



Fighting the Odds

Rural Development Strategies for Western Canada

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BUILDING THE NEW WEST

This report is part of the Canada West Foundation's **Building the New West (BNW) Project**, a multi-year research and public consultation initiative focused on the strategic positioning of western Canada within the global economy.

Five key priorities emerged from an extensive research and consultation process and provide a framework for the Building the New West Project:

- the West must create the tools to attract, retain, and build HUMAN CAPITAL;
- the West must continue ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION;
- the West must strengthen its TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE;
- the West must promote the global competitiveness of its MAJOR CITIES; and
- the West must develop new ways of facilitating REGIONAL COORDINATION.

To learn more about the BNW Project, please visit the Canada West Foundation website (www.cwf.ca).

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Executive Summary

Many areas of rural western Canada are in decline. While areas have prospered, particularly those nearest to cities or with natural tourism advantages, other areas have lost a large number of jobs through job-automation technology and commodity price declines. As the jobs disappeared, so did many of the people, drawn to employment opportunities elsewhere.

The impact of this decline is felt throughout the western provinces—both rural and urban. Rural economic lag affects the overall health of the regional economy, increases the cost of delivering public services, puts rural lands and natural resources at greater risk of decay, reduces quality of life for many western Canadians and alters the diversity of the social and political landscape.

Fighting the Odds present a collection of the proven and proposed strategies that can enable rural areas to fight against these trends. This report is about describing the quickest path to rural recovery and engaging rural resources in economic production.

Specific strategies to regrow rural Western Canada include:

- employment focused strategies:
 - recruiting outside industry to invest in building local capacity
 - encouraging local entrepreneurship to create and grow small and medium rural enterprises
 - cooperating within the economic regions to create rural opportunities
 - reorganizing environmental property rights for rural economic advantage
 - returning/keeping rural technology and knowledge capital within rural areas
 - engaging the informal economy in strategic support for the formal economy
- community strengthening strategies:
 - encouraging higher educational opportunities and promoting a learning culture
 - linking youth education with emerging local employment opportunities
 - maintaining and creating new recreational opportunities for youth and young adults
 - increasing regional attractiveness to immigrants
 - developing higher levels of rural social entrepreneurship
- new governance structures for rural areas to empower rural communities with a real voice and negotiating authority
- actions on the part of governments to:
 - change institutions, legislation and common property rights structures in ways that better empower rural communities
 - offer programs that encourage rural communities to take actions in their own best interest
 - act in ways that can mitigate the harm caused by disputes and policies to rural regions
 - enhance rural competitiveness by altering regulatory and licensing criteria to provide preferential rural treatment
 - simplify and rationalize of many of these regulatory frameworks to release rural productivity.

This prescription of changes cannot save all rural areas from dying away, but does provide an optimistic set of tools from which many rural communities can begin to recover and grow. The immediate challenge is in creating the conditions under which this steps can be implemented to arrest the spread of the decline and commence the climb to better overall rural economic health.

Introduction

It has been widely reported that the rural West is in decline, or more pessimistically, within death's grasp. Few would dispute that many rural areas across the West are either already in decline or are working hard to avoid slipping into a decline. As in most of the rest of the world, western Canada's rural areas have been negatively affected by technology-induced job losses in the mining, forestry and farming industries—much of this job loss having just come in the last decade. In the simplest of terms, successful rural communities are those that have created or retained an export economy; unsuccessful communities have not replaced the lost labour and as a result have suffered from economic decline induced by a shrinking population.

Fighting the Odds looks at the strategies proposed by rural scholars and advocates that offer a roadmap for rural redevelopment. Some of the solutions may require negative consequences for urban areas and others will not work in all rural places. Much of what is discussed in this report cannot occur without a change in public and political will to regrow rural regions. Well-entrenched policies of freer trade, widely available information exchange, commonly held environmental property, technological innovation, and free labour mobility have impacted on the areas of traditional rural competitiveness for decades. For rural areas to regain economic competitiveness now that information has replaced industry as the global growth opportunity, there is a need to rethink and restructure our policies and approaches to rural development.

As much of the emerging rural literature suggests this shift is not a small one. Wholesale changes in the approach to rural Canada are required at the legislative, community and regional levels to create competitiveness opportunities. Removing rural productivity barriers and facilitating the opportunity to locate and develop rural export products is seen as the path to bringing jobs and people to rural areas. Rhetoric aside, forging this path will not be easy. Strategies for assigning a monetary value to rural regions' environmental assets, encouraging corporations to build in rural areas, or developing new rural governance structures each present a real challenge for our policy makers.

This will truly be a fight against the odds. This raises an important question. If rural decline is nearly inevitable, should we continue to pour time and money in an attempt to achieve such difficult solutions? The preoccupation with generating rural solutions to

seemingly unsolvable systemic problems can be rationally criticized for romanticizing the past and ignoring the reality of a changed demography (Gibbins 2003). Is it time to turn off the lights in the rural areas and focus on strategies to transition the remaining residents into urban areas?

Perhaps, but the expanse of ideas is not yet exhausted. Our goal with *Fighting the Odds* is to point attention towards those solutions that, based on national and international experience, may work for at least parts of rural western Canada. In doing so, the report address four specific questions:

- What is the rural "problem"?
- How important is rural development to the future of western Canada?
- What are successful strategies for rural development?
- What is the role of government in rural development?

This analysis focuses specifically on the rural heartland areas—rural regions beyond the urban fringe—and does not specifically examine the rural northern areas or rural Aboriginal communities. Although many of the findings are applicable to these rural communities, they also face a number of different challenges and opportunities not considered in this report.

1.0 Defining The Rural "Problem"

Parts of rural western Canada have lost a large number of jobs as a result of technology changes and commodity price declines. Between 1996 and 2002, 52,000 jobs were lost across the West in agriculture alone—a reduction of 30% of the farming workforce (Azmier and Stone 2003). As the jobs disappeared, so did many of the people, drawn to employment opportunities elsewhere. While individual communities may understand the impact of the loss of tens of families, it is more difficult to understand the type of impact this change has had on the region as a whole. The nature of these impacts is briefly described in this section.

