



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF RURAL DIALOGUE ACTIVITIES

March 2002 to March 2006

Prepared by:

Regional Coordination and Rural Dialogue Division
Rural Secretariat
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

Publication # 10186E
© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, 2006

Canada

This report is available on the following Web site:
www.rural.gc.ca/dialogue/reports_e.phtml. For
further information on the Rural Dialogue, please call
1-888-781-2222 (toll-free number).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Objectives.....	1
1.3 Limitations of the Summary	2
2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	3
2.1 Economic Issues.....	3
2.2 Social Issues.....	5
2.3 Environmental Issues	7
2.4 Approaches to Rural Development.....	7
3. KEY TRENDS	8
4. CONCLUSION	9

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF RURAL DIALOGUE ACTIVITIES

March 2002 to March 2006

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Launched in 1998, the Rural Dialogue (RD) – an ongoing, two-way discussion between the Government of Canada (GoC) and Canadians from rural, remote and northern regions¹ – is a key citizen-engagement component of the Canadian Rural Partnership (CRP). The CRP is designed to support a horizontal approach to rural development within the GoC that responds to the priorities of rural communities.

The RD uses mechanisms such as workshops, roundtables, town hall meetings, conferences and surveys to provide a means for rural citizens and stakeholders to discuss issues directly with the federal government. This process helps the GoC to better understand local and regional priorities, and provides rural citizens with an opportunity to influence government policies, programs and services that affect them. The RD reinforces a citizen-centered approach to rural development.

This summary is based on a review of 34 reports of RD activities that took place between March 2002 and March 2006 and involved over 2,000 participants. RD findings are organized around four central thematic areas: *economic issues*, *social issues*, *environmental issues* and *approaches to rural development*. A later section focuses on trends and examines the evolution of rural priorities and issues covered over this four-year period.

1.2 Objectives

The main objectives of this summary are as follows:

1. Provide a concise and accessible account of RD findings as expressed by rural Canadians during RD activities, and identify the key ideas, actions and solutions suggested by rural Canadians.
2. Identify emerging trends and issues reported by rural citizens during RD activities.

¹ Any subsequent reference to “rural”, be it related to regions, communities or citizens, also include “remote and northern.”

In meeting these objectives, this summary will:

- provide federal, provincial and territorial partners with a concise overview of the key issues of importance to Canadians living in rural communities as reported during RD activities;
- provide a reference tool for the Rural Secretariat; and
- serve as baseline information and provide subjects for discussion for both policy and research networks.

1.3 Limitations of the Summary

When considering this summary, there are two underlying limitations which should be kept in mind:

- The topics, issues and recommendations presented in this summary are limited to those raised by RD participants and, as a result, may not address all issues that could be of importance to rural Canadians.
- RD activities were often organized differently. Some were structured, focussing on specific themes and issues, while others involved more open, free-ranging discussions. While participants were always encouraged to express themselves freely, the varying structure of RD activities has affected the scope and outcomes of the discussions.

DISCLAIMER

Recommendations, made by RD participants during free-ranging discussions, which fall outside federal jurisdiction are included in this summary. Views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Government of Canada.

2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This section summarizes the major findings of 34 RD activities that were held between March 2002 and March 2006. For practical reasons, findings are sorted into one of four thematic areas depending on whether they are primarily of an economic, social or environmental nature, or whether they relate to approaches to rural development. These four specific thematic areas were chosen because they best capture the key issues, challenges and priorities raised by rural Canadians. However, it should be noted that despite this categorization, many of the issues raised are cross-cutting, closely related to one another, and do not fall exclusively under one of the thematic areas. In addition to key themes and issues, each sub-section presents some commonly suggested ideas, actions and solutions to address rural development challenges.

2.1 Economic Issues

The main economic issues raised during RD activities can be captured under the theme “sustainable livelihoods”. This term refers to income-generating activities (such as employment and entrepreneurial activity) combined with other sources of income that provide the foundations for community economic well-being. At the heart of this issue is the fact that rural citizens are finding it increasingly difficult to earn a living in traditional resource-based sectors. In particular, parts of the agricultural, forestry and fisheries sectors have experienced shocks and downturns in recent years.

