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Rural Development Policy in the United States: Beyond the Cargo Cult Mentality¹

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Abstract. A host of economic, institutional, and political forces have thwarted the development of an appropriate comprehensive federal rural development policy in the U. S. This article examines those influences from an historical perspective. Some of the changes noted are the emergence of rural development leadership in agencies other than the U. S. Department of Agriculture, the birth of a *new* Congressional Rural Caucus, the formation of a National Rural Network of rural advocacy groups, and the coming realization that the destinies of central cities and rural areas are intertwined. An encouraging sign is the move toward a different type of rural policy governance in Washington, one in which a sensitivity to rural contexts and issues is being articulated in Transportation, Health and Human Services, and other program units that are not expressly rural-oriented. At the same time there continues to be too much emphasis placed on agriculture's role in the rural economy, which leads to policies that cannot help most rural communities.

Eight years ago, an article published in *Economic Development Quarterly* (Honadle 1993) analyzed the likelihood of the United States having a meaningful rural development policy--let alone lucrative programs--in the foreseeable future. The article argued that rural development advo-

¹ I would like to thank the following people for the earlier article and providing me with comments, suggestions, and resource materials for the current one: Kathleen Belanger, Chuck Fluharty, David Freshwater, Tom Johnson, Bob Lovan, George McDowell, Frank McKenna, Rick Reeder, Tom Rowley, Wileen Stommes, Neil Storms, and Robin Weirauch. I would also like to thank Manting Zhang and Dijana Bezjak for their research assistance. Any shortcomings of this piece, however, are my responsibility.

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cates in this country were behaving like *cargo cults*², waiting in vain for the federal government to announce a generous rural development program that will "revitalize" rural America. The focus in that piece was on the prevailing political, economic, and institutional climate, particularly in Washington, DC, and what that context meant for the long-awaited rural development policy.

This paper³ will analyze the current state of Federal rural development policy from an historical perspective. It begins by reviewing the key points in the earlier article, and then moves on to an analysis of the implications of recent changes for appropriate and effective rural development policy in the United States. The conclusion presents an overall assessment of the current policy environment and the prospects for the likely future.

The earlier piece articulated five reasons why we did not have -- and would not likely develop -- a comprehensive national rural development policy. These reasons essentially involved the Federal government's view of rural development. The themes were:

- ***Rural development is disserved by stereotypes.*** The conventional wisdom that the rural economy was primarily farming, and the perpetual myth that rural areas are bucolic, peaceful places without urban problems, was getting in the way of appropriate policies for rural development.
- ***Rural and urban interests are seen as being in conflict.*** Rural and urban interest groups and their elected representatives tended to see development as a competitive zero-sum game in which programs that benefited urban areas detracted from rural development and vice versa.
- ***Rural interests are divided.*** For a variety of reasons, rural interest groups were not able to work together to advocate a cohesive message for rural development policy. The various advocacy groups representing rural interests were too engaged in promoting their particular self-interests to be united. In addition, rural areas demonstrate immense diversity, militating against a unified approach to rural development.
- ***The rural population is declining.*** The relative size of the rural population continued to decrease, while suburbs continued to grow.

² Cargo cults, Melanesian religious sects who attempt to obtain goods of industrialized societies by magic, believe that their ancestors' spirits will return and bring with them cargoes of modern goods and will distribute them to the believers. Believers actually worship the cargo ships that will bring them the goods they desire.

³ This article is based on a paper, "Rural Development Policy in the United States: Rethinking the Cargo Cult Mentality," delivered at Borders and Inequality in Policy History: A National Policy History Conference, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH, June 2, 2000.

At the same time, declining representation in Congress and in state legislatures was making an emphasis on rural development policy less and less likely.

- **Congress is fragmented.** The structure of Congress echoed the splintering of the interest groups. Moreover, different committees had jurisdiction over specific relevant agencies, which made legislative coordination of rural development policy virtually impossible. For example, most of the USDA agencies involved in rural development came under agriculture committees (an exception being the U.S. Forest Service, which is more akin to the Interior Department legislatively). However, the Small Business Administration (an independent agency), the Economic Development Administration (in the Commerce Department), and agencies dealing with rural health, transportation, and so forth were dealt with in legislative committees, dealing with their respective departments or agencies.

