A RURAL PERSPECTIVE ON LINKAGES AMONG COMMUNITIES

Bill Reimer
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Concordia University

Prepared for

Building, Connecting and Sharing Knowledge: A Dialogue on Linkages Between Communities

March 3, 2005

Canada

Bill Reimer

Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology
Concordia University
1455 boul. de Maisonneuve O
Montréal QC H3G 1M8

(514) 848-2424 ext. 2171
Fax: (450) 689-5435
REIMER@VAX2.CONCORDIA.CA

http://www.crrf.ca
http://nre.concordia.ca/
http://reimer.concordia.ca

February 16, 2005

A Rural Perspective on Linkages Among Communities[1]

Introduction

Rural and Urban Canada are interdependent. Rural places provide the timber, food, minerals, and energy that serve as bases for urban growth. They also process urban pollution, refresh and restore urban populations, and embody a major part of the heritage upon which much of our Canadian identity rests. In return, urban Canada provides markets for rural goods, much of its technology, financial capital, and media-based culture. To understand intercommunity linkages, therefore, we must start with a framework that is not only sensitive to this basic interdependence, but builds on it.

The framework must also be sensitive to the multiple natures of those linkages and the many levels at which they occur. The community of Springhill, NS is not only linked to other communities through the jobs, commerce, people, and services they exchange, but also through the school boards, police services, volunteer groups, and family relationships they share, the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the identities they espouse. At the same time, it is linked to Amherst, Halifax, Toronto, New York, and Europe in a network of commercial and social relations that challenge our current frameworks in myriad ways.

My approach to the challenge is by way of 18 years of research on rural and small town Canada within the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF). This research has confirmed our central vision of rural and urban interdependence and led us to argue that rural communities must look to urban demand and urban alliances as a key part of their strategic plans. Thus, we are particularly interested in the linkages that bind people and communities, the changes in those linkages, and the opportunities they create for rural revitalization. We are also convinced that rural revitalization is a necessary condition for a strong and vital Canada. Rural places must reorganize to compete in the new economy, much as was done at the beginning of the last Century. This time the focus should be on social and knowledge-related infrastructures.

Understanding Linkages

We take a broad view of community linkages. They may occur through:

- the flows of resources, services, organizations, people, and information among them;
- the functional integration and complementarities of their activities;
- the formal and informal institutions they share;

- the environments they share; and
- their common and complementary perceptions, values, identities, and ideologies.

These distinctions are not meant to be exhaustive, but to distinguish different mechanisms through which linkages may occur. Since the processes driving them are different, we can also expect that policies and programs addressing them would have to vary.[2]

Exchange and Trade Linkages

Context

Community linkages are most frequently investigated in terms of the movement of *goods*, *services*, *people*, and *information* among geographical locations as an indication of their interdependence. These flows are dynamic and parts of systems that operate well beyond any specific community – systems that are national or global in nature. Global systems of trade in food, for example, condition community relations at both the national and regional levels.

The extraction and trade of our natural resources has been a basic element of the Canadian economy. Even in 2003, more than 80% of our trade surplus was contributed by primary products from rural areas. The way in which it is organized has changed dramatically over the last 75 years, however. Markets and technology have shed labour in all our natural resource industries – depopulating our rural communities and contributing to the urbanization that has become a key component of the Canadian social structure. During this period, our primary industries underwent considerable concentration and integration. Government policies explicitly encouraged these trends by supporting programs and strategies that provided basic commodities to the world. It was a highly successful strategy from the point of view of our balance of trade, but one that had severe consequences (often negative) for the many small towns and villages dependent on those primary industries.

Impacts

Not only did rural places lose their population as a result of declining labour demands, but they became more isolated from the production and distribution chains and relegated to a smaller role in the policies and programs of provincial and federal governments. Both private and public sector institutions reorganized with less presence in small towns and a diminished awareness of, or concern for, their special conditions. The divide between rural and urban political representation that we see today highlights the continuing impact of these changes.