The negative effects of these downturns are not only being felt by farmers and fishermen, but by entire communities who rely on income from these sectors to propel their economies. In rural Nova Scotia for instance, the fisheries sector brings in more revenue than all other sectors combined. In order to address these challenges, rural citizens recommend that the GoC take the lead in developing viable long-term national visions for both the agricultural and fisheries sectors.

Also in response to declines in traditional sectors, RD participants are increasingly recognizing the importance of economic diversification to the viability of rural Canada's economy. In this context, economic diversification involves not only the development of new businesses and business sectors, but also the creation of new opportunities within traditional sectors. In order to create these new opportunities, rural citizens suggest that those working in traditional resource-based sectors should look to shift towards secondary production and “value-added” products. However, participants feel that producers cannot undertake this type of restructuring without assistance from government. To better support producers, RD participants recommend that the GoC conduct and support research to help identify new opportunities, and assist producers in gaining access to the required financial capital to build the capacity to take advantage of such opportunities.

In terms of fostering the development of new businesses and business sectors, rural citizens also feel that governments have a role to play. RD participants stress that insufficient access to financial capital is the most significant barrier to entrepreneurship and business development in rural communities. Not only do participants feel that there is a lack of access to large financial institutions, but also express concerns regarding the complexity of applying for government funding and the inflexibility of many government programs.

To emphasize this point, a participant mentioned the Action Committee on the Rural Economy (ACRE), which is supported by the Government of Saskatchewan. The Committee identified 1,800 programs in support of entrepreneurship and business development, delivered through seven different agencies at all levels of government. Despite the high number of programs, finding the appropriate program and then accessing it can be a difficult task. Completing the necessary applications and meeting the reporting requirements is often time consuming and costly for a small community-based organization. In addition, the complex approval processes and frequent lengthy delays associated with this can stall community projects and initiatives as well as force organizations to incur additional expenses. Rural citizens identify a clear need to streamline both the process of applying for government programs and the process through which program funds are allocated. They further propose the creation of a single point of contact for the public for all rural related GoC programs.

In order to create a healthier climate for business and entrepreneurship in rural communities, RD participants also recommend that the GoC offer greater tax incentives for entrepreneurs and make more public funding available in the form of equity investment mechanisms and low-interest business start-up loans. Governments should also use their influence to bring more financial institutions and key lenders to rural communities. This is particularly important in First Nation communities which often face further barriers to accessing financial capital.

Another economic issue of vital importance to rural communities relates to deteriorating physical infrastructure. In particular, rural citizens frequently refer to the lack of reliable and affordable public transportation and deteriorating roads as two of the greatest obstacles to community development. Poor transportation infrastructure not only reduces citizens' mobility, but also creates additional barriers and costs for rural businesses and entrepreneurs.

Access to technological or knowledge-based infrastructure (telecommunication technology and broadband Internet service) is another priority. Rural citizens recognize that improving access to broadband is critical for rural communities to fully participate in the knowledge-based economy, take advantage of new business opportunities and tap into new markets.

The economic challenges related to poor infrastructure (physical and knowledge-based) are particularly difficult in aboriginal, remote and northern communities where access to infrastructure is further limited. RD participants propose two key strategies for improving access to all types of infrastructure:

- First, governments should review per capita funding formulas that put rural communities at a disadvantage as they typically have small population bases but cover large geographic areas.
- Second, communities should co-locate services and pool resources in order to more efficiently utilize existing or planned infrastructure, and better advocate their funding requirements to governments.

2.2 Social Issues

The majority of social issues raised by rural citizens during RD activities are closely related to the economic issues described above and revolve around the topics of “community capacity building” and “demographic changes”.

As it is commonly perceived that an increasing number of services are being downloaded to the community level, rural citizens feel that they can no longer rely so heavily on outside influences to oversee or nurture their communities’ development. If rural communities are to remain viable, they must develop the capacity to undertake strategic planning, define common goals and identify actions that meet their development challenges. Although technical and financial support is needed from governments, strategic planning should be a bottom-up, community-driven process.