The earlier article suggested that USDA was the exception among Federal departments in its sensitivity to rural issues and concerns. Furthermore, it attributed USDA's relative sophistication about rural development issues and needs to its historical roots in rural America. It was hard for most other Federal departments to understand that rural places cannot be lumped broadly into communities with populations under 100,000 or even 50,000.

Additionally, the earlier piece examined the tendency at both the federal and state levels to deal with rural development problems in piecemeal fashion. A common situation was to have disjointed programs dealing with housing, health, or economic development without a plan or strategy for how these disparate efforts support or reinforce each other.

In lieu of a comprehensive rural development policy, each presidential administration over the preceding two decades had promulgated one rural development "initiative" after another that had varying combinations of the following five characteristics.

- **Funding Cuts.** While each national administration announced its rural development initiative with a fair amount of hype, the reality was that the traditional rural development programs were being systematically slashed. In place of the funded programs, the Federal government attempted to show effort and improvements for rural America with the remaining resources.
- **Coordination.** Without additional funding (or even maintaining the base), there had been numerous attempts to "coordinate" existing programs as a substitute for policies or clear directions. The preceding decade was replete with examples of federal rural development

initiatives being based almost entirely on coordinating the various agencies and the programs they managed. The Reagan years' "Rural Enterprise Teams" initiative was one of the best examples of this phenomenon. The Rural Enterprise Team accomplishment was merely to have all the USDA agencies (Extension, REA, SCS, USFS, FmHA) work together at the state level with SBA, EDA, and other federal "partners" working at the state level to implement pilot projects in rural areas within the states. The Office of Rural Development Policy (ORDP) was another short-lived attempt to develop a federal rural development strategy. A relatively new initiative at the time of the earlier paper, "State Rural Development Councils," positioned a coordinator ("executive director") in each participating state to work with governors' offices and federal agencies to cut through some of the red tape and bureaucracy in dealing with a complex federal government.

In the early 1990s, only about 15 states had reasonably active councils.⁴ The President's Council on Rural America produced a report "*Revitalizing Rural America through Collaboration: A Report to the President*" in August 1992⁵. The report (never read by the president) clearly states that establishing the "mechanism" for collaboration will be the most effective way for the federal government to respond to locally determined rural needs.

- **Targeting.** Targeting was a standard term in the lexicon on rural development policy. How could anyone argue against using a "rifle" rather than a "shotgun" to make sure that the benefits of rural development policies hit their target rather than dissipating the resources over a wide area? Nevertheless, the political reality has always worked in precisely the opposite direction. The way to get Congressional support is through spreading the "pork" around as much as possible.
- **Access.** A recurring theme of many of the federal rural development initiatives has been "access," making existing programs more accessible to hard-to-reach audiences. One exemplar was "Access '88" with the purpose to publicize and make rural communities more aware of the Small Business Administration's programs. SBA held meetings around the country and showed off their wares.
- **Less Direct Technical Assistance.** In the late 1970s, there was considerable interest in providing hands-on assistance to communities.

⁴ The size of these bodies varies enormously, with one state having about 150 members on it.

⁵ This report is also referred to as the Rockefeller report, named after the Council's chair, Winthrop P. Rockefeller.

With few exceptions (e.g., EDA's University Center Program), there has been a dramatic decline in such programs in recent years.

The conclusion found no impetus for a major national rural development program. A rather unpretentious proposal concluding the earlier article was simply for rural advocacy groups to work on two fronts simultaneously: (1) Help Federal policymakers understand the rural context and consequently their programs will better meet the needs in the rural environment; and (2) Show the interdependent relationship of the rural and urban problems and issues in order to change the inaccurate perception of a zero-sum game.