Trade and exchange relations between rural and urban places have followed these general trends. Primary sector *goods* often flow from the farms, forests, and oceans directly to central processing locations, bypassing the smaller towns as they move in bulk form to national or international destinations. Processing, packaging, and marketing chains take a larger portion of the profits, leaving a smaller share for those in the communities of origin. One consequence is that rural producers must pay attention to a greater range of more volatile markets far from their local areas for both inputs and products. Under these conditions, urban and international markets, decisions, values, and perspectives become more important to economic success than local activities and

---

[2] In this paper, my primary focus will be on the relationships between rural and urban settlements. However, most of the arguments apply as well to relations within these two types.

organizations. It also means that global trade has veiled the link among rural and urban places, reinforcing the perception that the degree of interdependence is less than it really is and concealing areas of common interest.

Trade in *services* has followed a similar path to trade in resources. In Canada, both private and public services have become centralized and concentrated in urban areas. The replacement of local financial, commercial, and government services with franchise outlets or 'big box' stores has shifted many of the interactions to a regional basis, requiring rural residents to travel further to get consumer goods, education, health services, or recreation. Both risks and transaction costs are transferred to smaller places in the process. This has placed considerable stress on local services and created a plethora of institutional structures that may bear only a slight relationship to the 'community' with which rural people identify.

As local services become regionalized, rural *people* must travel greater distances. Under these conditions, commuting and shopping flows transform the social relations, available time, and opportunities of rural people and organizations – typically leaving less time and energy for local relations. Similarly, urban to rural travel for jobs, recreation, or services creates pressures on old social structures even as they open new opportunities. Our current governance structures are frequently unable to respond appropriately to these new conditions.

In addition to goods, services, and people, the exchange of *information* among rural and urban places has increased significantly. The Canadian government has given high priority to the infrastructure that permits telecommunications to all regions of the country – including the allocation of significant financial resources to broadband services and satellite communications in rural areas. This has created opportunities for economic and social linkages that have been eagerly developed particularly by youth and some entrepreneurs. A rural-urban digital divide remains, however, both with respect to infrastructure and ability. This means that any program using the internet as a sole method of delivery is particularly exclusive of rural people.

Most cultural production takes place in urban centres. This often results in the representations of rural issues and life being stereotypical and inaccurate: on the one hand idealized and on the other, crisis-focused. It also makes it difficult for rural people to gain access to media for local interest purposes and reduces their ability to learn about new forms of communication that may facilitate such objectives**.**

New Functions for Rural Places

Context
As conditions change in rural and urban areas, the relative importance of their traditional functions is altered as well. These shifts change the nature of the relationships among rural and urban places and, by extension, the challenges and opportunities they face.

In Canada, for example, the functions of rural places as sources of urban food, water, and recreational opportunities have grown to the point where they conflict in some important ways with their functions for commodity extraction and production. The Kyoto Accord discussions, in addition, have increased the value of rural areas for carbon sequestration and pollution sinks.

Both the bio and socio-diversity traditionally provided by rural areas have also been challenged. Standardization of production, large-scale forest management, and efficient methods of resource extraction have reduced the diversity of biological species. Mass production of commercial products and culture has also threatened the social and cultural diversity among smaller places. The recent urban demand for more specialized products may create opportunities for niche markets, however, justifying a policy shift to support smaller rather than larger enterprises.

At the same time, the importance of rural areas as habitats, reserves, and escapes from urban stresses appear to be increasing. Locations nearby major urban centres attract commuters, those near natural amenities attract retirees and vacationers, and more distant places provide relative isolation for those dissatisfied with urban lifestyles.

Impacts

If we examine how these various functions are represented, negotiated, and addressed we find it is seldom done with rural and urban interests clearly represented. In Canada, for example, the task has usually been left to economic players with a primary focus on commodity production and trade. From the very beginning, Canadian governments have been major players in these mercantile considerations, often deferring their service and governance obligations in pursuit of expanding international commodity trade. In the process, the key negotiators have represented commodity sectors, economic corporations, and regional governments rather than rural or municipal interests. This has worked against our ability to respond to the multifunctional nature of the rural economy, create governance structures that are more appropriate for these functions, and investigate rural-urban co-investment opportunities.