RD participants see an important role for all levels of government in identifying, developing and disseminating tools and data that could be useful to rural communities in their development planning. As communities seek more influence and control over their futures, citizens recognize a need for community leaders and organizations to develop new skill sets and build their capacity to meet a variety of development challenges. Strong local leadership is seen as particularly critical to this process. However, finding and maintaining a solid volunteer base can be a major challenge for rural communities. Furthermore, volunteers frequently lack the necessary skills to become effective community leaders and often do not have access to the education or training needed to upgrade their skill sets.

Citizens also see great potential for all levels of government to intervene in this area by providing additional funding for various types of leadership and skill development training in rural communities. Even small amounts of funding can provide significant incentives in the voluntary sector. While rural communities need immediate support in this area, community capacity building is seen as a long-term and incremental process which requires funding, policy and community commitment that works within this long-term environment. Citizens also acknowledge that communities could benefit from being more inclusive in their leadership base by including more women, seniors, immigrants, youth and Aboriginal peoples.

Another factor many rural citizens feel is making it difficult to develop the necessary skill sets to become effective community leaders is the limited access to post-secondary education in many rural areas. The vast majority of universities and colleges are located in urban centers, and very few have satellite campuses in rural areas. While many rural Canadians choose to relocate to urban centers to pursue post-secondary education, the costs associated with this can be too high for some. Although some post-secondary institutions offer distance learning, the limited access to broadband and telecommunications technology in rural areas prevent this from being a viable option at this time. Citizens feel that governments could assist in this area by supporting universities and colleges to improve distance learning programs and by helping to defray the cost of post-secondary education through the creation of additional scholarships and bursaries specifically designed for students from rural communities.

Steadily declining populations are at once a symptom and an underlying cause of many of the economic and social challenges facing rural communities. This problem has a number of negative impacts on rural communities that can lead to serious threats to their viability. Some of the most significant impacts include: labour and skill shortages; business closures; economic inactivity and declines; and a reduced tax base which can threaten a community’s ability to

support key services and infrastructure. Citizens feel that the high levels of young people migrating out of rural areas (often referred to as “youth out-migration”) and the low levels of immigration to rural areas are largely responsible for the declines in population that many rural areas are experiencing.

Among the many challenges facing rural communities, RD participants identify three in particular as being the main causes of youth out-migration: limited post-secondary education opportunities; limited employment and career opportunities; and low levels of youth engagement in community life. Many of the suggestions mentioned above relating to supporting economic diversification and entrepreneurship, facilitating access to education, and building community capacity could begin to address some of these issues.

In addition, citizens propose a number of specific strategies to improve young people’s career prospects in rural communities, including: communities and governments working together to create locally applicable vocational training; creating more internships and apprenticeships; organizing more rural job fairs to help connect youth to job markets; and colleges and universities creating co-operative programs that would enable students to spend a semester working in a rural community.

As rural youth report that their voices are often not heard or marginalized, citizens feel that it is important to take measures to more actively involve youth in community decision-making to foster greater feelings of belonging and community attachment. An important step towards this is for communities to develop a more positive attitude towards young people by viewing them as assets and future community leaders. In line with this vision, RD participants suggest that communities should strive to foster greater youth engagement by: reserving seats for youth representatives on municipal councils and ensuring that they are given opportunities to meaningfully participate in the council’s deliberations; creating youth advisory councils; making greater efforts to involve youth in the development of programs and policies to strengthen the arts, culture and recreation; and organizing more local rural youth award ceremonies to recognize young people’s achievements and contributions to rural communities.

While youth out-migration remains a top priority, citizens are increasingly recognizing the importance of attracting more new Canadians to rural areas. Immigration is seen as a potential revitalizing force that can enrich rural Canada’s socio-economic and cultural fabric, and help ensure the long-term viability of rural communities by adding new skills, knowledge and investments. However, before this potential can be achieved, there is much work to be done. The vast majority of immigrants coming to Canada choose to settle in urban centers. In order to attract more new Canadians rural citizens feel that work must be done to create a truly welcoming environment in which immigrants can fully integrate into community life. To this effect, it is recommended that communities should implement multiculturalism awareness and education programs in schools and community centres. Rural citizens would also like the GoC to support communities by developing a comprehensive immigration strategy for rural Canada. This strategy should be accompanied by immigration programs that focus on repopulating rural areas and addressing labour shortages.