If these two approaches were not undertaken, the prediction was that rural advocates would continue to act like *cargo cults* waiting for the shipment of lucrative programs to magically appear. In sum, the "There ha[d] been currents and ripples on the water, but no wave of public support for a comprehensive rural development policy seem[ed] to be gathering to bring a cargo ship ashore." ⁶

Not long after the original article, the Federal government announced the Fund for Rural America. In fact, the 1996 farm bill allocated \$100 million per year beginning January 1, 1997, to the Fund for Rural America. The funds were to be divided equally among three areas: rural development, research, and an amount to be used at the discretion of the Secretary for research or rural development.

According to a USDA 1996 Farm Bill Fact Sheet⁷, "[The FFRA] unites the many rural development efforts of the U.S. Department of Agriculture into one strategy aimed at addressing the most pressing needs in rural America and improving the quality of life for our citizens there.

The Fund will tackle the backlog in critical needs [and] it will also take on new challenges....

By applying tomorrow's technology and science to the challenges facing our rural areas today, the Fund for Rural America is a model of good government that will help usher in a new era of prosperity and abundance in our country communities."

This sounded like it just might be the ship the rural development advocacy groups have been waiting for.

In reality, though, this program was more of a temporary palliative as the Federal government weaned agriculture off decades of subsidies. It was widely perceived as a one-shot buyoff by its detractors who would otherwise say that the federal government was "abandoning"

⁶ Honadle, B.W. 1993. Rural Development Policy: Breaking the Cargo Cult Mentality. *Economic Development Quarterly*, 7 (3), 227 – 236.

⁷ Available on the Internet at <http://www.usda.gov/farmbill/fund.htm> .

rural America by forcing agriculture into a more market-oriented approach to farming. Moreover, the program was diverted to provide relief for flood-stricken areas of the upper Midwest in 1997 and 1998.⁸ All told, the 1997 Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Recovery from Natural Disasters and for Overseas Peacekeeping Efforts, including those in Bosnia, Public Law 105-18, signed into law June 12, 1997, rescinded \$20 million of the funds provided to the Fund for Rural America.⁹ The clear message it sent was that rural development remained low priority and it was all right to raid this dedicated fund if something more pressing came along. Also, because the subsidies of the 1996 Farm Bill are not targeted, they do little for rural communities.

Therefore, what initially appeared to be the long-awaited cargo ship turned out to be the proverbial Titanic, hitting the political icebergs of natural disasters and international crises requiring emergency funding.

Although there still has not been a national rural development policy, fewer people seem to be clamoring for one than in the past. The *cargo cult* mentality seems to have either dissipated from the national scene or moved to the states. As David Freshwater recently put it, "We all now recognize that there is no real federal rural development policy, other than assistance to agriculture." (Freshwater 2000, p. 7)

In talking with rural development professionals at the USDA in 2000, they variously describe USDA rural development as "not being on anyone's 'radar screen'" and being at its "nadir." As evidence of this low level of attention to rural development *per se*, they point to drastic cuts in staffing at the state level in rural development agencies and to a shift from funded programs to guarantee programs. One veteran of rural development policy at the national level summed it up this way: "The name-of-the-game [at USDA] is to leverage, partner, provide TA [technical assistance] and in some cases guarantee."

That is not to say that USDA is not still at the center of rural programming at the national level. USDA has three rural development agencies: the Rural Housing Service, the Rural Utilities Service, and the Rural Business-Cooperative Service. These replaced the old Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) and Rural Electrification Administration (REA) agencies. Nevertheless, USDA is still perceived to be:

"...unduly influenced by its traditional constituency, farmers, and the agrarian myth. Furthermore, the agrarian myth blocks legislative recognition that USDA

⁸ See the press release from Senator Tom Daschle (D-SD), "Daschle Urges Glickman to Use Fund for Rural America to Help Day County, Other Flood-Damaged Areas of Northeastern South Dakota," at <http://www.senate.gov/~daschle/releases/98/980521-a.html>.

⁹ See: <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rd/cong/97fund.htm>, "Rural Development Under the Fund for Rural America."

has failed to serve non-farming rural Americans. Appropriations to USDA come from a Congress that is seduced by the image of rural America, not its realities.” (Ferguson 2000, p. 6)

The record of the last several years points to some changes in the political, economic, and institutional context. For example, the rural population grew again in the last decade and budget surpluses have replaced deficits; there has been a long period of economic growth; and e-commerce has exploded onto the business scene. These developments hark back to several of the themes of the earlier piece – specifically, the fragmentation of Congress, the perception of rural and urban interests being in conflict, and the divisions among the interest groups.