Institutional Interrelations

Context

Institutions structure relationships, bring certain people together, and keep others apart. They also direct many of the conditions under which those relations should operate, with regulations and sanctions to increase the chances that it will happen. As a result, they become key components of the interrelationships among communities, both rural and urban.

Before World War II, rural communities relied heavily on local organizations for governance and social support. Churches, professional organizations, co-operatives, and ethnic-based groups provided the institutional manifestations of the social capital that supported their economic and social lives. After WWII, however, provincial and federal governments took over many of these functions – first in education and justice, then in health and welfare. In doing so they provided employment opportunities for primary sector workers who were victims of the shrinking demand for labour in the face of mechanization.

By the 1980s, the situation had changed considerably. Governments were cutting back on most of their services under fiscal and political pressures. In many rural areas, this meant job losses and greater distances to schools, hospitals, and other support services as the institutions were rationalized on the basis of efficiency and population criteria. The costs of getting access to these services were passed to rural people and the procedures for doing so required a level of

bureaucratic sophistication that was foreign and intimidating to those rural people who were accustomed to more informal relations.

These changes reflected the increasing importance of market and bureaucratic-based relations over those of an associative and communal-reciprocal nature. This fragmented and de-valued the traditional rural strengths in voluntary associations, families, and local networks and placed rural people at a disadvantage in negotiations with urban-based institutions.

Impacts
We are now in a situation where fewer people are called upon to provide more services, often with less available time. This is exacerbated by the increased participation of women in the labour force, high levels of youth out-migration, and the aging of the population through natural processes. The social infrastructure that served as the basis for community resilience is now severely stressed. We know, for example, that aging at home is better for an individual's health and cheaper for the health system – but to make it work, investments are needed for both physical and social infrastructure. This includes informal support networks, respite care, transportation, and day care options that are appropriate for low-density regions.

Unlike its physical counterpart, *social infrastructure* takes much longer to rebuild once it has gone – and its impacts are more extensive. Social infrastructure provides the means by which we identify opportunities, reduce risks, pass information, and act collectively: all critical elements for both economic and social goals. At the same time, it provides a critical basis for personal identity and welfare. Aboriginal communities with self-government, control over education, police services, health services, cultural facilities, and land claims all show lower rates of suicide over those without, for example.

Social institutions link communities. On the one hand, they bring rural and urban people together. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, for example, has the resources and mandate to bring together agricultural producers, processors, transporters, marketers, and traders from both rural and urban contexts to deal with challenges relating to agricultural production and trade.

On the other hand, in both policy and practice, these same institutions may work against the identification and sharing of common interests among rural and urban people. By focusing on agriculture production and marketing alone, agricultural departments tend to exclude many other actors who are significantly implicated in such production. Municipalities, consumers, social workers, NGOs, foresters, and construction trades are just some of the many types of people who have an interest in the identification and enactment of agricultural-related policies and programs. In addition, such institutions may exclude important concerns that cut across multiple sectors and groups, making it difficult for alliances to occur and undermining those that may have already been established. By organizing for agriculture alone, the institution may remain insensitive to the food, pollution, environmental, and health-related interests that could serve as a useful basis for rural-urban alliances.

In many of the institutions where rural and urban interests are joined, the predominance of urban participants has meant that rural conditions are weakly represented. Health policy, for example, is largely organized to take advantage of medical specializations that can emerge in large

agglomerations. As a result, the training, financing, and evaluation of medical personnel favours specialized fields. In smaller centres or regions, the populations and infrastructure cannot support multiple specializations, however, leaving them without a pool of medical personnel who can manage the multiple demands of general practice. Similar effects occur in education, social services, business development, and financing. The uncritical application of a population criteria for service provision makes sense in a context of high density where costs are low for transportation, but it will usually put smaller, more remote places at a disadvantage, undermining their institutional completeness, social cohesion, and capacity.

The division of government powers in Canada places few powers in the hands of municipalities. Even though each province has independent responsibility for organizing municipalities, their allocation of powers tends to be limited to property taxation and services. In many provinces, municipalities are forbidden to borrow money for local development projects. As a consequence, most municipalities are unable to respond quickly and effectively to local opportunities or crises. It also means that they typically have difficulty building social capital to enhance such responses.