Shortage of employment opportunities

Technology has replaced and will continue to replace jobs in western Canada's three primary rural industries: forestry, farming and mining (Reimer and Apedaile 2000). Rural job losses themselves are not new as they have been occurring since the 1930s, but this trend has arguably now reached

critical levels. Rural communities are in a position of having to find something new to manufacture and export or its population will move to the cities to look for work. While some communities may have accomplished the former, the overall depopulation trends in rural areas outside of the city fringe areas suggest most rural communities have not been successful at finding alternative export products (Azmier and Stone 2003).

A dwindling labour force in a town presents the real possibility that the town will not survive. Among those communities that do survive negative labour growth, quality of life can diminish as access to public and government goods, services and programs is reduced. Access to private markets is also reduced as fewer industries remain to provide locally-available goods to diminished rural markets.

Infrastructure deficiencies

Low population densities and long distances—both between and within rural communities—has resulted in a comparably weaker infrastructure in rural areas than in most cities. Low demand in areas with lower population density renders it unprofitable to provide some services (Freshwater 2000). Even when these services are accessible, they are often expensive and out of reach for some rural residents.

Moreover, a low tax base makes it difficult for rural communities to muster the necessary funds to create and maintain sufficient roads, bridges and other forms of transportation infrastructure. Before the infrastructure deficiency can be addressed there must be an increase in the local tax base and an increase in demand. In the absence of expanding economic activity to use the new roads, electricity lines and faster Internet there is little need or means to pay for upgrades. In these circumstances, the financial burden of maintaining a foundation of competitiveness in the rural regions becomes the responsibility of the state.

Lower educational attainment

Statistics have shown that rural populations have lower educational attainments than do their urban counterparts (Conference Board of Canada 2003, Bollman 1999b). In British Columbia, the “achievement” gap between rural and urban students was of such concern that a task force was assigned to study it (see Imrich et al. 2003). One conclusion of this report was the need for consistent professional development

opportunities for rural teachers, where teachers can learn skills, such as computer skills, that can then be passed on to their students (Imrich et al. 2003). However, rural residents are less likely to participate in formalized continuing education programs than urbanites (Conference Board of Canada 2003). Lower levels of education and the absence of continuing education are troubling given the importance of education to economic prosperity, particularly in a knowledge based economy (Conference Board of Canada 2003). A less educated rural workforce has trouble plugging into a transformed employment market brought on by technology change or the growth of knowledge-based business.

Fewer international immigrants

In 1996, only 6% of the rural population in Canada was made up of international immigrants, compared with 27% of urban populations (Beshiri and Alfred 2002). This can represent a barrier to generating innovative ideas and exportable economic activity. Immigrants bring with them a diversity of ideas and experiences that can plug into the rural “problem” to create a number of new business solutions. Immigrants are not attracted to rural areas for a number of reasons, including fewer jobs, fewer people of similar culture, and competition from cities. Shrinking rural communities are unable to provide the cultural moorings, or the variety of educational and employment opportunities of cities (Azmier and Dobson 2003). The result is that rural communities are not benefiting from the skills and diversity that international immigrants possess.

The rural problem includes:

- a shortage of employment opportunities
- infrastructure deficiencies
- lower educational attainment
- fewer international immigrants
- geography disadvantages
- permanent youth out-migration
- health concerns

Rural geography disadvantages

The reality of rural geography itself can be a barrier to economic development. Low population densities and long distances make it “difficult for rural businesses to achieve economies of scale or critical mass” (Dabson 2001). Transaction costs are greater and producers therefore pay more to manufacture goods or operate services and must raise their prices to recoup this cost (Dabson 2001). The relatively high price may limit the already small market of consumers, putting the viability of rural business opportunities into question (Dabson 2001).

Where the majority of rural residents cannot afford to pay an increased price, weaker demand will result in fewer facilities that supply or provide particular goods or services (Freshwater 2000). In some cases, these goods and services may not be available at all. This means rural business operators and residents may have to travel significant distances to access necessary goods and services, such as financial or medical specialists. Higher transaction costs present a significant challenge in the attempt to economically revitalize the region.

Permanent youth out-migration

The process of youth leaving home to explore other parts of the world is not a uniquely rural phenomenon. The rural variant is that proportionately fewer rural youth return to settle and work in the region. Limited rural employment opportunities can partially explain this trend (Conference Board of Canada 2003). The absence of rewarding or diverse employment opportunities in rural areas fails to draw rural youth into or back to the region. Limited local educational opportunities also largely contribute to the youth exodus from rural communities (Conference Board of Canada 2003). Geographic distance and inadequate communication or transportation infrastructure make it difficult for youth to access post-secondary education. This problem could be mitigated were there employment opportunities to draw those educated youth back to the rural regions upon completion of their programs or if larger numbers of migrating urban youth were choosing to settle in rural areas.

Rural health concerns

A number of rural health concerns impact rural competitiveness, including high levels of substance abuse among youth, the aging of the rural population and a number of specific health concerns (e.g., higher levels of cancer and

circulatory diseases) in rural areas (Romanow 2002). On the whole, people living in rural and remote communities have poorer health status than Canadians who live in large centres (Romanow 2002). As communities contract, access to health care is also a contributing problem due to longer travel and because of a shortage of health care providers (Romanow 2002).

Substance abuse among rural youth may be the most troubling rural health concern. Alcohol and drug use among rural youth can have particularly dire consequences for rural communities, in that youth skill development is a lynchpin of economic growth. Substance abuse reduces volunteerism and educational pursuits among youth and can act to further disengage rural youth from emerging job markets. Evidence suggests that rural alcohol usage is of additional concern because rural youth use higher quantities of alcohol and engage in high risk behaviour (Edwards 1997). Vehicle-related substance problems (e.g., drinking and driving) are a unique rural challenge as longer distances require that rural youth drive to engage in social and recreational activity.

2.0 Rural development’s importance to the future of western Canada

Although there are numerous descriptions of the pending or inevitable decline of rural Canada, there has been a lack of coherent discussion about the consequences of that decline. We have not, for example, asked ourselves what role rural areas will play in the future social, cultural and economic growth of a particular province or of the whole nation (Blake 2003). As is argued below, rural economies, rural health and rural environments do very much impact on urban quality of life.