Congress. To the extent that Congress operates by committees, the legislative branch is inevitably fragmented. There is no committee in either house to deal with the totality of rural issues. However, a *new* Congressional Rural Caucus¹⁰ is breathing some life into the idea that rural development needs Congressional attention. Under the leadership of Reps. Jo Ann Emerson (R-MO) and Eva Clayton (D-NC), the Congressional Rural Caucus (CRC) has such laudable objectives as: “...develop[ing] legislative proposals that address the unique challenges and opportunities of rural communities, and secure rural impact statements in all major federal legislation.”; “...monitor[ing] and evaluate[ing] federal programs and agencies to ensure that adequate resources are being directed towards the improvement of services in rural communities and areas.”; and “...educat[ing] Members of Congress about the impact of federal legislative proposals on rural areas, and generat[ing] a stronger dialogue within Congress on the unique needs of rural communities.”¹¹

If these goals were met, they would address one of the two suggestions offered in the earlier article. That is, they would help ensure that legislation is sensitive to the rural context. After all, there are often the *unintended* consequences of environmental, transportation, health care, and other policies that have more of an impact on rural communities than programs specifically meant to deal with rural development.

The problem is that even this new legislative group still focuses too much on agriculture. According to the CRC’s mission statement, “The Congressional Rural Caucus (CRC) is a bipartisan coalition of Members of Congress who are committed to helping agricultural and rural America build stronger, more prosperous futures for current and future gen-

¹⁰ There had been a group by the same name, but it had gone defunct many years ago.

¹¹ See: <http://www.house.gov/emerson/crc/overview/objectives.html>, “Objectives of the CRC” on the Congressional Rural Caucus homepage.

erations of Americans living on the family farms and ranches and in rural communities.”¹² The emphasis on agriculture, family farms, and ranches is not in keeping with the current situation in which: only 6.3 percent of rural Americans live on farms; half of these farms families have significant off-farm income; 90 percent of rural workers have non-farm jobs; and farming accounts for a mere 7.6 percent of rural employment. (Fluharty 2000) In short, “...agriculture is no longer *the* anchor of the rural economy. It is important – let there be no mistake. But a healthy agriculture no longer assures a healthy rural economy, as it once did... More rural counties now depend on manufacturing as their primary source of income than depend on agriculture.” (Drabenstott 1999, p. 8)

The reasons why the CRC feels compelled to focus on agricultural needs as the cornerstone of their rural development priorities are made clear by Freshwater. He cites four reasons why farming interests are disproportionately powerful in rural development policy circles: the reluctance of farmers to share power; the organizational structure of government, which deals with economic policy by sector; the orientation of social policy toward individuals, not places; and the failure of nonfarm rural people to see the potential connections among themselves. (Freshwater 1997, p. 1518)

Moreover, the farmer is something of a sacred cow in this country and Washington is dependent on farmers for support. This 1994 quote of Rep. Lee Hamilton (as quoted in Freshwater 1997, p. 1515) sums up the political imperative quite well:

“The American farmer is enormously popular in the Congress and in the Executive Branch as well. And even though farmers are a very small percentage of the population, and one that is getting smaller every year, they retain political clout that far exceeds their numbers.”

As one rural development policy expert observed recently, the foundation for the public's love for the American farmer is questionable: “The best evidence is that the public wishes not merely to increase farmers' incomes, but to preserve the family farm, and, by extension, the rural lifestyle that family farmers maintain.” (Long 1999, p. 105)

Changing Relationships. There are some encouraging signs that the Federal government, states, tribal governments, and the private sector are working together for rural America. The National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP) is an attempt to bring these entities together for rural development purposes. The NRDP consist of three parts: State

¹² See: <http://www.house.gov/emerson/crc/overview/index.html>.

Rural Development Councils (SRDC), National Rural Development Council (NRDC), and the National Partnership Office (NPO) at USDA in Washington, DC.

