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# ISSUES AND PROBLEMS OF IMMEDIATE CONCERN

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The focus is still somewhat blurred as we struggle to put public policy education into perspective for the 1970's. The 1952 publication, *Turning the Searchlight on Farm Policy*, stated that public policy relating to agriculture must be based on sound principles and long-time objectives if it is to serve adequately the interests of the farm people and the general public. On what priorities should we turn the searchlight in the 1970's?

In the 1950's and most of the 1960's, our basic focus was on agricultural policy for commercial farms. I do not think that agricultural policy makers or we as agricultural economists have been completely honest with people in rural areas and with the total public. We have not told the whole truth about the effect of agricultural policies on economic development and what this has meant to the poor living in rural areas and to the small family farmer. There is a truth here that no one likes to hear. Past policies have not provided much help for the very people that they were designed to help. The results of these policies are that social costs have been substantially higher than the benefits that have accrued mainly to a relatively few of the larger commercial farmers.

Changes in our society have altered the opportunities and responsibilities of those of us who work in public policy education. The related and interdependent problems of our states must be tackled with a realistic orientation to the economic and social relationships of the 1970's.

## COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE

We have long sought the overall goal of providing an abundant supply of food and fiber to meet domestic and foreign demand. Policies which bring income gains to farmers in the marketplace by reduced marketings mean higher prices to consumers and impose constraints on freedom to produce, which some farmers resent. Current policies adjust output and encourage participation by diversion and price support payments, which improve farm incomes at the expense of taxpayers. The "feed the world" notions have been ruled out. Excess

capacity in U.S. and world markets demonstrates that technological progress in agriculture is likely to continue to outdistance the growth of domestic and effective export demand.

No panacea exists for the ills of commercial agriculture. Policies characterized by voluntary land retirement programs with diversion payments and market clearing prices will continue. The policy focus is on land or people, or some combination of the two. We have had three decades of discussion and experimentation with programs designed to adjust the use of land resources. Policies designed to adjust the supply of human resources in agriculture will increase in importance in the next decade.

### THE RURAL POOR

Thousands of rural people own few resources other than their labor. They find that their earnings are not sufficient to meet their aspirations, and many are poor. The real gap is between aspirations and the means of fulfilling them.

We have devoted much of our energies to studies of individual farms, marketing firms, and commercial farm policies. However, the plight of the small family farmer and poor people living in rural areas is not alleviated by most farm programs. Commodity programs aid those farmers who have the most to sell, and the largest diversion payments go to those with the greatest capacity to produce. The march of technology has, in a real sense, condemned the farmer with few resources to a meager farm existence and low income. Policies such as job training, better education, and development of new industries in rural areas would help these families but would not solve the problems of commercial agriculture.

Public policies to combat rural poverty potentially conflict with policies that accelerate overall growth and development. The cost to the public of eliminating rural poverty would be staggering, and in nearly every case, practically unacceptable. The public policy issue becomes one of priority, emphasis, and degree in the use of public funds rather than instantaneous elimination of poverty in rural areas.

### LAND USE PLANNING

As we enter the decade of the 1970's, we must focus on the role of area planning as an instrument of public policy that will affect the development of both nonmetropolitan areas and metropolitan areas. The major function of regional planning is to carry out a continuous and coordinated plan for efficient use of an area's scarce resources.

Although the nation's population is largely urban, residential patterns have changed dramatically over the past twenty years. There has been a rapid expansion of trade and jobs outside of central cities. This suburban explosion has created perplexing problems for the unprepared county. High levels of public services are now demanded by the affluent new residents and industry. And this has painfully strained the financial resources of local governments. Federal grants for community services have provided only partial relief.

Land is a limited natural resource, while demands on its future use appear unlimited. Any method to take full advantage of this scarce resource requires long-range planning.

In many states there is increasing active cooperation between state and local governments in area regional planning. Area planning staffs can influence decisions on capital investments, zoning, planning, and public facilities. In addition, private decision makers have begun to take part in implementing area plans. They use the information developed by the area planning staff to determine the location of new plants and shopping centers, and through these decisions carry out the planning goals of the area.

These policies can have as large an impact on rural America as price and income policies. Land use and water pollution problems spill over political boundaries and have an impact on smaller non-metropolitan communities and rural areas. We have the inside track on influencing current owners of the land resource in their decision on area planning. This advantage will mean little if our focus is blurred by our "helping the farmer" image, and we fail to grasp the total meaning of these public policies to *all* our citizens.

#### TOUCHING BASE

Most of us who have worked in public policy education have developed a clientele with whom we touch base. An ability to touch base in terms of ideas and policy proposals has greatly increased our creditability and performance as policy educators. While we influence the thoughts and actions of our clientele, they also influence ours.

Are the clientele that we have touched base with during the 1960's adequate for the 1970's? Probably not. Our clientele for the 1970's will be key community leaders who have a feel for state-wide issues. State government will play a much more dominant role and will need to deal with such public policy issues as area planning, financing and taxation, pollution, and job opportunities. The challenge is for each of us to develop effective means of reaching these leaders so that our educational programs can continue to be sound and relevant.

## FOCUS ON OURSELVES

In the 1970's, problems of job opportunities, poverty, pollution, and environment will have a significant impact on nonmetropolitan areas. When the frustration of being unable to create a more livable area begins to outweigh the fear of loss of political power, individuals and groups have shown increased willingness to cooperate on region-wide problems. The typical city-suburban-rural rivalries which have hamstrung area cooperation are being broken down, and significant progress will be achieved in the decade ahead. How should those of us who work in the policy area prepare for these new policy issues?

One response might be, "Have methodology; will tackle problems," and in a sense, this is what we have done on many issues. The success of this approach is unclear since we tackle problems that are outside the field in which we have our background and training. We must stretch our imaginations to meet the challenge and opportunities of the next decade. We must follow a policy of providing opportunities rather than inhibiting them. Today rural people face much different and, in some respects, more complex adjustment problems than ever before. No longer are farm and city separated by easily identifiable boundaries. Programs in public policy education must meet the needs of a restless society and can no longer be built on a foundation of rural nostalgia.

PART III

*Income Maintenance  
Programs*

