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# INSTITUTIONAL LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO ALLEVIATE RURAL POVERTY

*C. Edwin Gilmour, Director  
Program in Practical Political Education  
Grinnell College*

The marriage of university research and field outreach has transformed U.S. agriculture into a fabulously productive system that is the envy and the hope of the world. Perhaps it is time that this successful model should now be turned to the development of the potential of what Gunnar Myrdal has called "the greatest underdeveloped area of the world": the American poor. Extension personnel have demonstrated that they can increase the productivity of the land in rural America; perhaps this same experience and expertise should now be directed toward increasing the productivity of the people in rural America, particularly those who, more than any other, have been the forgotten and neglected in our generation: the rural poor.

## A PROBLEM NEWLY RECOGNIZED

### **The NACD Conference on Rural Poverty**

Save in the speeches and writings of a limited number of people-oriented rural sociologists and agricultural economists, it has been only recently that the problem of rural poverty and its substantial and serious implications for the entire nation have been recognized.

One of the first agencies to focus national attention on the needs of rural citizens and their communities and on the direct relationships of rural and urban poverty was the National Association for Community Development when, in late January 1967, it sponsored a National Conference on Rural Poverty in the nation's capital. This conference attempted to dramatize the slow start of the War on Poverty in rural America and to stimulate new commitment of will and resources to the rural poor.

In three days of papers, speeches, panels, and workshops, evidence was piled upon evidence that the rate of economic poverty in rural America was almost twice that of urban America and that rural residents were made and kept poor because they were being denied their fair share of the product and prosperity of an affluent

nation. The conference turned to an explanation of this wide differential in economic poverty between rural and urban areas. Catalogued were the inadequacies and limited effects of the programs of education, health, housing, legal services, employment, farm credit, income support, and economic development in rural areas. The personnel involved in these programs, particularly at the state and local levels of government, were accused of racial discrimination, an anti-poor bias, political favoritism, and administrative sloth or ineptitude. The programs and the personnel of the two federal agencies that have been assigned particular and unique responsibilities concerning rural poverty, viz., the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Office of Economic Opportunity, were singled out for candid, and at times cruel, criticism. Finally, the resource allocation processes of the President and the Congress and the budget allotment processes of the federal bureaucracy were indicted for a niggardly awarding of money and men for the needs of the rural poor. The central finding and conclusion of the conference was that:

Economic poverty exists and persists in rural America to a much greater extent than in urban America because of the low level and ineffective nature of the human development services in rural areas, and this, in turn, is due to the failure to allocate sufficient personnel and material resources to the real human needs that exist in these areas.

### **A New Awakening to Rural Poverty**

This new awakening to the problem of rural poverty and to its widespread national repercussions has been evidenced rather impressively since the NACD Conference. In its report of July 1967, the National Advisory Commission on Food and Fiber observed that:

The most important (and most neglected) aspect of policy for agricultural adjustment is the task of finding better opportunities for those whose economic prospects are limited by the onset of farm technology. This is the key to improving incomes both for the people who are leaving and those who remain.

The National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty opened its report, released last December, with these sentences:

This report is about a problem which many in the United States do not realize exists. The problem is rural poverty. It affects some 14 million Americans. Rural poverty is so widespread, and so acute, as to be a national disgrace, and its consequences have swept into the cities, violently.

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders devoted an entire chapter of its March 1968 report to the migration of millions of Negroes from the South and the resulting formation of racial

ghettos in cities in both the North and the South. And, in its trenchant report just a few months ago, the Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition reported shock, indignation, and demands for action at its findings that particularly in rural America, hunger, malnutrition, and even starvation "exist in this country, affecting millions of Americans and [are] increasing in severity and extent from year to year."

Finally, the leadership of the American labor movement, a private institution with a predominant urban constituency and orientation, said this, within the past month or so:

The problem of urban poverty and of rural poverty are closely intermeshed; to solve either we must work at solving both. If all Americans are to live decently, increased job opportunities and improved living standards must be achieved throughout rural areas as well as in our over-crowded and crisis-ridden central cities.

#### **A PROBLEM RECOGNIZED BUT UNMET**

Perhaps encouragement should be taken from the belated acknowledgment during the past year and a half that rural poverty is truly a national problem of substantial proportions and that it demands early and effective response. However, if the reports and observations just noted indicate that this problem finally has been raised to the level of public consciousness, there is precious little evidence that it also has been raised to the level of public concern, conscience, and commitment.