Presently there are about forty SRDCs compared to only 15 of these organizations at the time of the earlier paper. These entities create their own mission, structure, operating guidelines, and plans; and hire an executive director who works with the leadership of the SRDC. According to Cornelius Grant, Executive Director of the North Dakota Rural Development Council (NRDC), the NRDC:

“...is not intended to be a new rural development program, a source of funds, a project clearing house or lobbying organization. The goal is to make existing programs work more effectively to meet the needs of local communities. The Council’s role is to complement, reinforce, and enhance these efforts by serving as facilitator, expeditor, convener, coordinator, and where appropriate, initiator.” (Grant 2000.)

Although there is a large number of state Rural Development Councils (RDCs), a relative few are very active and contributing substantially to rural development. Bob Ho, Executive Director of Maine’s Rural Development Council, recently reflected on the experience to date of the RDCs. (Ho 2001) He spoke passionately about the *potential* of these organizations, which exist in a solid majority of the states. However, he expressed the hope that the RDC’s, which he calls an “initiative” will yet become a “movement.” Given their historical roots as a Federal construct dating to 1990 (with a similar ancestor going back to the Reagan administration), it seems unlikely that an RDC “movement” will emerge now. One reason for this is that RDCs were not a grassroots-based institution that sprang up spontaneously from the states. On the contrary, they exemplify top-down development. They were federally initiated and, until just two years ago, nearly half the leadership of the state RDCs were Federal employees. Now, all of them are nonfederal employees.

Two Federal departments that have a major impact on rural America are Transportation (DOT) and Health and Human Services (HHS). Former Assistant Secretary for Transportation Policy in the Clinton Administration, Eugene Conti, Jr. told a Congressional committee last year:

“From flexible road design in Massachusetts to the needs of short line railroads in Kansas, the State Rural Development Councils facilitate the advancement and enhancement of transportation issues at the local level. By providing access to a broad range of rural local officials and activities, the NRDP enables the DOT to carry out our programs more effectively.” (Conti 2000)

There are other indications that DOT is more inclusive with respect to rural issues. For example, the Urban Mass Transit Administration was renamed the Federal Transit Administration to reflect its broader mission. In addition, former Transportation Secretary, Rodney E. Slater, was a strong advocate for rural issues. In May 1999, he announced the department's Rural Transportation Initiative, which was billed as a plan to help rural America economically and to deal with safety and mobility problems. The initiative produced a brochure and program guide to the Transportation programs available for rural areas. This approach is reminiscent of the "access" theme of earlier administrations' rural development initiatives, in which the basic idea was merely to create better awareness of existing programs. Nevertheless, rural policy insiders in Washington, DC generally regard DOT as one of the more rural-sensitive Federal departments.

The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is a key player in Federal assistance to rural America through such programs as the Community and Migrant Health Center Program, the Maternal and Child Health Block Grant, the Rural Health Outreach Program, and the Area Health Education Center program, among others. The Health Resources and Services Administration has an Office of Rural Health Policy, which advises the Secretary of HHS on rural health issues and policy. According to its last administrator, Dr. Claude Fox, this body plays an important function in attempting to make Medicare and Medicaid policies "fair" to rural communities. According to Dr. Fox,

"The challenge comes in making sure we have a coordinated rural perspective, both within HHS and across the Government. Enter the National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP), providing HHS with information and encouragement to broaden our perspective. HHS also provides active staff representation to the National Rural Development Council. In fact, the HHS representative to the Council...has served as the chair of the [Council] for the last two years." (Fox 2000)

Whether this is an indication that USDA has lost or is losing its central role in national rural development policy remains to be seen. However, it does show that other departments are in leadership positions within the Federal government's rural development structure. Unless USDA is able to address the needs of non-farm rural America, its days as the nation's premier leader in rural development will be numbered.

