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12-9-1988

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Recommended Citation

Lundeen, Ardelle A., "Rural Development Policy Workshop" (1988). *Economics Commentator*. Paper 261.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/econ_comm/261

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Economics Newsletter



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No. 265

December 9, 1988



Rural Development Policy Workshop

by

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During September and October 1988, a series of four rural development policy workshops was held across the U.S. These workshops brought together local and state government officials, state agency personnel, rural planners, extension specialists, and other interested parties.

The workshop objectives were fourfold:

1. Identify the most critical rural development policy issues and options.
2. Educate rural leaders on these policy issues, options, and consequences.
3. Reduce fragmentation, increase communication, and begin building a consensus between and within levels of government and others working in rural development.
4. Provide the results of the consensus building process to Congress.

The first three objectives were addressed at each workshop. To accomplish Objective 4, organizers were to collect information from all four workshops and then prepare and present a consolidated statement on rural development policy to congressional representatives.

I had the privilege of attending the first workshop held in Minneapolis on September 19-21. Some of the highlights and findings of the workshop follow.

Rural development broader than agricultural development

One of the first points emphasized by both government officials and others was that rural development is no longer synonymous with agricultural policy. Increasingly, nonmetropolitan counties (non-metro) are no longer farming-dependent

(defined as those counties with 20% or more of the total labor and proprietor income from production farming or ranching). Nationally, only about 700 of a total of 3,000 counties are classified as farming-dependent and most of these are concentrated in the midwest, including South Dakota.

This is not to assert that farming is no longer important, but that rural policy must be formulated taking into account the non-agricultural sectors as well. More than 40% of the 60 million people living in nonmetro areas live in manufacturing counties. The most rapidly growing counties involve retired people. One specialist noted that the structural changes that have occurred since the 1950's (the change from ag to non-ag population in rural counties) are not temporary.

In developing rural policy, the needs of all of the disparate groups must be considered. It was also noted that the policy should be comprehensive. A series of policies focused on specific areas, e.g., health, education, etc., is failing.

The declining farm population makes it increasingly difficult to generate support for agricultural policy. A comprehensive rural policy may forge a coalition of the various groups and increase support for the policy.

The rural crisis has been well-publicized and documented but is usually considered to refer to only a financial crisis on the farm. One city official pointed out that what happens in rural America also affects the cities. If farmers don't have money, they cannot spend it in the cities. Further, he observed that serious problems exist in rural America other than just with farm businesses. For example, the poverty rate is almost 50% higher in nonmetro than in metro counties. The rural unemployment rate has been higher than the urban rate since the beginning of the 1980's--as of 1985, 3% higher than the urban rate. Basic industries, mining and timber, have

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suffered because of the recession and increased competition from imports. More than 700 rural hospitals have closed in the past 15 years. In many counties, basic infrastructure is lacking.

Almost without exception, all speakers reiterated the above problems--regardless of the sector they represented. The key issues in rural development are employment, education, agriculture, health care, water quality, and training. A key challenge is to develop coordinated development policies to deal collectively with these issues.

Conclusions were drawn in several areas and only some can be enumerated here.

1. Farm policy cannot solve rural community problems.
2. Different sections of America have different problems. Rural policy must be flexible to treat all existing problems.
3. Rural communities close to urban areas have more success in fighting declines in employment and income.
4. Trade-offs are involved in almost every policy/program decision. More dollars for education means less dollars for health care; this also points up the divisiveness of some issues. Do we channel more dollars to the young or the elderly? With the current concern in South Dakota and other states on controlling taxes, this issue will gain special importance.

Local government: a key role in rural development.

The general consensus was that there is a role for all levels of government but there also must be coordination and cooperation between and within those levels. The federal role is best left to

those areas that spill over local/state boundaries rather than in determining local needs. The federal government can best regulate and provide technical assistance and some financing. Communication among federal agencies was stressed, but indications are that the U.S. Department of Agriculture will still be the lead agency for rural America.

The state government's role was outlined as coordinating local efforts and providing an advocacy role, technical assistance, and a small amount of financing to local government and businesses.

This indicates that the major role must be local, and local persons must do much of the determination of needs and planning. One of the most motivating speakers was a young county commissioner from North Dakota who enunciated her ideas on the local government role. She stated that nothing will be done without local support. Local leaders must be informed and educated to develop long-range plans that are achievable and offer new solutions for old problems. This will involve determining what kind of life rural America wants. Communication among groups within counties and among units of government must be established to develop cooperation and overcome infighting. She emphasized that county leaders must become business conscious and develop leadership qualities.

Cooperation and communication were emphasized at all levels of government. Finally, the point was made that policy must be for people, not just for places. Rather than trying to maintain a place for its own sake, the effort must focus on the best means for providing a good standard of living and quality of life for the people.