#### **The NACRP Report**

One of the serious and continuing obstacles to the design and implementation of an effective antipoverty program for rural America has been the dearth of knowledge concerning the extent, the character, and the causes of rural poverty. This gap of information and insights has been substantially filled with the publication of the final report of the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty and its supporting documents. The Commission report, *The People Left Behind*, examines specific rural problems and suggests new programs and proposals, as well as changes in existing antipoverty efforts.

#### **A Stark Picture of Rural Poverty**

Several realities concerning rural poverty are either unknown to most Americans or are misconstrued by them. Contrary to popular impression, there is much more poverty in rural America, proportionately, than in our cities. In metropolitan areas, one person in eight is poor and in the suburbs the ratio is one in fifteen; but in

rural areas, one of every four persons is poor. Further, most Americans will be surprised to know that not all of the rural poor, or even most of them, live on farms, nor are they mostly Negroes.

Unemployment and underemployment are major problems in rural America. While the unemployment rate nationwide is presently somewhat less than 4 percent, the unemployment rate in rural areas, in the off-season, approaches 12 percent. Studies based on 1960 census data estimate that more than 18 percent of all employed rural residents, both farm and nonfarm, are underemployed. The underemployment rate for farm residents is almost 37 percent. Public employment service and training programs to meet these problems are notably lacking in rural areas.

The quality of rural schools is low compared with urban schools. And the educational product of these rural schools reflects these lower levels of educational resources. The 1960 census revealed that over three million rural adults had less than five years of schooling and were classified as functional illiterates; almost three-quarters of a million of these persons had never enrolled in school. The average years of schooling for rural nonfarm adults was 9.5 years and for rural farm adults 8.8 years, as contrasted with an average educational achievement level for the urban population of 11.1 years. Only 11 percent of the rural adult population had any college education, compared with 19 percent of the urban population. Rural youth, while apparently getting a better education than their parents, were noticeably behind their urban counterparts educationally. In 1960, 28 percent of rural nonfarm youth and 23 percent of rural farm youth dropped out of school before graduating; these rates compared with 21 percent for urban youth. In that same year, about twice as high a proportion of urban youth as rural youth were enrolled in college.

The Advisory Commission was profoundly disturbed by the health problems of low-income people in rural America. Disease and premature death are startlingly high among the rural poor. For instance, infant mortality is far higher among the rural poor than among the least privileged groups in urban areas. More common also are chronic diseases among both young and old. Hunger and malnutrition are widespread, often contributing to diseases related to inadequate diets. And rural families average fewer visits per person to physicians and dentists than do urban residents. Related to these health problems in rural America is the scarcity of health manpower and facilities there.

Census data show that decent housing is an urgent need of the rural poor. One of every thirteen houses in rural America is officially

classified as unfit to live in. In 1960, 27 percent of occupied rural housing was classified as deteriorating or dilapidated, compared with 14 percent for urban areas. Fewer than half of all rural homes have central heating, and less than one-fourth of rural farm dwellings have indoor water and toilet facilities. In the face of these critical housing needs, the Commission found that existing housing programs—public housing, rent supplements, and the housing programs of HUD and FHA—had had minimal effect.

A similar pattern of unmet need and of inadequate remedial resources was found by the Advisory Commission in three other functional areas, viz., family planning services, public income support programs, and area economic development programs.

Finally, the Commission describes the disintegration of the small town or village as an effective institution in rural America. Technological progress has brought sharp declines in the manpower needs of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and mining, with few new industries as replacements. Many of the economic and social functions of the rural communities have been taken over by larger towns and cities. Robbed of an adequate tax base by a declining economy, the public services of the typical rural community are inadequate in number, magnitude, and quality.

The Advisory Commission concluded that:

Because rural Americans have been denied a fair share of America's opportunities and benefits, they have migrated by the millions to the cities in search of jobs and places to live. This migration is continuing. It is therefore impossible to obliterate urban poverty without removing its rural causes. Accordingly, both reason and justice compel the allotment of a more equitable share of our national resources to improving the conditions of rural life.

#### **AN INQUIRY INTO THE FAILURE OF RURAL INSTITUTIONS**

The picture of rural poverty just sketched indicates serious deficiencies in the institutional system of rural America. If rural poverty is to be alleviated, then these institutional inadequacies must be identified and understood.

#### **The Rural Village**

Since the major social, economic, and governmental institutions of rural America are centered in the small towns and villages that service both rural nonfarm and farm residents, it is necessary to understand the rural village better in terms of its present realities and capabilities. Typically, the rural village is faced with the dilemma of providing needed services, particularly for its older residents, with

a relatively small number of active adults to furnish financial support for these services through taxes, to provide community leadership, and to adjust to changing circumstances.