We must reorganize our governance institutions to meet these new conditions. This means including the private and civic sectors, respecting the principle of subsidiarity, and empowering local and regional groups to participate as equal partners. Regional corporations, community forests, economic development co-ops, Community Futures-type programs and watershed committees provide examples where joint rural and urban investments are possible.

Sharing the Environment

Context
With our increasing awareness of the environment, we have come to recognize how communities are linked through our shared natural resources. Water, air, natural resources, and life forms are all drawn upon and affected by people and communities, creating interdependencies that are vast in their impacts and implications. Urban sprawl and the subsequent loss of agricultural land, resistance to rural industry by urban visitors, and campaigns for environmental preservation are current examples where these interdependencies become visible in a dramatic way.

Most of the mechanisms by which the environment links communities have been treated as externalities by traditional economic models – often to the detriment of both our understanding and the environment itself. A new framework for linkages must, therefore, include the environment as a key component with strong recognition for the multiple functions it serves.

As this recognition grows, we trust it will be integrated into our relations with rural producers and citizens. If so, it promises to open up numerous opportunities for rural revitalization as many currently invisible goods and services become acknowledged. Clean water, carbon sequestration, pollution processing, bio-diversity, recreation opportunities, personal rejuvenation, and preservation of natural amenities are all contributions of rural places that remain largely uncounted in our current economic and social assessments.

Impacts

Many of these environmental issues can serve as strategic foci for building inter-community alliances and economic opportunities especially among rural and urban people. Models for how this might take place can be found in numerous locations. Camrose county maintains a regional landfill for surrounding communities on a fee basis, Ducks Unlimited pays farmers for preserving wetlands, New York City has a contractual relation with those in the Catskills Mountains for the protection of water supplies, and Japan levies a surtax on water that goes strictly for rural development purposes. As the Kyoto-initiated protocols are developed, we may use carbon-credits for a similar purpose. Revisions of Crown land policy could help direct benefits to the places that are sharing that asset with the industrial economy. By developing innovations of this type, we not only respond more appropriately to these interdependencies, but create opportunities for new linkages and economic development.

Rural and Urban Perceptions and Values

Context
Rural and urban people have perceptions, values, and identities that can integrate or divide them. In Canada, this is most clearly seen in linguistic, ethnic, or regional identities, but it is also reflected in the current debates regarding communities. If smaller communities are perceived as the remnants of inevitable urbanization, they are likely to be overlooked in the quest for global competitiveness. If they are seen as actual or potential partners in that quest, their revitalization would be a priority. If they are also seen as key elements in the social and environmental health of the country, this revitalization would be even more important.

Impacts
The dominance of commodity trade, urbanization, and institutional centralization have tended to make rural diversity and contributions invisible. Canadians are generally not familiar with the complex (and international) web through which they are fed, clothed, and housed – including the role of rural Canada in this web. Nor are they aware of the diversity of conditions that rural communities face. The results are health, education, and economic programs that are unsuitable for local conditions, social friction based on inappropriate expectations, and the loss of important elements of our cultural heritage.

Toward an Analytical Framework

Even this brief survey makes clear that the issue of community linkages is vast, complex, under-researched, but very important. There are, however, some important guidelines that can be used when developing an analytical and strategic framework.

1. The framework must recognize that communities are inter-related through *multiple, complex links* – not just through a few dominant centres.
2. It should be sensitive to the *diverse nature of community linkages*. We have identified five dimensions to consider, and there are likely to be many more.
3. Our research affirms that *distance and density still matter*, but both high and low density carry their own advantages and disadvantages.
4. The first three points imply that any decisions must be made with a consideration of the different ways the issues may be understood and the multiple impacts they may have. This

means we need to establish ***appropriate forums*** for the consideration of key decisions where inputs from all stakeholders are included.

5. The fact that community linkages are simultaneously relations of power, obliges ***attention to the less powerful***. Those who are likely to be adversely affected by changes in those linkages should be welcomed to the table – and supported to get there, if necessary.