2.3 Environmental Issues

Although environmental issues were not widely discussed during RD activities, a number of participants acknowledge that such issues must be taken into consideration and that economic development must always be weighed against environmental costs. Citizens are particularly concerned with the sustainability of resource-based industries as many rural communities depend on these. A key recommendation from rural citizens is that communities evaluate the full value of their natural resources and develop plans to manage them effectively. The GoC can assist in this regard by developing national long-term strategies for the responsible management of resources-based industries.

2.4 Approaches to Rural Development

Outside of the three thematic areas noted above, one of the key recurrent themes participants expressed over the four-year period of RD activities is that rural development does not occur in neatly defined silos. Based on their experiences, the majority of rural citizens believe that the most successful rural development strategies are not sector-based, but rather holistic, involving entire communities and taking into account all aspects of community life. As previously mentioned there is a belief that such strategies should be driven by communities themselves and carried out in partnership with all levels of government.

Citizens also emphasize that all levels of government must do a better job of recognizing that solutions that are effective in an urban context are often poorly suited to a rural context. Thus, if the GoC is to effectively meet the needs of rural Canadians, it must continue to support and develop policies and programs that specifically target rural areas and respond to rural needs and priorities. Some examples of successful rural programs cited by RD participants include the Municipal Rural Infrastructure Fund and the Community Access Program.

In addition to rural-specific policies and programs, RD participants suggest that rural circumstances continue to be taken into account in government policies, programs and services. Finally, the GoC should also continue to provide funding and support to the four regional development agencies and their affiliated arms-length groups such as Community Futures organizations that are locally situated, and thus well positioned to provide tailor-made programs and services to rural citizens and communities.

3. KEY TRENDS

This section presents key trends, tracking the evolution of certain rural priorities, and issues. While issues raised by participants varied from one activity to the next and across different regions, overall only minor changes can be observed over the four-year period covered in this summary.

In other words, from 2002 to 2006 the issues, priorities and concerns of rural Canadians who were consulted during RD activities have remained essentially the same. Having job stability, good pay and access to basic infrastructure and social services are enduring priorities for all rural Canadians. Rural citizens continue to focus on issues such as building community capacity and adapting to demographic changes as these remain major challenges for them and their communities.

Of the changes observed in the issues raised by RD participants from 2002 to 2006, three are particularly noteworthy:

- First, rural citizens are increasingly expressing their concerns in economic terms. Themes such as economic diversification, strategic planning, business attraction and entrepreneurship development are becoming increasingly common, and were particularly prevalent during RD activities that took place in 2005 and 2006.
- A second key trend is that RD participants are raising the issue of immigration with increasing frequency. Although much of the focus remains on reducing levels of youth out-migration, more recent RD reports have presented the issue of immigration in greater detail and include some strategies to encourage a greater number of new Canadians to settle in rural communities.
- The third trend relates to the environment. As noted, environmental issues are also receiving more and more attention during RD activities. Although still not a top priority, rural citizens are increasingly concerned with the sustainability of resource-based industries and the environmental cost that can be associated with economic development.

4. CONCLUSION

Over four years of RD activities, rural citizens have raised a wide variety of issues spanning the economic, social and environmental sectors. Some key challenges include: revitalizing resources-based industries; strengthening economic diversification; addressing infrastructure challenges; building community capacity; improving access to education; and adapting to the effects of demographic changes.

In order to effectively support communities in addressing these challenges, rural citizens recommend that the GoC adopt a holistic, collaborative, participatory and community-driven approach to rural development.

For a more in-depth look at the issues raised by RD participants, RD reports can be found on the rural Web site:

http://www.rural.gc.ca/dialogue/reports_e.phtml

For basic socio-economic information and analysis on structure and trends in rural Canada, editions of *The Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin* – an occasional joint publication by Statistics Canada and the Rural Secretariat on behalf of the Canadian Rural Partnership – can be found on the Statistics Canada Web site:

<http://www.statcan.ca:8096/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=21-006-X&CHROPG=1>