Our blurred understanding of the overall impact of rural decline is in part due to the difficulty in separating rural from urban into truly separate units of measure. Gross domestic product data for rural areas, for example, are not available in part due to the interrelatedness of rural and urban economies. Primary evidence of rural decline therefore is often anecdotal—plant closures, job losses, hotel vacancies, and population decline.

Having integrated economies means that rural and urban areas share many of the same resources (e.g., suppliers) and

distribution channels. The advantages of integrated economic regions—economies of scale, vertical supply channels, product specialization—can become disadvantages if one aspect of the network is in decay. The bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis affecting the cattle industry in 2003 and 2004 illustrated how a highly integrated economic system relies on each aspect functioning at a certain standard in order to grow the region as a whole. The financial impact of reduced beef exports rippled throughout the integrated economic system, from agricultural scientists to farm equipment sellers to beef retailers. The impact of rural decline can matter very much to the larger rural and urban integrated western Canadian economy.

There are also costs borne by the region as a whole associated with the delivery of rural government services. For example, regardless of the level of population decline in the rural communities, the provision of some basic government services cannot cease altogether. There will always be a need to provide at least a minimum level of education, health care, postal services, police and fire services and road safety. Increasing rural populations increases the efficiency of delivering these services and can reduce the overall cost of maintaining underutilized schools and hospitals.

Rural decline is also important because a strong rural Canada represents a fundamental element in maintaining our national identity (Blake 2003). Canadians define their culture closely with rural landscapes of mountains, forests and trees

(Citizen’s Forum on Canada’s Future 1991). Western Canadians also indicate that supporting rural industry should be a high priority for their governments (Berdahl 2003). Whether we recognize it or not in day-to-day life, rural issues and a strong rural Canada are part of our regional identity. Therefore the legitimacy of rural development policy instruments proposed in this report derives very much from the public desire to maintain a strong rural Canada.

The decline or loss of rural communities means the loss of the social diversity, heritage and creativity they foster. As communities disappear, so does the cultural diversity they represent, and the rural amenities that they protect (Reimer and Apedaile 2000). Social diversity has an innate societal value in a culture based on democratic principles. A strong rural voice, even if a minority, contributes to the policies of our governments. Rural development initiatives that strengthen rural Canada contribute to a diversified political landscape.

In sum, the decline of the rural heartland is felt throughout the western provinces—both rural and urban. Therefore, rural development can have a number of positive outcomes for the region as a whole, including: the maintenance of the contributions that rural skills make to the formal and informal economies of the region; scale efficiencies in the delivery of some government services; the protection of the rural land and peoples’ contribution to our national identity; and, the promotion of a diversified social and political landscape.

3.0 Successful Strategies for Rural Development

Rural development is defined in a broad sense to include any effort that makes life “better” for rural residents (Freshwater 2001). These include initiatives that bring higher levels of income or more job opportunities. Rural development also includes efforts to bring better access to government services, enhance the social vibrancy of the region or boost informal economic activity (e.g., child care, food preparation, trading of skills) that is a defining element of the traditional rural lifestyle.

Rural development is, however, first and foremost an investment strategy. Rural communities can offer the same opportunities to be vibrant active places of yesteryear if economic activity returns to pre-reduction levels. What is required to bring people back to

Rural areas importance to western Canada includes:

- financial impact of an integrated regional economy
- the overall cost of delivering social services
- rural contributions to regional and national identity
- maintenance of social and cultural diversity in the region
- democratic value of a strong rural voice

rural regions are tradeable economic goods to replace the economic rents lost through automation and a weakening commodity price base.

Our analysis of western Canada's rural communities suggest that a broad strategy of employment growth, building stronger communities, and new approaches to rural governance is needed to encourage the development of the rural West for the next century.

3.1 Employment Creation Strategies

Recruit outside industry to invest in building local capacity

Recruiting large, outside firms has long been a rural development strategy. The rationale is that if firms can bring jobs, markets and resources to the community, people will move there and increased demand for goods and services will stimulate secondary economic development in the community (Freshwater 2003). Yet, this strategy has shown to have a number of downfalls including over-dependency and impact of sudden relocations. Nonetheless, the instant success potential continues to merit the careful use of "smokestack chasing" strategies to attract industry to rural areas.

Government efforts in this area include subsidies to attract industry to rural areas, either directly through grants or loans, or indirectly through tax incentives or infrastructure upgrades. There are numerous examples of this: the Alberta government gave \$16 million in grants and loans to Lakeside Packers (Brooks) to help it become Canada's largest meat packing plant; the Manitoba government gave \$7 million in subsidies and tax incentives to a Maple Leaf pork packing plant (Brandon); and the Saskatchewan government gave over \$1.5 million in equity investments and loans to Big Sky Pork Inc. to fund the construction of 2,400-sow mega barn complexes (Qualman 2001).

The investment of public dollars in this type of activity can have questionable outcomes. Relocated industries are still prone to seeking profit-maximizing strategies, which can drain any of the desired economic activity out of the region. The Brooks meat-packing example above has been critiqued for providing too little of the anticipated local growth activity, for transferring too many of the direct economic benefits out of the community, and for introducing too many social concerns related to large-scale immigration in a small community.

At best, re-location strategies provide the opportunities for the growth in jobs and to build community. The critical success

component of industry location is the investment and reinvestment that the industry and the community make in building permanent supply and distribution business activities to trap the primary and secondary economic benefits within the region.

In order for strategies of attracting business to rural areas to succeed, there are guiding principles that ought to inform government actions. Working in cooperation with governments, communities need to target those firms that give "significant opportunity for local inputs or for additional steps in the production process" and allow local residents to acquire greater knowledge and skill, whether they be specialist or generalist skills (Freshwater 2003). Communities can encourage successful adoption of business by dialoguing with governments during the recruitment process to ensure that targeted firms have a reasonable local component to their product or service, and hire and train local residents. Firms with these policies will build greater community capacity that may later help communities attract new industry or start industry of their own if the firm relocates (Freshwater 2000; Canadian Rural Partnership 2001).