U. S. Senator Larry Craig opened a subcommittee hearing on the NRDP earlier last year by noting that:

“...management decisions by the federal government on public lands directly impact livelihoods and daily activities of many rural Idahoans. However, the impacts of federal decisions on rural areas go far beyond those of the land managing agencies. I support programs that bring communities together to develop solutions to their problems. I believe the Partnership can and does do this. However, I have heard concerns that not all Departments and Agencies participate in the Partnership and that financial support may be lacking.”

Thus, the concept may be sound, but the NRDP may not be realizing its potential in cutting across the Federal agencies that have important impacts on rural America.

Under Secretary for Rural Development at USDA, under Clinton administration, Jill Long Thompson, concluded her testimony at those hearings by making the following observation:

“I am convinced that the state Councils can make a real difference in rural America. However, we need to revisit the original approach to funding and participation at the Federal level, if we expect the Councils to carry out the original mandate of the Executive Order¹³ and if we expect to have Councils formed in each state. There has to be some legislative foundation and funding needs to be consistent.” (Thompson 2000.)

Not everyone is convinced that the Federal government's broadening realization of rural needs is on the mark. According to the director of a university-based program designed to increase professional child welfare resources in rural Texas:

“It appears that the federal government IS actually more aware of the imbalance of funding for rural vs. urban social services. There have been a variety of awards lately that target rural areas;

¹³ She was referring to Executive Order 12720 signed by President Bush in 1990. This EO did not establish the rural development councils. That EO established the President's Council on Rural America, which was extended by EO 12783 in December 1991. President Clinton revoked these EOs in September 1993 with EO 12869. The work on the Partnership actually started before the first of these EOs. The Partnership was started based on authority in Title V of the 1972 Rural Development Act (P.L. 92-419, 92nd Congress, H.R. 12931, August 30, 1972. The Rockefeller report of the President's Council merely endorsed the already ongoing Partnership in operation under Title V.

however, they are designed in Washington D.C. by urban staff, with at most a quick trip for meetings in the regions. ... Even the rural-designated programs end up, for the most part, being urban studies about rural areas, or "rural" programs built by urban outsiders who come for a time and leave when the grant is over, with the program never part of the community and gone when they're gone. While the government appears more aware of the need, methodologies for addressing it are traditionally urban."¹⁴

There also seems to be emerging governance in rural policy -- in that rural advocacy, networking is taking place at the Federal level. This way of working may be driven more by relationships and intersections of purpose in planning programs than by formal committees, memoranda of understanding, and written agreements.

Rural and Urban Interests. Increasingly the connections between urban and rural areas are coming to be appreciated by policy advocates. "As population has again reversed and many rural areas are growing, the focus on rural land and resource use has taken a new turn and a new level of intensity... Thus, environmental policies are in some ways becoming de facto rural policies. The question for rural development advocates -- in many areas -- becomes how do we develop without urbanizing."¹⁵

The most articulate expression of the commonality of interests is found in Mayor Wellington E. Webb's¹⁶ of Denver, Colorado statement:

"...The urban agenda remains a low priority on the Congressional agenda... We continue to be hurt by federal policies that have the effect of pushing people and businesses and resources out of our urban communities and toward development on the fringes of our metropolitan areas... We have an opportunity to unite our great urban centers in an expanded alliance. An alliance that includes older suburbs, rural communities... The cities and older suburbs are natural allies... Rural constituencies are potential allies as well. Increasingly they are sharing our concerns about the impact of federal policies on metropolitan growth. The same suburban sprawl that is hurting cities and inner-ring suburbs is also consuming farmland." (Webb 1999, p. 1-2.)

¹⁴ Personal e-mail communication from Kathleen Belanger, Director, Child Welfare Professional Development Project, and Lecturer, School of Social Work, Stephen F. Austin State University, to the author, Tuesday, May 30, 2000.

¹⁵ Personal e-mail communication to the author, Monday May 1, 2000.

¹⁶ President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the National Conference of Black Mayors.

Mayor Webb talks about a “new majority” in American politics, a coalition of Congressional districts, which includes not only the 67 U.S. Congressional districts that are predominantly urban, but also the 57 rural districts and other districts that are fiscally stressed. (Webb 1999, p. 3.)