6. We must build the ***social infrastructure*** in smaller communities – both formal and informal. Our research has shown that informal networks and organizations provide critical links to formal organizations, and information, flexibility, and resilience to all forms of communities. Strong and diverse social capital can offset the challenges of distance – but it cannot do so without resources and nurturing. Recent attention to the social economy is encouraging in this regard, but it must include small organizations as well as large. Capacity must be built in all forms of social relations: market, bureaucratic, associative, and communal.

7. We must explore and experiment with ***new forms of governance relations*** to better respond to changes in community linkages. Moving decisions and support resources to the lowest possible level (subsidiarity) is one example. As our research shows, many small rural communities are weak with respect to market and bureaucratic relations, but strong with respect to associative or communal/reciprocal ones. Trying new ways to build on these strengths for representation and accountability would not only make our programs more responsive to local conditions, but would simultaneously help to increase the variety of capacities that create resilient and innovative communities. Successes with Aboriginal peoples in establishing new governance relations should provide both inspiration and potential models for how this might be done.

8. It is clear that the future means greater, not less interdependence – among people, communities, and the environment. We are therefore assured that ***research*** to better understand the nature and implications of interdependence will be a wise investment. This should be done using the traditional approaches and indicators of social science research as well as those better suited to the analysis of more intangible factors of interdependence and complexity. It should also be done with the recognition that interdependence is not always desirable.

9. We need a framework that ***does not marginalize rural and remote locations***, but recognizes their actual and potential contributions to Canadian society. Such a framework would include linkages that go beyond trade and exchange to highlight the new functions, institutional and governance innovations, sustainable environmental management, and the importance of local identities for social cohesion and community health. It would also direct our attention to the elements of our rural social infrastructure that can make it happen.

Selected References

Aldrich, L., C. Beale, and K. Kassel. 1997. "Commuting and the Economic Functions of Small Towns and Places." *Rural Economic Development Perspectives.* 12(3), 26-31.

Bollman, Ray D. and John M. Bryden (1997) *Rural Employment: An International Perspective*. Brandon: CRRF-CAB.

Browder, John O. (2002) The urban-rural interface: Urbanization and tropical forest cover change. *Urban Ecosystems* 6:21-411.

Chandler, Michael J., Christopher E. Lalonde, Bryan W. Sokol, and Darcy Hallett (2002) *Personal Persistence, Identity Development and Suicide*. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, Serial No. 273, Vol 68, No. 2.

Esposti, Roberto, Frans E. Godeschalk, Tuomas Kuhmonen, Jaap H. Post, Franco Sotte, Ida J. Terluin (1999) *Employment growth in rural regions of the EU*, The Hague: Agricultural Economics Research Institute.

Flora, Cornelia Butler and Jan L. Flora (2004) *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change* (2nd ed.), Boulder: Westview.

Halseth, Greg and Regine Halseth, eds (2004) *Building for Success: Exploration of Rural Community and Rural Development*, Brandon: Rural Development Institute.

Hawkes, David C. (2001) Indigenous peoples: self-government and intergovernmental relations. *International Social Science Journal* **53** (167), 153-161.

Hofman, Nancy (2001) Urban consumption of agricultural land. *Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin* 3(2) Sept. Statistics Canada 21-006-XIE.

Lester M. Salamon, ed. (2002) *The Tools of Government: A Guide to the New Governance*. NY: Oxford University Press.

Munnich, Lee W., Greg Schrock, and Karen Cook (2002) *Rural Knowledge Clusters: The Challenge of Rural Economic Prosperity*. State and Local Policy Program. University of Minnesota and the U.S. Department of Commerce.
(http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/slp/projects/rkcweb/walzerbk.pdf)

Polèse, Mario and Richard Shearmur (2002) *The Periphery in the Knowledge Economy*, Montréal: INRS-Université du Québec.

Reimer, Bill (2004) Social Exclusion in a Comparative Context. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 44(1) 76-94.

Smithers, John, Paul Johnson, Alun Joseph, (2004) *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe canadien* 48(2) Pp. 209-224 June.

Stabler, Jack C. and M. Rose Olfert (2002) *Saskatchewan's Communities in the 21ˢᵗ Century: from places to regions*. Regina: Plains Research Centre.

