*J*ournal of *R*ural and *C*ommunity *D*evelopment

Observations on Rural Policy and Applied Research: Brandon University's Rural Development Institute

Author: William Ashton

Observations on Rural Policy And Applied Research: Brandon University's Rural Development Institute

Wm. (Bill) Ashton
Rural Development Institute
Brandon University
Brandon, Manitoba, Canada
ashtonw@brandonu.ca

Before stating my observations from RDI, I will first create a context by describing RDI's mandate then highlight related assertions about policy and research made by the keynote speaker.[1]

_____

1.0 RDI's Mandate

With over twenty years of experience, RDI is active in Manitoba, and from coast to coast to coast in fulfilling its mandate and representing Brandon University.[2] RDI's mandate is to utilize research to define issues and develop responses with rural, northern, and remote communities. This often requires partnering with funding agencies and creating a collaborative approach among many stakeholders. RDI's mandate also includes knowledge dissemination, best illustrated by publishing e-books and the free on-line Journal of Rural and Community Development. A third element of RDI's mandate is to nurture or 'grow' rural researchers, among faculty, students, community members, and stakeholders. Through research RDI contributes to defining issues, opportunities, and public policies that are 'rural' and important today and strategically critical for the future. Often, we provide evidence and policy implications that impact existing programs, new policies, and innovations, such as new organizational structures. RDI is contributing the practice and theory of policy making and is increasingly focusing on key aspects of policy implementation, including design thinking and rapid prototyping approaches.

2.0 Assertions About Policy and Research

There are five assertions from the keynote speaker about policy and research that contribute to forming the context of my observations.

- **Policy and research are more often fluid than static.** Agreed. Policy and research activities operate in very fluid or changing environments. This makes it difficult to know when a policy process begins and ends, and equally blurs clear evidence of the contribution of research in policy processes and content.
- **Unit of analysis.** While a definition of rural was not always made explicit by the keynote speaker and aware there is no one definition of rural, for this paper 'rural' is more place-based rural regions or multi-community.

---

[1] Keynote speaker was Julio Berdegué and he based his presentation on: Berdegué, J.A. & Fernández, M.I. (2011) From policy to research and back again: Rimisp-Latin American Center for Rural Development..

[2] See publications at: www2.brandonu.ca/organizations/rdi/publications.asp#rural_immigration

- ▪ <u>Policy making as a process</u>. The keynote speaker described the policy cycle with sequential steps, which depicts the process as rational. Yet, several times the keynote speaker argued how irrational policymakers can be and that research does contribute to policy, but only for a limited time. For this paper, RDI contents that policy processes (in general and more specifically rural policy processes) are usually socially constructed by those involved. This means a policy cycle model serves as one explanation or heuristic, but may not reflect the practice of policy making held by those involved.

- ▪ <u>Scope of impact</u>. The keynote speaker referred to 'mid-range theory' (Merton, 1968), where the scope of impact of rural policy can be characterized as guiding action from policy through programs and for research as well. What is unlikely from such mid-range theory, the keynote speaker clarified, is a new economic theory. Equally important, what is not ruled out in the mid-range theory is a call for reform based on more systemic issues and opportunities.

- ▪ <u>Working horizontally</u>. To reflect the complexity of issues and policies affecting rural areas, researchers and policy makers need to work more collaboratively among the various departments and agencies. As argued by Rummler, Ramias, & Rumnler (2010), working horizontally means focusing on the space between organizations; and I agrue, it is this space that is in need of policy and research efforts, as much as the policy efforts within any one silo or department. It is this space where investment of collaboration and cooperation are heard and for rural issues where there is a dearth of research and practice.

3.0 Observations

Given this context, I put forth two observations that take on more of a provincial or national view from Canada, regarding policy and research for rural Canada; both build upon existing and established organizations and policy practices. This means leaving a more international and developing country view for another effort. In Canada, one observation is that we have been experimenting with a more deliberate way to address the multi-dimensional/sectoral aspects of rural issues. Here I would point to the efforts and programs of the Rural and Co-operative Secretariat. They purposely expanded their policy 'view' to move beyond rural as agriculture to over a dozen national departments and agencies impacting rural and northern development. This organization took on the 'white space' or cracks between organizations where rural issues often fell through. They appropriately defined their mandate as applying a rural policy lens to existing and proposed public policy. Their programs also required proposals to have matching funding often shared among community partners and others. While criticized for being costly proposals to prepare, once approved the success of the projects, at least from my experiences, speak for themselves. A second observation brings focus to the 'action' stage of rural policy making, where research and program implementation are equally critical but often left to the devices of the market place. Here I want to speak about an evolving approach I refer to as a 'differential policy response' in rural areas.