Further, industry location decisions need to be made between competing rural areas based on the potential for a maximum positive economic development outcome. The communities that will be favoured in the effort to encourage business relocation will be those well situated within the regional trade network and having a sufficient complement of trade and service outlets to generate the spin-off industries (multiplier effects) (Stabler and Olfert 2002). A combination of good fortune and good policy offers the best approach to business relocation activity.

Encourage local entrepreneurship to create and grow small and medium rural enterprises

Rural entrepreneurs can face some unique challenges. Banking and other essential financial services can be more difficult to access and banks are reluctant to invest in rural initiatives if they are perceived as high risk (Freshwater 2000; Canadian Rural Partnership 1998). In addition, rural entrepreneurs (for the most part) lack the access to large markets that urban entrepreneurs enjoy. Weak demand due to low population density makes it difficult to design and keep rural businesses that will be financially viable over the long-term.

Henderson (2002) maintains that part of the deficiency in rural entrepreneurial activity is a lack of skills. The accuracy of this claim would likely vary from place to place given that many rural economies were at one time fundamentally based on self-employment (farming). However, rural economies no longer rely as heavily on agriculture. Therefore, the culture of self-employment may have been lost in some communities as manufacturing became more prominent in rural economies (Murdoch 2000). Why, then, against these odds, should public policy encourage the development of rural entrepreneurs?

Although locally-owned businesses may be difficult to start up, once successful, they provide the economy with the stability that outside recruitment cannot. Local businesses are less likely to relocate than are their external counterparts because ties to the community often go beyond financial considerations (Freshwater 2000). In addition, local businesses may be more willing to engage in horizontal integration, whereby local businesses support each other through their procurement practices (Freshwater 2003; Van Depoele 2003). For example, by including local food products in their dishes, local restaurants promote tourism and increase the sales of local produce (Van Depoele 2003). This type of interaction strengthens the local economy. Community capacity is also strengthened by entrepreneurs because not only do owners acquire new skills and knowledge as they manage, evaluate and improve their business, they also provide employment opportunities for other residents, albeit minimal employment in smaller business.

The impact of local entrepreneurs on rural economies is clear in Winkler, Manitoba. Once a community suffering from economic and population decline, Winkler now combats overcrowded schools and a lack of housing (Pratt 2002). Winkler's economic development officer attributes a large part of the growth to a group of young, "off the farm" entrepreneurs who now own Triple E Canada, a recreational vehicle and semi trailer manufacturer (Pratt 2002). As a "major employer of community youth" and with 500 employees, Triple E Canada, a home grown business, has made a large contribution to the slow and steady growth of Winkler (Pratt 2002). Although this level of success may not transfer to all rural communities, Winkler provides optimism of the type of change that can be achieved in rural areas through good policy and good fortune.

The increasing use of and demand for Internet access in rural

areas is a double-edged sword for rural areas. On one hand, the Internet overcomes the distance that hinders the development of many rural entrepreneurs. It gives them access to a wider range of goods and services and also, with the development of online shopping, to a larger market. However, what comes in, may also go out. High speed Internet gives rural consumers the opportunity to buy online from outside markets. Rural entrepreneurs need to be aware of the threat and opportunity of the Internet to capitalize on the advantages of access to world markets.

Public policy should encourage rural communities and residents to pursue entrepreneurial activity that aggressively contributes to the surrounding business environment. Spin-off economic activity that creates its own permanent business structures is of the highest importance. Secondary business structures offer rural development potential by reducing the impact of catastrophic primary industry relocations. Supportive entrepreneurial activity not only reduces the need for business to relocate, but also can minimize the impact of such a loss on rural communities.

Together, communities and governments will likely need to: increase awareness about what support structures are available to rural entrepreneurs and, if needed, increase the capacity of these organizations (for example, the Community Futures Development Corporations); provide entrepreneurial training; encourage entrepreneurial interest, particularly in rural youth; and improve rural entrepreneurs' access to venture capital. The ways to approach these and similar tasks are numerous. One example is the youth entrepreneur camp that was created by an Albertan Community Futures Development Corporation to introduce rural youth to entrepreneurial skills, such as budgeting, advertising and record keeping, and to stimulate interest in self-employment (Pitcher et al. 2003). While this type of information and resource exist, much needs to be done on coordinating the access and dissemination of this information. This can be a challenge as rural residents face the access barriers of relatively lesser internet usage and longer travel distances to major public centres,

Cooperate within the economic regions to create rural opportunities

Traditional notions of community apply less in today's trade- and service-driven rural economy as the sphere of influence of cities and larger rural areas has extended while the smaller

communities have contracted. Large centres offer more shopping, employment and public services for rural residents, drawing them out of their communities as never before (Stabler and Olfert 2002).

These zones of economic influence centred around cities or larger rural areas could represent an opportunity for smaller rural communities through the creation of regional regulatory institutions. The formalization of these economic zones by creating overseeing bodies represents an opportunity to counterbalance rural and urban interests (Stabler and Olfert 2002). To prevent the large urban centres from swallowing up the smaller rural ones, there is a need for effective structured institutions. A forum is necessary within which rural communities can voice concerns on changes that affect them and the larger economic region. Cooperative solutions can succeed only if both parties recognize rural interests through negotiated outcomes. Because this will require limiting their sphere of influence, urban areas may need incentives to participate willingly in negotiated regional outcomes. These incentives may come from federal and provincial sources in the form of desired legislative changes that give cities more control in other areas or through financial tradeoffs.

Rural community cooperation within smaller economic areas also offers growth potential by addressing some inefficiencies associated with low population density. For instance, telecommunication companies often claim that insufficient demand in rural areas makes it unprofitable for them to install telecommunication infrastructure despite requests for broadband access from rural residents (Ramirez 2001; Freshwater 2000). Lanark County, a region representing eight municipalities, responded to inadequate telecommunication infrastructure by forming a non-profit cooperation called Lanark Communications Network (LCN), whose purpose, among others, was “to support the development of the communication infrastructure of a knowledge-based Eastern Ontario community [and] to obtain for its members within Eastern Ontario, telecommunications and information technology services” (Ramirez and Richardson 2000). By pooling the applications of residents and businesses from the eight municipalities, the LCN made a convincing case that the telecommunication infrastructure and services would be financially viable in their region. Little by little, communication infrastructure upgrades were made and broadband access was established in Lanark County, four years after their initial request (Ramirez and Richardson 2000).

