is required: the knowledge gap between rural and urban places, conflict resolution, education regarding the world outside the local community, social cohesion, and social capital.

Finally, the paper by Reimer cautions us that the governance, services, environment, and communications themes must all recognize the contextual conditions of rural people and communities. Using the dimensions of the NRE sample frame he demonstrates how the context of the site can significantly modify the local capacity processes and their outcomes. Using the associative-based social capital inherent in voluntary associations, for example, is positively related to labour force participation, but only for those sites that are relatively low in institutional capacity. For those with high levels of such capacity, the relationship is reversed: using associative-based social capital is negatively related to labour force participation. Similar conditional results are found when comparing sites with respect to their global connectedness, economic stability, and metro-adjacency.

Policy Implications

These papers provide lessons for community activists, policy-makers, and citizens as well as for researchers. Jean clearly identifies this by his call for the reorganization of governance relations between the private, public, and third sectors. Citizen-based action is a central feature of the new governance, but it also means that public sector institutions must seek new ways to solve the challenges of fairness and accountability that are implied by local representation. The challenges are wide-ranging, requiring innovation in local organization, reformation of alliances within and outside of communities, and exploration of new ‘tools of governance’ (Salamon 2002) by our formal institutions.

Both of the service-related papers provide direction for local and policy action. As services move to a more regional organization it will become more important for local communities to seek representation on those regional boards, develop alliances with nearby communities, and reorganize to accommodate the additional demands this will create for transportation and communication, especially among their more vulnerable populations such as the elderly, youth, and women. The

collaboration between private, public, and third sector organizations that Jean highlights will be even more important for meeting this challenge.

Public sector institutions and policy-makers would be well advised to consider innovations in service delivery, both with respect to the technologies related to those services and with respect to local supports for those people who are at risk. Reorganizing health, education, protection, and social services to better meet the rural challenges of low population density and long distances should be a priority. Both papers demonstrate clearly how meeting these challenges is critical for much more than delivery of the services themselves. Adequate service provision is crucial to the economic and social viability of rural places.

Romanow and Bruce provide some clues regarding how this might be done through communication learning and infrastructure. Local communities can develop their capacities by learning how to make use of the new technologies and directing those new skills to seeking alliances regionally, nationally, and internationally. At the same time, the Communications Theme has been conducting research that reinforces the importance of the traditional forms of communication in rural areas – local media, meetings, bulletin boards, and of course, the telephone. We have many examples where communities have used both old and new technologies in innovative ways to reach their objectives.

The lessons are equally important for policy-makers. Canada's efforts to build communications infrastructure in all parts of the country have been significant, but we are still facing a rural-urban gap – both with respect to the access to broadband technology (a necessary condition for business ventures) and to the required skills. Formal education can contribute to the latter challenge, but we have found that many communities have used informal methods to learn about the new technologies – from local broadcasts to public internet sites and local library activities.

The lessons from the Teitelbaum and Beckley paper are more specific yet just as important if we consider how self-provisioning is related to the formal economy (Reimer 2006). Self-provisioning teaches skills and builds social cohesion through the multiple sharing and exchanges typically involved. If, as the authors speculate, it is also part of a life style choice, it may be a latent asset for rural places. By providing the resources, information, and support for those seeking this life-style, communities may replicate in rural areas the successes of urban gardens. Our Japanese partners have recognized this opportunity and integrated it as an important element in their program for rural revitalization through rural and urban exchanges (<http://www.furusato.or.jp/eng/annai/>). Programs and policies supporting the development of networks for such activities and the skills related to them are likely to provide valuable outcomes for local community support, rural-urban relations, and the enhancement of human capital.

Finally, the Reimer paper suggests both cautions and opportunities for communities and policy-makers. It reinforces the message that one size does not fit all in the realm of policy-making. Programs directed to building social capital must recognize that it is grounded in different types of relations and norms and that the impacts are different among them. Similarly, the consequences of building social capital in one type of community are not the same as in another. Matching the type of program to the type of community therefore, becomes an important element in design and implementation. At the same time, the paper provides direction

regarding some of the characteristics to consider. The four-fold normative classification of social capital appears to provide important distinctions. Similarly, the five dimensions of the NRE sample frame identify contextual differences that condition the more endogenous processes of capacity development. Community leaders would be well advised to consider their location on these dimensions when developing strategies for community development.

These papers represent only a small sample of the results of our work. They also hint at the type of activities that are ongoing as the project moves into its final year. The Governance team is following up on its investigation of innovations in collaboration between sectors at the local level – giving particular attention to citizen participation. The Services team is continuing its examination of innovations in service delivery with particular attention to transportation and the special conditions faced by women. The Environment and Natural Resources team is completing several projects examining the variety of ways in which natural resources are managed by community groups, the perception and responses of both urban and rural people to environmental concerns, and the processes by which capacity is reorganized and built in resource-dependent communities. The Communications team continues to examine the role of the rural media, including both traditional forms such as newspapers and bulletin boards and the more contemporary forms as found in the Internet and associated web sites.

Our activities have led us to new collaborations and new directions to explore. Discussions are currently under way with Australian, US, and European colleagues regarding the establishment of similar projects in these countries. These are likely to enhance our analysis considerably as the work with our Japanese colleagues has demonstrated. Our research has also drawn attention to the importance of rural and urban relations, the interests we have in common (food, water, and the natural environment), and the institutional innovations that are emerging as a result of stresses on these interests.

In all cases, our attention is directed to the processes and conditions contributing to capacity-building. By collecting and analyzing rural-appropriate information, engaging rural people and policy-makers in the process, and enhancing the infrastructure to continue this work, we hope to provide the resources and networks for greater research capacity as well. In that spirit, we encourage you to explore our results both here and on our web site (<http://nre.concordia.ca>) and we welcome your collaboration and participation as we seek new understandings and opportunities to revitalize rural Canada.

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