The Advisory Commission concluded that "our hamlets and villages are parts of a larger community which must include urban as well as rural elements if either is to survive." The Commission called for an expansion of governmental efforts to foster community organization and development, for better coordination between the OEO and USDA community organization programs, for better identification and integration of all public and private resources available for community development, and for the broadening and strengthening of the responsibilities of the land-grant universities and their Extension Services to encompass the problems of rural and urban poverty, regional development, and urbanization.

### **The Social Institutions of Rural America**

The financial dilemma of the typical rural village means that most rural communities do not possess adequate financial resources to support effective social institutions, whether these are financed publicly or privately. Moreover, it appears that in many local areas, the potential fiscal capacity that does exist is not being fully utilized. Finally, there is little evidence to suggest that extralocal financing from federal or state sources or from private sources has been sufficient to overcome existing institutional deficiencies.

The lack of adequate financial resources for rural social institutions inevitably affects the number and quality of the professional personnel of such institutions. Further, in many instances, professionals lack organizational support, facilities, and professional contacts which they consider necessary for the satisfactory performance of their professional duties. Also, the absence of cultural amenities and the dearth of good schools in low-income rural communities deter the recruitment of well-educated, experienced professionals.

Many of the more troublesome problems of local institutions in rural America can be attributed to their organization. Most rural social institutions are too small to render good service and tend to be more expensive on a unit service cost basis. Further, the vertical relationships of these institutions to agencies at a higher administrative level have been complicated by institutional specialization of the extralocal agencies and the substantial shift of decision making out of the local community. The coordination of different institutional systems to produce optimal community benefits is, therefore, made more difficult. Lastly, the problem of service integration has been accentuated by the numerous overlapping service districts.

The Advisory Commission recommended the increase of federal and state financial support to rural service institutions, the encouragement by federal and state granting agencies of the development of larger institutional service units, the establishment of comprehensive area-wide service centers with adequate professional personnel and facilities, and the acceleration of the development of congruent service areas.

### **The Economic Institutions of Rural America**

In assessing the economic institutions of rural America, the conclusions are sobering, if not melancholic. The declining manpower needs of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and mining have been noted. The direct results of this widespread decline in rural employment are the personal poverty of unemployed or underemployed rural residents and the community poverty of inadequate service institutions. If the existing mutually reinforcing and cumulative patterns in rural America of low employment levels, community disintegration, inadequate human development programs, high taxation, and cultural isolation are to be corrected or reversed, new or expanded economic activity must be brought to rural areas.

A rural community attempting to achieve economic growth and development is faced by a dilemma. Adequate physical facilities for rendering essential community services and adequate service programs are prerequisites to the industrialization of rural areas; yet, only industrialization can make available the tax base and other community resources needed to increase public investment in social overhead and improve the service institutions in the typical rural community.

Three major public policy proposals have been offered to deal with economic poverty in rural areas: (1) the relocation of industry to rural areas; (2) the creation of growth centers; and (3) the stimulation, through public subsidy, of continued migration of the rural poor to urban areas.

The location or relocation of industry in rural areas appears to be a logical solution to the economic distress of rural America. Rural areas, it can be argued, have the natural resources and the human resources to sustain industry. And the employment and income that will accompany the industry will begin the revitalization of rural communities and rural life. However, the manpower resources of rural America are geographically maldistributed, and they are generally of a poor quality so far as industrial skills and productivity are concerned.



The concept of the growth center was recently included in federal legislation establishing the U.S. Economic Development Administration. As applied to rural areas, a growth center would be a point at which population is brought together from a number of diverse places to create an urban area with sufficient resources to serve the modern needs of its residents and those of the surrounding rural area. There is disagreement concerning how rural growth centers should be identified and developed, how large they should be, and how many would be needed to employ the rural poor. But the growth center as the focus of rural economic development may have economic advantages over the rural location of industry and its necessary dispersion. Such claimed advantages include: (1) a reduction of commuting time between home and work by centralizing the residences of workers; (2) a larger pool of workers and skills, making specialization of function possible; (3) an economy in transport time and cost; (4) availability of services of an urban character to the surrounding farm population; and (5) usefulness as a staging area for adaptation of many rural migrants to urban life before they move to larger cities.

The third alternative is really a deliberate and planned acceleration of the historical pattern of voluntary relocation by which more than 25 million persons have migrated from rural to urban areas in the past four decades. Government policy would induce the rural poor to move to metropolitan centers through travel, relocation, and income payments. These migrants could receive training either before they leave the rural area or, more probably, at their destinations.