Rural communities that consider themselves within a context of adjacent communities open up opportunities to find mutual benefit by locating areas of synergy. Adjacent communities may have a complementary strength to offset individual weaknesses of labour, land or capital. Cooperation also provides the opportunity to create the idea-generating critical mass necessary to enhance the success of entrepreneurs. Businesses may also be able to expand their size through the better access to labour markets that rural cooperation provides. Creating rural-urban governance institutions and community alliances will allow rural areas to better uncover those economic areas where they can compete to meet urban needs and to plan for the future threat that urban agendas may represent.

Reorganize environmental property rights for rural economic advantage

Perhaps the greatest asset of rural areas is the environment. Western Canadians, whether rural or urban, recognize and personally value the rural environment as an escape from predominantly urban problems of congestion and pollution. Rural areas are increasingly becoming places where western Canadians live as part of a commuting lifestyle. A rural lifestyle can mean more space, less noise and cleaner air—highly cherished values.

Yet as richly endowed as rural areas are with clean air and water, this represents common-property of little marketable value beyond spotty tourism opportunities. There are indications that this will change going forward into the future. A number of international studies are considering the opportunities to address rural poverty by capitalizing on rural lands’ ability to slow climate change (Scherr et al. 2003). Our own provincial governments recognize that the rural environment is becoming increasingly financially valuable for natural beauty and its environmental advantages (Ewaschuk 2002; Manitoba 2004). The sprawling of our cities into rural areas suggest that the public also recognize the value of rural lands—metro-adjacent landowners are paying a premium to live outside the cities (Azmier and Dobson 2003). Moving forward, these trends suggest that there are opportunities for rural financial gains from environmental stewardship that protects habitats for wildlife and humans, and preserves leisure and recreation amenities (Apedaile 2003a).

Responsible land management is increasingly being recognized as a marketable economic product in a number of

jurisdictions. Driven by the demands for carbon sequestering associated with the Kyoto protocols, rural landowners in the future may be paid as land stewards to plant particular non-consumable crops (Feng et al. 2002). Carbon trading with urban areas offers potential direct monetary benefits to rural areas, environmental benefits to us all, and can offset the disproportionate industrial advantage of urban centers. In particular, these changes offer optimism to the most remote and impoverished areas of rural Canada where strategies to attract and create industry are less successful. A recent report by the Manitoba government suggests the province is poised to enter the emerging carbon trading market, which should be of economic value to its rural areas (Manitoba 2004).

Whether monetarily valued at present or not, current rural environmental land policies do provide a direct benefit to western Canadians through carbon ground storage, climate moderation, flood control, storm damage prevention, and air and water pollution abatement. These are not inconsequential items, yet the rural region receives little direct value for these roles. To get a sense of the potential future value of these assets, imagine what it would cost to artificially create these natural abatements. Similarly, there would be large costs associated with the damage that would be caused if rural regions did not provide these functions (Fausold and Lillieholm 1996). Although the process of pricing and paying for these rural services would no doubt be complicated, the environment represents a currently under-utilized financial asset of rural western Canada.

As with environmental valuation, tourism activity is also not appropriately valued monetarily to reflect the importance of rural areas for our quality of life. Unspoiled natural landscapes offer economic opportunities for rural areas as part of a larger rural tourism base if the unspoiled lands are properly valued for what people are willing to pay. Visitor payback systems, such as employed in the East of England, seek to convert the emotive value that visitors place on their destination into a literal financial value (Warren 2001). Visitor payback systems can focus on voluntary or mandatory charges for those visiting rural attractions. It is estimated that some of the funding shortages of the rural sector can be solved by the proper valuation of rural natural beauty to visitors (Warren 2001).

We are perhaps a long way from altering the approach to the valuing of rural lands. These markets are not at all well

developed and there is an overall absence of investment or recurrent expenditures on rural common property (Apedaile 2003a). As a consequence these issues are generally handled by regulatory policies as a byproduct of industrial activity (Apedaile 2003a). Rural industrial water usage, for example, is treated as a matter of regulation and control, rather than a monetary-valued commercial product.

Proposed environmental changes suggested by the Kyoto Accord and similar commitments suggest that rural land stewardship is going to be an emerging issue requiring greater public awareness. At the heart of the future debate will perhaps be the need for a reorganization of rural property rights to allow for the creation of a marketable rural export product of environmental protection. What is needed going forward is a manner by which knowledge and property rights may be reorganized to pay for the environmental measures required by Kyoto Accord (Apedaile 2003a). Doing so would create a marketable environmental product for rural western Canada, particularly in the areas of carbon reduction and sequestering activity.

Return/keep rural technology and knowledge capital within rural areas

While rural communities have been transformed by technology advances in agricultural, mining and forestry, they have not been able to sufficiently retain rural ownership over these knowledge-based innovations to keep the rural economy buoyant. Much of this intellectual “know how” and innovation can be found in the West’s urban centers. This acts as a double harm to rural western Canada: both the jobs and the knowledge capital are transferred to urban areas. Capturing and building the knowledge capital associated with rural technological innovation within rural communities could partially offset the impact that automation has upon human capital levels in the region.

Rural areas suffer from a relatively weaker knowledge-capturing ability in comparison to their urban counterparts. Reversing this lag is critical to growing the rural economy. Organizing knowledge, according to Apedaile, is the real heartbeat of leading edge new rural economies:

Historically, rural economies have been driven by the can-do problem-solving tradition of artisan farmers, fishers, forestry workers, and commerce. In marked contrast, the new rural economy is about extracting value

from human knowledge, acquired tactically within an emerging culture of “global” trading and technology relationships (Apedaile 2003a).

To maximize the benefit of rural ingenuity, the innovations, efficiencies and learning of the rural economy, the economic rents that are normally flowing out of the rural regions need to be redirected to rural enterprises. The education and entrepreneurial recommendations of this report will assist in developing the knowledge base to trap some of this experience locally, but more significant efforts are required. There needs to be an awareness among those companies doing business in rural areas of the need to reinvest in the communities from which they draw resources because that re-investment will, over the long-term, create better technology and greater efficiencies. Research is required to make the business case for the value of locally-housed rural knowledge, financial instruments and project designs. Government can also assist in locating international markets for the acquired rural knowledge, generating more activity and growing the market for Canadian rural experience.

