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RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOR COMMUNITY SELF-RELIANCE

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It will come as no great surprise that rural communities in the South are experiencing severe economic, social and political crises. Most of this nation's persistently low-income, nonmetropolitan counties are in the South and those counties have a higher proportion of nonwhites, disabled, low-income and female-headed families than the nonmetropolitan average.

It is also true that: there has been an erosion in farmland values; natural resource-based industries continue in a state of decline (mining, timber and petroleum); there has been a loss of light manufacturing industries; the human capital base is shrinking due to the outmigration of talented youth and young adults; and, most of the economic development efforts in these areas, especially those implemented by governmental agencies, have produced inadequate (and often disastrous) results.

In other words, residents in many rural southern communities are experiencing enormous difficulties in maintaining a stable economic base to meet the needs of an increasingly nonagricultural society and economy.

Narrowing the focus to disempowered, limited-resource and, often, minority communities, the effects of economic and social decline are even more obvious. These communities have been inadequately served by traditional economic development programs. And when made available, existing programs and subsequent delivery have often failed to benefit limited-resource populations in those communities. After many years of economic development "attempts" in disempowered communities it is all too often the case that economic development professionals, including Cooperative Extension specialists and agents, develop a prevailing "why try?" attitude.

The frustrations encountered when attempting to work with disempowered and limited-resource communities and the resulting "why try?" mentality are founded in the approach employed when attempting

economic development educational programming. The point is simple: The economic development educational programs developed for use in the “general” public are usually *incomprehensible and acutely uninviting* to disempowered and limited-resource audiences. We may equate American society to the “melting pot” analogy, but current sociological and political thought clearly contradicts this notion.

The reality is that we are probably more correctly analogous to a set of islands, each with differing characteristics, resources, abilities and opportunities. Our standard economic development educational programs frequently assume that communities are somehow “alike” and that what will work in one will work in another. The communities in question would be better served by greater emphasis on economic development strategies that recognize and accept the current community base (education, income and resources) and focus initially on community self-reliant activities. Inherent in this approach is an awareness that what worked in another community may be uninviting and out of reach for others.

Background

The beginnings of Rural Economic Development for Community Self-Reliance were founded in informal discussions by 1890 Cooperative Extension Program Community Resource Development Specialists. These discussions centered on the severe economic conditions in the South and the inability of traditional “canned” economic development strategies to adequately serve the needs of severely economically disadvantaged, disempowered and minority communities. A component was missing in the program delivery process; our task was to identify the critical elements necessary for successful economic development education within those communities.

The expressed needs of the 1890 Cooperative Extension Program CRD Specialists for innovative economic development programming methodologies for disempowered, low-income and minority audiences triggered an enthusiastic response from Beth Walter-Honadle, then National Program Leader for Economic Development, who entered into the discussions, and became a key catalyst in the evolution of this project. Greater project specificity was generated, including: audience analysis, community profiles, current economic environment and future prospects, racial-ethnic composition, and the applicability of such an educational package for the total Cooperative Extension System.

The premise behind “Rural Economic Development for Community Self-Reliance” was a consensus that current economic development programming efforts assumed the existence of a critical knowledge base inherent in the affected communities. To point, most, if not all, traditional economic development programs assumed that the community leaders (and most of the residents) had at least a working knowledge of:

1. how their community fits into and is affected by county, state, regional, national and world economic and political environments;

2. community analysis skills;
3. community leadership and community power;
4. concepts of cooperation and intergovernmental relations;
5. existing and needed resources;
6. community planning;
7. community change and mobilizing for action; and,
8. evaluation of community programs and projects.

It should be further noted that audiences in these communities are different in certain other respects from mainstream America. First, these residents are encased in a perspective that dictates that they lack power to affect changes in their lives and communities. They are used to being acted upon by others outside the community; the notion of participatory democracy is largely nonexistent. Second, the educational attainment of residents is far below the national average. The assumption that people can read and write is often in error, and is a key factor in the failure of other attempts at economic development (and other types) of educational programs. Third, recruitment of disempowered, low-income, minority and female head of household audiences is a vastly different experience from that of recruitment of mainstream populations. Posting a notice in the courthouse or in the newspaper will not achieve the desired end, and factors of transportation to meeting sites, child care, work schedules, and local norms all contribute to poor success in recruitment.