In recent years top political leaders in the United States have condemned the continuation of this historical migration pattern because it results in further urban congestion, in more urban unemployment, in higher costs of public services in urban areas, and in additional tax burdens on present urban residents. In the 1967 amendments to the Economic Opportunity Act, the Congress included the following statement of policy:

It shall not be the purpose of this title or the policy of the Office of Economic Opportunity to encourage the rural poor to migrate to urban areas, inasmuch as it is the finding of Congress that continuation of such migration is frequently not in the best interests of the poor and tends to further congest the already overcrowded slums and ghettos of our Nation's cities.

The recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty for the economic growth and development of depressed rural areas represent acceptance of the growth center concept and the inducement of industry to locate in "area development districts."

Federal planning grants to organize and develop such area development districts, the location of federally supported or subsidized facilities in such growth centers, federal tax incentives and the use of the federal government's procurement practices to stimulate new industries in lagging rural regions—all these proposals were made by the Commission.

Recently, in two separate reports, the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations supported these twin federal goals of encouraging the development of rural growth centers and the use of incentives to locate industry in these centers. In 1966, the Commission recommended the establishment of multipurpose, area-wide public agencies in rural areas to undertake physical, economic, and human resource planning and development programs over multicounty areas. And, just two months ago, the Commission recommended, as part of its call for a national urbanization policy, a federal incentive plan for business and industrial location in rural areas.

### **The Governmental Institutions of Rural America**

Rural poverty both contributes to inadequate governmental institutions in rural areas and is created and perpetuated by these governmental deficiencies. Thus, commonly, the governmental policies and services of rural communities deter economic growth and limit the resources of the rural resident in terms of his health, education, vocational skills, self-respect, and social involvement. On the other hand, the economic resources of the local citizens and of the community are insufficient to maintain more progressive or productive governmental policies and services.

The Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty concluded that rural local government is characterized "particularly by inadequate revenues, unprofessional administration, undersized jurisdictions, and lack of real interest in the problems of poor people." And it called for a structure of government that reflects and responds to the realities that, in recent decades, the area of economic and human activity has broadened substantially and the needs of rural America are now closely linked with urban America.

Specifically, the Commission recommended: (1) that states permit, by enabling legislation, the establishment of area development districts; (2) that states provide planning and technical assistance to such districts; (3) that these districts be so organized as to involve the coordination and cooperation of local governments and private interests; (4) that these area development districts be assigned a full range of responsibilities, including such direct operating functions as

area-wide library systems, health programs, park systems, antipoverty programs, industrial development, vocational training, or pollution abatement; and (5) that adequate federal funds be made available for the support of effective community action antipoverty programs in rural America.

### POTENTIAL AND PROMISE VS. PERFORMANCE

Some sense of the nation's reaction to rural poverty today may be gained by looking briefly at the response on the part of the President, the Congress, and the federal bureaucracy to the recommendations of the report of the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty.

#### Presidential Response

Several observations can be made concerning Presidential response to the report. First, although the report was printed in September 1967, it was not released publicly by the White House until December of that year. Informed observers explain this delay as a deliberate downplaying of the report, because its recommendations embarrassed the administration by exposing not only the poverty of rural America but also the inadequacy of present antipoverty programs and effects. Second, only a small number of the proposals in the report, and none of the significant ones, have been put before the Congress by the President. Third, the National Association for Community Development, just this week, in Kansas City, sponsored its second Conference on Rural Poverty, to get the Commission's report off dead center and to consider the development of a "rural coalition" to pressure the President and Congress to act on the Commission's recommendations.

#### Congressional Response

The response of Congress must be viewed as little better. In 1967, the Congress, in amending the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, declared it to be the purpose of the Act and the policy of the Office of Economic Opportunity "to provide for basic education, health care, vocational training, and employment opportunities in rural America, to enable the poor living in rural areas to remain in such areas and become self-sufficient therein." Yet its current appropriations to the two federal agencies particularly charged with antipoverty efforts in rural areas reveal no sense of urgency or high purpose on the part of Congress to honor its own mandate. Its anticipated appropriation to the OEO for fiscal year 1969 of \$1.87 billion is \$330 million less than it had earlier authorized for that fiscal period. And

while this funding level represents an increase of \$100 million over fiscal year 1968, many existing programs, in rural and urban areas alike, will have to be cut back because of inflation and Congressionally mandated new programs.