Engage the informal economy in strategic support for the formal economy

As formalized economic activity declined in rural western Canada, the informal economy (IE) stepped in to deliver many of the needed support services (daycare, clothing manufacture, food services, equipment repairs, etc.). While this in itself does not represent much of a growth opportunity for rural regions, it is nonetheless a component of rural strength that can have a real economic advantage. This often unpaid and unmeasured economic activity can support formal economic activity by providing an important role in the operation of a formal economy (Reimer 2001).

First, informal economic activity can act as a social safety net or buffer for the formal economy (Reimer 2001). Doing so reduces the stress on social programs and may encourage entrepreneurial risk-taking. Second, work in the home, volunteerism, and sharing labour and ideas each promotes skills that are directly transferable to a formal labour market if the demand for these skills can be created (Reimer 2001). Third, social cohesion within the region is enhanced due the goodwill associated with the culture of helping associated with informal activity (Reimer 2001). Social cohesion, in turn, creates opportunities for the sharing of ideas and skills, and is an

incubator of marketable economic ideas (Apedaile 2003b). These functions offer strength to the formal economy. Actions on behalf of community (e.g., keeping meeting places open), private sector (e.g., supplying the IE with affordable depreciated or redundant products), and government (non-restrictive policies regarding underground economic activity) are needed to maintain and strengthen these informal roles.

3.2 Strengthening Communities

Communities may play an important part in encouraging the success of many of the employment growth options presented above. Community-driven efforts to attract business through an “if you build it they will come” approach do offer communities the hope of success. However, it can be a risky proposition for communities; these strategies offer little in the way of a guarantee that the “they” will ever arrive. Investing in the educating and training of people can make it easier for them to get jobs outside the region, and investing in the town can create expensive and unused amenities in an already troubled community.

Nonetheless, the process of recruiting firms, encouraging entrepreneurship and keeping rural knowledge in the rural

Rural employment creation strategies

include:

- recruiting outside industry to invest in building local capacity
- encouraging local entrepreneurship to create and grow small and medium rural enterprises
- cooperating within the economic regions to create rural opportunities
- reorganizing environmental property rights for rural economic advantage
- returning/keeping rural technology and knowledge capital within rural areas
- engaging the informal economy in strategic support for the formal economy

areas can be enhanced through a critical mass of supporting infrastructures and institutions. This “chicken or egg” predicament must be carefully balanced in rural communities to minimize risk and maximize benefit. It must be acknowledged at the outset of this process that not every community will have the ability to overcome its deficiencies with available resources.

The sections that follow offer a number of methods designed to strengthen the human capital within rural regions by educating, attracting and retaining skilled rural populations. Skilled population growth can then encourage the development of and investment in high demand services, such as grocery stores and restaurants, and in business-attracting infrastructure such as communications. Strengthening these elements increases the opportunity for rural regions to attract economic activity.

Encourage higher educational opportunities

The importance of education in building community capacity would perhaps seem self-evident, but rural communities themselves are less involved in formal adult education activity. Only 3.2% of rural western Canadians over the age of 15 are engaged in formalized lifelong learning, compared with 5.8% of their urban counterparts (Conference Board of Canada 2003). There is relative absence of a rural “learning culture” when compared with urban areas that acts as a competitive disadvantage to rural regions. Making programs available in rural areas appears insufficient. What is needed is a pro-active strategy that sells rural youth and adults on the value of investing their time in educational programs.

On the whole, provinces need to take a leading role in ensuring the accessibility and quality of rural education, particularly formalized continuing education programs. Ongoing skill refinement and development increases the effectiveness of rural professionals and trades people; it also increases knowledge of the changing economic climate, thereby increasing awareness of future opportunities to build businesses. The value of continuous learning to community capacity building is particularly apparent with the professional development of rural teachers. Workshops, seminars or courses can expose rural teachers to new and useful technology that they can then transfer to their students (Imrich et al. 2003).

The western provincial governments have recognized the value of continuous learning opportunities in rural areas and have made efforts to improve the accessibility of professional development and post-secondary learning opportunities in rural areas through online, distance and tele-learning opportunities. The next step is for governments to make these programs more visible in rural communities. Moreover, they should dialogue with rural communities about the effectiveness of their current programs and possibilities for future programs. As long as rural continuing education numbers lag behind urban centres, rural areas are at a competitive disadvantage in attracting investment.

Similarly, communities need to be active in encouraging their residents to be life long learners and to take advantage of the existing continuous education programs. They should be at the forefront to help guide further development of these kinds of programs, whether by proposing or volunteering for pilot projects and/or by suggesting improvements to current programs. Communities need to create a positive learning culture where it is seen as part of the rural life to be involved in skills upgrading.

Link youth education with employment opportunities

Youth out-migration is not in itself a troubling or uniquely rural problem. However, permanent youth out-migration, where there is no return to the community, is a bleak proposition for rural areas. While there are a number of factors contributing to this phenomenon, one important reason is that youth do not see a future for themselves within their community—they do not see career possibilities (Canadian Rural Partnership 1998). The job creation opportunities listed earlier offer some hope of providing rewarding rural careers in the future, yet the youth need to be educated to levels where they can contribute to this employment market. This is a particularly significant concern for rural western Canada’s relatively abundant First Nations youth populations. Rural communities and government need to make the link between the current education that rural youth are receiving, and the jobs and upcoming rural careers that are desired for their region. Specifically, this means an emphasis on environment and climate control, rural manufacturing and production technologies, service industries and tourism, and entrepreneurship.

One way to engage youth in the local economy, as suggested by rural youth themselves, would be to create work-study

programs such as co-operative education, internships or apprenticeship programs (R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. 2002). An example of such a program is the Bridges to Agriculture program in Goderich, Ontario, which after relevant class instruction places secondary students in a variety of agricultural occupations (Pitcher et al. 2003). By connecting youth with local organizations, businesses and governments, these programs develop the skill level of rural youth and may introduce them to locally available work that they would like to pursue as a career.