Tacoli, Cecilia (1998) *Bridging the Divide: Rural-Urban Interactions and Livelihood Strategies. International Institute for Environment and Development*. Gatekeeper Series No. 77. (www.iied.org/docs/gatekeep/Gk77.pdf)

Tiepoh, M. Geepu Nah and Bill Reimer (2004) Social capital, information flows, and income creation in rural Canada. *Journal of Socio-Economics* 33: 427-448.

Wallace, Iain, A (2002) *Geography of the Canadian Economy*, Don Mills: Oxford.

Weber, B. (1995) Extractive Industries and Rural-Urban Economic Interdependence. Pp. 155–79 in *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places*, edited by E.N. Castle. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Research Directions

1. Data at the community level is sparse – especially with respect to small settlements. In addition, the information available tends to be limited to economic and demographic characteristics, with little information on institutions, informal organizations, governance structures and processes, and social relations. Our NRE research has demonstrated how these contextual characteristics condition the impacts of general policies and programs, yet we are unable to fully explore these processes because of lack of data – especially of a longitudinal nature. Therefore, we suggest that significant resources be devoted to designing, collecting, and distributing information at the level of communities and regions that is longitudinal, comparative, and systematic. This type of data could be used to answer questions such as the following:

   - How are the economies of settlements linked through trade and exchanges?
   - How are the social networks organized for market, bureaucratic, associative, and communal/reciprocal relations – within and between settlements?
   - What are the consequences for community, regional, and national objectives of these different types of linkages?
   - How are these linkages affected by different types of governance arrangements? This question should be addressed by comparing levels at which those relationships occur, the extent to which various sectors are involved (Private, Public, Civic), and the contexts under which they occur (adjacency to metropolitan centres, integration into the global economy, etc.).

2. Closely associated with the collection of information at the level of settlements is the development of indicators that are appropriate for identifying and analyzing linkages. For a start, indicators related to the five aspects of linkages could be developed:

   - Trade and exchange linkages involving: goods, services, people, and information.
   - Indicators related to the functions binding rural and urban places: commodity extraction and exchange, pollution management, amenity provision, heritage preservation, bio-diversity, etc.
   - Indicators of key institutional structures and processes – both formal and informal.
   - Indicators of environmental conditions and interdependencies – natural and human.
   - Indicators of values, perceptions and their related outcomes (social cohesion, social capital, social exclusion and inclusion).

3. Rural and urban settlements are linked through a wide variety of social infrastructure – both formal and informal. Research is necessary to identify and understand how this infrastructure is organized, how it is changing, and what opportunities it provides for beneficial collaboration and co-investment between rural and urban people. This will require the collection of information regarding the many institutional structures that cut across rural and urban places, the social capitals represented, and the social networks they reflect – both formal and informal. Such information would allow us to answer questions such as the following:

- What institutions bring rural and urban people together and which institutions keep them apart?
- How do existing government policy and institutional frameworks support such collaboration and where do they inhibit it?
- What institutional arrangements facilitate economic and social sustainability of all forms of communities?
- What are the effective tools of governance for communities and their interaction?
- How do informal and formal networks and organizations facilitate or inhibit one another in the achievement of local, regional, and national objectives?
- What forms of accountability and representation are consistent with strong 3rd sector involvement in governance?
- Where are the gaps in social infrastructure? How do they marginalize certain communities over others? What are the most effective means for building social infrastructure?
- What types of institutional linkages are most effective for governing issues such as food, water, environmental sustainability, and amenities management?
- What types of institutional arrangements are most effective for sharing economic, social, and political risks among communities?
- How do formal and informal institutions reinforce or inhibit one another for the achievement of valued outcomes?

4. The values, perceptions, and identities of rural and urban people are critical to the identification and emergence of alliances and co-investment. Research on them is necessary to answer the following types of questions.

- Where do the values, perceptions, and identities of Canadians converge or diverge with respect to issues such as food, water, environment, amenities, and the natural environment?
- What are the community-related identities of Canadians and how do they affect social cohesion?
- In what ways do current perceptions and identities support innovations in inter-community relations?