Interest Groups. The most promising development in rural advocacy has been the creation of the National Rural Network, a voluntary coalition of about thirty interest groups, think tanks, and rural-based organizations. The members represent a wide array of rural interests from health care to transportation to agriculture to economic development and public works. Its purpose is to be a resource to the administration, Congress, and the public about rural development issues.

In addition, the Child Welfare League of America recently created a National Advisory Committee on Rural Social Services:

“The needs of children and families in rural communities are clearly related to a range of conditions that typify rural communities as a whole: poverty, obstacles posed by cultural and racial differences, and geographic and social isolation. Through the establishment of the National Advisory Committee, we will develop a national action agenda to identify the critical obstacles that impact the design and delivery of rural social services; replicable and successful rural social service delivery models; and program and policy directions to ensure the development and implementation of effective social service delivery systems in rural communities.”¹⁷

Another recent development is the creation of the Rural Action Caucus of the National Association of Counties (NACo). Some of the goals of the caucus, a self-selected group of county officials, are: to identify rural issues, provide input in developing national programs and policies, advocate rural-friendly policies; and work in concert with NACo’s Large Urban County Caucus to develop policies that improve service delivery for both rural and urban citizens.¹⁸ This may be yet another indication that policy advocates are beginning to realize that the urban and rural communities of this country are trying to address many of the same problems and the solutions may come from working together.

In the last decade, there have been numerous changes in rural America, including renewed population growth after a period of declining

¹⁷ This is from the letter by Shirley Marcus Allen, Acting Co-Director at the time (letter dated December 6, 1999), inviting participation in the committee. Quote provided to me in personal correspondence from Kathleen Belanger.

¹⁸ These, and other objectives, are listed at <http://www.naco.org/naco/comms/RAC.cfm>.

population. Due, in part, to this growth, urban and rural areas may be seeing some of the same problems and be anxious to work together to address them. It is too early to say whether policies that take into account urban, suburban, and rural problems simultaneously will be forthcoming. However, it is encouraging that the mayor of a major central city is realizing how policies can harm both urban and rural areas at the same time. This kind of mental model has to be applied if major national problems, such as transportation and health care, are to be dealt with sensibility.

The central role USDA has played in rural development policy seems to be waning, as the importance of such other Federal departments as DOT and HHS in rural communities is receiving appropriate recognition.¹⁹ Unless and until the United States Department of Agriculture becomes the United States Department of Agriculture *and Rural Development*, USDA appears destined to become less and less relevant in helping to alleviate problems in rural America. The name change would have to be more than just that. USDA would have to be given a much broader mandate and support for doing the kind of broad-based rural development it has, if anything, backed away from in recent years.

Some institutions, notably the National Rural Network, the Congressional Rural Caucus, NACo's Rural Action Caucus, and the National Rural Development Partnership hold some promise for coordinating programs and making programming more appropriate to the rural context. Even though the CRC is clearly focused on agriculture, the attempt to resurrect an organized group of Members of Congress, which will focus on rural problems, is a step in the right direction. If these institutions (which are focused on the national, state, and local level) have enough clout and are willing to work together, there is a chance that intergovernmental cooperation for rural development may occur. Again, it is too early to tell if this will actually happen.

The earlier piece concluded that rural advocates should give up on their dream of a lucrative, identifiable rural development policy, and instead focus on more realistic, attainable goals. It seems that most people no longer expect the Federal government to make a major rural policy pronouncement. There appears to have been some movement in the direction of educating policymakers across the broad spectrum of Federal programs about the rural context (which is quite varied) so that the programs delivered in rural areas are appropriate to the local situations in which they are operating. This is an ongoing need and each succeeding administration will need to become informed about rural trends and issues.

¹⁹ And, according to Swanson and Freshwater 1999, "The rural components of these federal programs are at best secondary and typically are nothing more than simple extensions of programs designed for urban areas." (p. 84)

At the time of this writing, a new George W. Bush administration has assumed power and a brand-new set of political appointees and some new members of Congress are now in place. It is too early to predict what this change in political power will mean for rural development. However, the Bush team has made no pronouncements suggesting that rural development will be a priority, which does not bode well for a resurgence of national policy interest in this area.

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