The lack of post-secondary education opportunities in rural areas interrupts the transition from high school to rural employment. Despite its growing incidence across the West, decentralized and distance education at a post-secondary level is the exception, rather than the rule. Therefore, rural youth who wish to pursue post-secondary education will likely leave rural areas. However, linking education and employment may still be a valuable tool for retaining youth and therefore building rural community capacity because work experience or relevant training may spark young people's interest to return to and work in a rural setting.

Maintain or create recreational opportunities (especially for youth aged 15-20 and single adults aged 20-30)

It is difficult to attract or bring back skilled, young, single adults to rural areas because of the general lack of a youth culture (R.A. Malatest and Associates Ltd. 2002). The isolation of the rural heartland becomes even less appealing when there is nothing for young adults to do in their spare time. From theatre to night clubs, cities have more to offer in terms of youth-targeted recreation and therefore youth will remain or migrate there simply "to have a life."

Although rural communities cannot compete with the variety of activities available in cities, they can provide specific recreational activities that may help attract, re-attract or retain present youth. For example, The Rural Communities Program, a department of the Camrose and District Support Services, has created the "Solo Club" that puts on events that enable single adults to meet and socialize, swimming programs for youth and young adults alike, and teen focused activities such as dances, teen rap, gym night, and movie night (City of Camrose 2003ab). The Camrose and District Support Centre finances its programs, youth programs included, through user fees, fundraising and donations, but also relies on municipal and provincial funds (Pitcher et al. 2003). Recreational programs like these make growing up or settling

down in rural communities a more positive experience and may mitigate against the negative attitude that rural and urban youth have of rural communities. A more positive attitude may encourage rural youth to settle there.

However, a study by R. A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. (2002) found that some proposals to create youth-friendly facilities, like a skateboarding park and roller rink, were protested by community residents or were built in locations that were inaccessible to youth. Rural communities should realize the importance of recreational activities to the quality of life of a young population, which, in turn, is important to the future development of their community. As such, they ought to maintain or create recreational activities that target youth aged 15-20 years and single adults aged 20-30 years (R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. 2002). Governments can support community initiatives of this nature.

Recreational outlets may also offer another option to alcohol and drug addiction issues among rural youth. The higher substance abuse levels among rural youth likely contribute to the social and economic consequences felt in the region. Increasing rural recreational opportunity for youth can further contribute to future rural economic development as recreational opportunities can reduce levels of substance abuse (Edwards 1997).

Increase regional attractiveness to immigrants

A number of studies have found that western Canadians (particularly those in Manitoba and Saskatchewan) are among the most accepting of higher levels of immigration (Angus Reid Group 2000; Leger 2002; Palmer 1999). However, rural western Canadians appear to be much less accepting of immigration than are urban westerners. Canada West Foundation public opinion surveying has found that as few as 11.8% of rural western Canadians believe that Canada should accept more immigrants (Azmi and Stone 2003). These results are an immediate source of concern for rural Canada whose future prosperity in large part appears to rely on attracting highly skilled people to work and create rural business. As rural recovery takes hold and new jobs are created, it is to the region's advantage to attract skilled immigrants to work and live in the area.

Rural communities cannot do much to directly influence immigration outcomes, yet indirectly there are opportunities to

appropriately celebrate the diversity that exists within community. Actions on behalf of rural communities to encouraging the growth of the existing cultural moorings (e.g., places of worship, nationality clubs, restaurants) create a more welcoming community to future immigrants. Government incentives to rural immigrants can also hold some promise as a policy tool, most notably in relation to special skill immigrants such as doctors and other professionals.

Develop higher levels of rural social entrepreneurship

The third rural power base (after government and business) is the volunteer sector. Rural areas are well endowed with high levels of volunteerism—formal volunteering was about eight percentage points higher in rural areas than in large urban centres in Statistics Canada’s 1997 survey of volunteerism (Reed and Selbee 2000). Rural areas lead by a similar margin on rates of informal volunteering activity. Combined, these data indicate that rural areas offer a competitive advantage in the area of social entrepreneurship over cities.

Rural areas need to capitalize on the strength of the local nonprofit sector by assisting government and local business in luring business to rural areas. Businesses make relocation decisions based in part on the amenities and social options available in a region (Azmier 2002). A vibrant rural voluntary

sector with music, arts, sports leagues, rodeos, service clubs, parades, and 4H programs are a valuable resource that can be used to promote the community. Business investment, immigrants and rural youth can be more easily drawn to a community with an active cultural and voluntary sector. Nonprofit rural development organizations can play increasing roles in rural areas as a tool to assist business and governments by submitting bids and hosting rural events.

The rural social capital represented by voluntary agencies is a critical component in enhancing the success of all rural development initiatives. Voluntary associations provide skills training, are places for entrepreneurial ideas to germinate, and enhance social cohesion and population growth by creating recreation for youth and immigrants.

3.3 Rural Governance

Fundamental changes to existing rural governance structures (or the development of rural governance structures where few exist) is the pathway to potential economic benefits described earlier. Rural governance is, as Apedaile (2004) describes, “the sum of the institutions, traditions and processes that determine the specific regulation of power and decision-making by which authority over rural outcomes is exercised.” However, the business, economic and political transformations discussed in this report suggest that this traditional amalgamation no longer meets the development needs of rural communities. The rural voice with respect to rural outcomes has atrophied, and as a consequence new private sector, government and the volunteer sector relationships and institutions are required if rural communities are to have adequate public policy leverage.

Simply put, as the situation now stands, rural communities and leaders lack sufficient power to shape developmental outcomes. Admittedly, there has been an active dialogue with the provincial and federal governments over the last two decades, but this dialogue has not been effective in addressing the decline of rural regions. Being heard is not the same as having real influence. The priorities of rural communities are diminishing in importance as the relative weight and influence of rural communities in the political process are being overshadowed by the growing influence of urban centres. As these centres expand they not only encroach on the physical space of rural communities; they also take up larger and larger portions of our collective attention. As urban regions grow, they come to play a larger and larger role in rural governance, often

Rural community strengthening strategies include:

- encouraging higher educational opportunities and promoting a learning culture
- linking youth education with emerging local employment opportunities
- maintaining and creating new recreational opportunities for youth and young adults
- increasing regional attractiveness to immigrants
- developing higher levels of rural social entrepreneurship

to the detriment of rural interests (Apedaile 2004). If rural development is to be a public policy priority, then this trend is exactly backwards; rural voices need a means to have a larger say in urban governance.