For reasons of brevity, these two ideas are explored among the following comments and are related to the assertions from the keynote speaker.

Rural research centres across Canada play important roles in rural policy. By way of an example, three roles RDI has persistently contributed to include defining issues,

engaging stakeholders, and implementation. A rural perspective is gained in defining issues from local and regional perspectives, while engaging stakeholders so they can advance the findings to policy makers. With over five dozen research reports, papers, and presentations exploring the many aspects of immigration,[1] RDI's research is increasingly framed by the proposition that a welcoming community invites, settles, and retains rural new comers, including the benefits of temporary foreign workers and addresses related policy implications of service providers. Such research is contributing to new knowledge about rural immigration, which helps to offset the preponderance of policies and research defining immigration as a big city phenomenon (e.g. in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver).

Rural research centres reflect the complexity of rural Canada, in part from their multi-disciplinary approaches to rural issues, opportunities and policies. Things are interconnected, and this axiom is certainly true when addressing rural matters. Some models depict policy development processes as rational and even following sequential steps, (eg. as did the policy cycle model mentioned by the keynote speaker). On the ground in rural communities, the experience at RDI is that the importance and urgency of issues and opportunities shape the timing and contents of the research and policy discussions. Process, as a result, follows and results from discussions, deliberations, and negotiations. Policy process, for the most part, is not pre-determined as the keynote speaker's policy cycle model suggested; rather process is often bound by existing practices of the department, previous policy encounters, timing in relation to the next election, and available resources (Ashton, 2010). Certainly, any process model remains incomplete without mention of how policy making can be discordant, disputed, and even threatening (Stone, 1997).

For a rural lens, a network of research centres strengthen policies and programs at all stages – developing, establishing, and implementing policy – with their regional intelligence. From a national level, rural centres are well positioned to comment on and give critical review of proposed national policy and provide input on the contents and implementation of rural policy. The point is that RDI's rural policy lens has each rural centre providing another lens, much like those in the ocular frames in Figure 1. Such a multi-lens view allows for both a synthesis but also for one or more regions to be considered or differentiated. Such an approach is consistent with understanding rural Canada as a federation of many regions, each with very different histories, cultures, economics, and environments that are impacted differently by national rural policy.

Figure 1. Multi-Lens Ocular Frame for Detecting Regional Differences and Commonalities When Making and Reviewing National Rural Policy

Source. Nuclearsphix see: http://www.yourprops.com/National-Treasure-Benjamin-Franklin-Ocular-Device-other-replicas-movie-props-National-Treasure--2004--prop-48984.html

Rural research centres foster innovation and problem solving. One such example of this is how RDI has created neutral ground for stakeholders within and among governments, communities, non-profit organizations, and others to discuss issues, research agendas, and policy. RDI and rural research centres can call for discussion on many topics and invite various government departments and an array of other stakeholders to a forum. At times, when a rural issue involves the mandate of several departments (and most issues do involve several departments), this situation limits what any one department can do without the others. Moreover, to work horizontally and engage other departments and stakeholders can require senior level approvals, thus adding to the complexity, delays, and uncertainty of having a discussion. What is often not clear among departments, stakeholders and rural communities is how to navigate this 'white space' to work horizontally for such things as holding a meeting to initiate broader cooperation and coordination. Rural research centres can comfortably help catalyze interests of multiple stakeholders which are not easily possible by any one department. This was evident in meetings recently hosted by RDI regarding immigration, including over five dozen service providers (Ashton, 2009) and a regional workshop in October 2010. Those gathered valued each other but had no compeling reason to assemble. In a similar vein, collaboration among rural communities is needed more than ever, if for no other reason than economic efficiencies at the local level; yet they are often kept apart over long term rivalries and embedded competition. In a recent example, RDI took on a regional view to rural development and helped northern communities bridge their differences and take action. What emerged was a collaborative approach to sharing and identifying common issues, devising coordinated actions, and collaborative policy implementation (Annis, Beattie, & Gibson, 2006; Annis, Racher, & Beattie, 2004). In reflecting on RDI's work in this area of multi-community collaboration, it also begs the question of evolving the notions of local or sub-provincial governance. Knowing local governments are the responsibility of provinces (under the Canadian constitution), from many accounts local government is overdue for more systemic reform (e.g. Baldacchino, Greenwood, & Felt, 2009; Stoney & Hilton, 2009). Rural forums, I content hold promise for initiating multi-community discussions about local government reforms.