I would like to point out one other salient factor associated with this audience. Contrary to what is often heard, the residents in our most disadvantaged communities are not stupid or disinterested. They may be ignorant of some facets of life and lacking in educational attainment, but I assure you that, given the opportunity to express their ideas to a willing listener, residents of the communities in question would astound you with their knowledge and insights. They often cannot express their thoughts in the precise language of academia, but the thoughts are just as good, and frankly, often less confusing. We should note that these audiences are, perhaps, the greatest survivors in our nation, and they could not survive if they were as stupid or disinterested as some assume.

Following a working meeting with selected Staff of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Extension Service (ES-USDA), the need to develop an educational package which would provide low income, disempowered and minority communities the educational infrastructure necessary to engage economic development activities was solidified, with an additional observation. Our original emphasis was on communities in the South, yet it was apparent that other regions had similar communities with like audiences and conditions. Discussion was transformed into a concrete and pragmatic proposal to assist in the acquisition of the necessary funds to make this project a reality.

We must, at this point, acknowledge the tireless efforts of Beth Walter-Honadle and Curt De Ville for their counsel and in "walking"

our proposal to potential funding sources. Their efforts identified the USDA Soil Conservation Service Resource Conservation and Development Program as an appropriate actor in the process of providing economic development assistance to disempowered and limited-resource clientele. The Resource Conservation and Development Program offers technical and financial assistance (including loans to rural communities) for measures that conserve and improve the use of land, develop natural resources and enhance social, economic and environmental conditions in rural America.

Ron Page, of the Resource Conservation and Development Program, USDA Soil Conservation Service, expressed an interest in the proposed training project. His primary motivation was a concern that state Resource Conservation and Development Coordinators faced a similar plight in working with low-income, disempowered and minority communities. The Soil Conservation Service had very limited funds to assist our efforts, but did agree to provide a small funding base to foster project development and testing. The Southern Regional Development Center, under the direction of Doss Brodnax, provided additional funding support.

Project Overview

“Rural Economic Development for Community Self-Reliance” is a joint venture representing a positive and unique programming relationship between two 1890 land grant universities, Alabama A&M University and Florida A&M University, and USDA Soil Conservation Service, with technical assistance and guidance provided by ES-USDA. This project is the culmination of a shared recognition of the need to tailor economic development educational processes for disempowered, limited resource and minority rural citizens. It is important to note that the intent is *not* to recreate the substantial economic development programming resources currently available. Rather, this project seeks to provide supplemental knowledge and skills generally assumed as a prerequisite to economic development education.

The purpose of “Rural Economic Development for Community Self-Reliance” is to empower limited-resource audiences in rural communities to fully realize economic development opportunities. This will be accomplished through an educational effort which will provide local community leaders, county agents and Resource Conservation and Development Coordinators with information and skills needed to generate employment opportunities, improve services and facilities, improve leadership skills, improve the natural resource base, interact with local governments and make use of resources readily available in the community. The overall objectives of this effort are to:

1. Raise the awareness of local leaders and public decision makers in rural communities about economic development conditions and trends;
2. Motivate these decision makers to use their skills and positions

- to create positive changes in their communities; and,
3. Facilitate their abilities to conduct economic development programs.

Two key products derive from this economic development project. First is an instructional notebook/manual for use by County Cooperative Extension Agents and Resource Conservation and Development Coordinators in facilitation of the project. The instructional notebook/manual is designed as a self-contained instructional package, divided into comprehensive subject-matter units. Each unit focuses on a specific topic and provides reference materials, educational activities and related handouts. The eight modules allow participants to generate a world view of their community, explore their community, seek out community leadership and power, plan for change, locate and utilize resources and cooperative strategies, explore comprehensive community planning, and learn and apply rural economic development strategies. Second is a motivational videotape designed to show leaders what the project entails and what others have done to develop similar communities with comparable resources.

We sincerely invite you to renew your interest in working with some of our communities most in need. We think this project will provide a workable methodology for assisting disempowered communities achieve economic development successes. Our model, when the testing and refinement stages are complete, will be available for your use in whole or in part. We will be more than happy to assist you in any way we can, for we are firmly committed to the notion that it is our responsibility and consistent with our Cooperative Extension System mission to help those most in need. Clearly, the total of this nation will gain if disempowered and low-income communities begin to generate positive contributions to American society, and together we can assist them in this process.

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