The solution, however, is not to be found by increasing rural representation in conventional forums such as provincial and federal legislatures, for indeed rural communities are already over-represented in those forums. If rural communities are to be empowered with legitimate bargaining authority for negotiations with urban centres, and with the provincial and federal governments, more innovative ideas are needed. While provincial associations of municipal districts and counties can fill some of this hole, there is also a need for new regional planning authorities that reach beyond individual communities, and within which an effective rural voice can be embedded.

At the same time, and perhaps of even greater difficulty, ways have to be found to ensure that rural perspectives are heard when it comes to policy issues that reach well beyond rural communities themselves. For example, federal and provincial policies relating to immigration, trade, environmental protection and water management will all have an impact on rural development.

Reimer and Apedaile (2003) offer a description of the role that a new governance paradigm would play in freeing rural communities to compete economically. Their vision includes:

- a reorganization of market relationships in order to recover environmental costs, build trade competence and to provide supports the informal economy;
- a reorganization of bureaucratic structures to extend the current “rural lens” to urban policies and regulations, and to set standards for environmental security;
- creation and empowerment of NGO associations around strategic rural-urban issues of watersheds, hinterland, food, and recreation; and
- the development of a rural-urban research agenda for mutual gain.

Admittedly, change in these respects is exceedingly difficult. However, unless ways can be found to enhance the rural voice within both regional planning and the broader policy process, it will be very difficult for development initiatives that have a proportionate rural advantage to gain sufficient traction. The

larger processes within which such initiatives are embedded are critically important determinants of their success or failure.

4.0 The role of governments in rural development

The current federal and provincial approaches to rural development might best be described as a facilitative or empowerment approach. Based on the principle that for rural development to take hold, it must be locally appropriate, many government programs are targeted to develop the “know how” to build local capacity with the assistance of government. This shift toward community-driven development is part of a larger international trend. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) describes this concept as simply meaning “that development activities need to be stimulated, organized and supported at a territorial level which is meaningful for people in terms of their culture and identity, networks participations and production and consumption activities” (Van Depoele 2003).

What is proposed throughout this report is a more aggressive approach to rural governance—one where government actions assist in changing the institutions, legislation and common property rights structures in ways that better empower rural communities with the capacity to control their economic destiny. In this way, we too suggest community-based rural self-determinism, yet after the mechanisms of competitiveness are created.

As was mentioned earlier, government action that encourages regional industry relocation to rural areas can be a successful development strategy. Incentives that make it less desirable to move rural business out of rural areas, or real business incentives to relocate to rural areas can help catalyze rural renewal. For some areas a single plant with 200 jobs would be sufficient to revitalize a town. Part of the growth potential of the rural areas is hinged on the ability to create secondary business activity to support industry. In some cases the primary anchor industries may require incentives and encouragement on behalf of governments to consider the strengths of rural relocation options.

Governments can also offer programs that encourage rural communities to take actions in their own best interest. Rural areas may need assistance from governments in hedging the

risks associated with some growth strategies. For example, bonus incentives can be offered for those communities that partner up with other regional communities to solve mutual concerns, as opposed to the competitive funding models that set communities against each other.

As a means of assisting communities to achieve prosperity, governments may be called upon to provide technical support and community audits to rural areas where needed. In situations where rural communities lack the technical expertise necessary to identify or gather information on a potential strength, such as in the evaluation of the carbon sequestering capacity of rural lands, governments need to lend their expertise to rural communities. Technical support may also come in the form of publishing guides or other resources that can help communities conduct audits of local opportunities or attempt local development projects.

Finally, there are a number of issues in which government actions could mitigate the harm to rural regions and increase rural competitiveness. These include: negotiating conclusions to long suffering western rural problems by resolving trade disputes (e.g., softwood lumber); taking actions to protect export markets (e.g., the beef industry); adopting rurally-beneficial solutions to environmental protocols; rural exceptions to gun control, redistributing of fiscal powers to local levels to improve rural public finance. These broader good governance actions on behalf of governments are needed to create rural opportunity for growth.

Government regulatory agencies (e.g., utilities, environmental) can also be in conflict with local rural interests. Given the appropriate mandate to do so, regulatory bodies could enhance rural competitiveness by altering regulatory and licensing criteria to provide preferential rural treatment. The simplification and rationalization of many of these regulatory frameworks would also act to release rural productivity.

Conclusion

The death of rural western Canada is not inevitable. As the preceding pages suggest, a comprehensive prescription exists to breathe life back into the rural West. While the region has struggled for the last few decades to adapt to the changed economic environment, this disengagement is not a terminal prognosis. Given the appropriate tools, rural western

Canadians have the basic potential to create the small and medium scale rural enterprises needed to bring economic activity to the region. Rural areas also possess underutilized natural and environmental advantages that offer the potential to fuel new markets and new products. Combined with the civil and social strengths of rural western Canada's voluntary sector, there are reasons to remain optimistic that at least some rural areas will prosper in the future.

Yet clearly a mix of optimism, unexplored potential and good ideas is not enough. Rural development efforts have lagged for decades in spite of the availability of most of these same factors. The negative impact on rural areas in response to the rise of global information-based economies may have been inevitable, but the slow rate of recovery and the inability to adapt to these changes is a reflection of ineffective rural governance. Rural governance structures, be they private, civil or government, are currently not working well enough to affect change. The catalyst for rural development must come from forthright actions.

So what are the odds of hastening the path to rural development? What is the likelihood that the public and governments will recognize the need for a comprehensive and wholly new approach to rural areas, and then find ways to implement such a change? There are few signs that this is anything but a long-shot. These odds lengthen as public and political momentum continues to line up behind emerging and seemingly pressing urban agendas. The odds get longer still as a sense of futility accompanies depictions of rural areas that are inevitably within death's grasp. Overcoming the lack of public urgency around the importance of rural re-growth is the first step toward re-engaging rural areas in economic growth. ■

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IDEAS CHANGE THE WORLD



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