Combined, rural centres affect processes of policy development, as well as policy itself, and its articulation through implementation. As with RDI, we consider how each project and activity contributes to and impacts rural issues; and, this also includes the very methods used for undertaking a research project, such as engaging the community. RDI also considers existing policy and its impact, and how research might inform policy revisions and signal the need for new policy and programs. Indeed, these are concerns reflective of a mid-level theory, where policy gets defined in terms of the delivery of a program in a rural area. Also important are challenges faced by departments and stakeholders to respond to rural and regional concerns. For this place-based notion, Bradford (2005) argued government has to get the policy mix right for the specific conditions and more important for the people; it is the people and firms that act, so policy has to aggregate the right mix for action. In such situations, RDI recommends a "differentiated policy response" by government. For example, rural immigration in Manitoba is generating challenges for rural communities. With over 130 rural communities welcoming over 10,000 new residents (between 2003 and 2010), such growth stretches resources of many departments, including those dealing with labour and immigration, housing, and rural initiatives, along with education and

health. Yet, a full 80% of these immigrants settled in 10 rural centres, and four of these centres accommodated 75% of all rural immigrants (Carter, 2010). RDI suggests government utilize a differentiated policy response to these 10 rural areas in the form of collective 'horizontal' action among departments and related service provides. This would mean addressing the place-based complex of issues, learning from that experience, in terms of what worked and didn't, and use the findings to gauge the level of collaboration needed for the other centres as well. Such an approach might well set an implementation standard for rural policy that could be emulated with other policy responses.

In short, a network of rural research centres will strengthen a rural lens and provide opportunities for constructive discussion and holds the possibility for more potent rural policy and programs. For action, what this suggests is a differentiated allocation of resources to rural 'hot spots' and learn from that experience to deliver the policy in other rural areas.

4.0 References

Annis, R. C., Racher, F., & Beattie, M. (2004). *Rural and community health and well being: a guide to action*. Brandon, MB; Brandon University

Annis, R. C., Beattie, M., & Gibson, R. (2006). *Regional round table handbook for the community collaboration process*. Brandon, MB: Brandon University.

Ashton, W. (2009). *Building welcoming communities: A multi-sectoral regional collaborative approached toward immigration 2009-2010.* Presented at Exploring Brandon as a Welcoming Community Forum, Brandon, MB.

Ashton, W. (2010). How crown forest policy is developed: probing perceptions of influential stakeholder groups.

Baldacchino, G., Greenwood, R., & Felt, L. (2009). Introduction. In G. Baldacchino, R. Greenwood, & L. Felt. (Eds.), *Remote control: governance lessons for and from small, insular, and remote regions* (pp. 1-15). ISER. St John's, NL.

Bradford, N. (2005). Place-based public policy: toward a new urban and community agenda for Canada. Canadian Policy Research Networks, Inc. (pp. 1-63). Ottawa, ON.

Carter, T. (2010). *Housing strategies for immigrants in rural southern Manitoba*. Brandon, MB: Brandon University.

Merton, R. K. (Ed.). (1968). *Social theory and social structure*. New York: Free Press.

Rummler, G., Ramias, A., & Rumnler, R. (2010). *White space revisited: creating value through process.* John Wiley: Sims-San Francisco, CA.

Stone, D. (1997). *Policy paradox: the art of political decision-making*. New York, NY: Norton and Company.

Stoney, C., & Hilton, R. (2009). Canada's City regions: Time to rethink local governance. UHICA Seminar, March 24 [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from www2.carleton.ca/cure/ccms/wp-content/ccms-files/Local_Government_Reform.pdf