The second revealing funding action by Congress involves the Rural Community Development Service. Early in 1965, President Johnson pledged energetic and effective action to insure that full equality of opportunity would be made available to all the people who live in rural America, and he assigned the responsibility for carrying out this pledge to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The USDA then created the Rural Community Development Service (RCDS) to mobilize all available resources, within and outside the Department, and focus them on the rural needy. For this challenging mission, the Congress has never assigned funds to the RCDS for any year of its existence of more than .01 of 1 percent of the total USDA budget, and the appropriation of \$463,000 for fiscal year 1969 represents but a 3 percent increase over the previous fiscal period. Equally revealing—and sobering—is the fact that the Bureau of the Budget has allotted but \$420,000 of this appropriation for the operational use of the RCDS, under the Congressionally mandated \$6 billion reduction of the fiscal 1969 federal budget. This means that the RCDS will see its current operating budget cut by some \$30,000, compared with its budget for fiscal 1968.

### **Administrative Response**

Some administrative actions within the federal OEO in recent months relative to rural poverty have not been reassuring. Shortly after the Economic Opportunity Act became operative in the fall of 1964, the OEO created a Rural Task Force to keep the needs of the rural poor constantly before the agency and to insure that a fair share of OEO resources would be committed to meet these needs. But, from its very beginning, the Rural Task Force staff has been small, with never more than five or six professionals, and the unit has been buried deep in the OEO bureaucratic hierarchy without the attention, let alone the support, of top OEO executives either in Washington or in the regional offices. And, in a reorganization move over a year ago, the Task Force was demoted organizationally to the status of the Rural Programs Branch.

One of the recommendations of the first NACD Conference on Rural Poverty bore fruit when Congress, in its 1967 EOA amendments, established the position within OEO of an Assistant Director for Rural Affairs. It was hoped that this new director would bring new attention and resources within OEO to bear on rural poverty.

However, a number of concerns have been expressed concerning this new position and its status. First, the President delayed almost five months in making the initial appointment to the position. Second, although the legislation suggested some measure of coordinate status of the Assistant Director for Rural Affairs with the Assistant Director for Community Action in Urban Areas, at present the former has but four professionals on his staff compared with several hundred for urban community action programs. Third, after some four months, the mission of this unit has still not been defined. Fourth, there is serious question concerning whether the often claimed urban bias of the OEO has been at all redressed by either the new legislation or the new appointment. Finally, the fact that the new director is white, as are all of his top staff members, is disconcerting to those who remember that one of every five rural poor persons is black.

Over the years, the evidence offered to support the charge that the OEO has an urban bias has been the disproportionately low funding of community action agencies and programs in rural areas. Figures published by the OEO itself show that the proportion of Title II, or Community Action Program (CAP), grants going to rural areas and programs for fiscal year 1965 was 18 percent. For fiscal year 1966, the figure had risen to 24.7 percent and it rose further to 27 percent for 1967. An informed estimate was that it would be close to 30 percent in 1968. While the steady rise over the past four years in CAP funds for the rural poor is encouraging and proper, the fact remains that the present record of but 30 percent rural CAP grants is still indefensibly low when 43 percent of the nation's poor are rural dwellers.

Scholars and some public officials have pointed out repeatedly that both the U.S. Department of Agriculture and its rural constituencies have been more interested in the increased productivity of land, plants, and animals in rural areas than in the increased productivity of rural people. The Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, at several points, echoes this charge and complaint but notes with approval that several USDA agencies, notably the FHA, the RCDS, and the Extension Service, have been making stronger efforts to deal with the unique needs of the rural poor.

However, a recent report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights of its investigation into the economic security of black citizens living in sixteen "Black Belt" counties in Alabama is less kind in its assessment of USDA agencies and programs. Focusing particularly on the Department's food programs and on the activities of the Farmers

Home Administration and the Cooperative Extension Service, the Commission concludes that these programs are "not intervening effectively at any point to provide people who have been victims of slavery and discrimination with an opportunity to lead decent and productive lives."

At the same time, recent newspaper reports have revealed that, in the years since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 went into effect on January 1, 1965, the Farmers Home Administration has loaned more than \$20 million to some 200 segregated recreational facilities in the Deep South. In fairness to the FHA administrator, it should be noted that he was legally supported in these actions until late March of this year by Justice Department and Civil Rights Commission rulings that the loans were exempt from the nondiscrimination provisions of the 1964 act. However, for over three years, the FHA and the USDA have been challenged repeatedly on the ethical propriety of providing federal aid to discriminatory facilities.

#### LACKING: A NATIONAL COMMITMENT

This record of dissembling, delay, and inaction relative to the demonstrated needs of the rural poor is hard to square with the pronouncements and promises of the top leadership of both political parties. One might, and should, ask why it is that the American people, at the peak of the most sustained period of prosperity this or any other nation has ever enjoyed, are unwilling or unable to alleviate rural poverty more effectively and expeditiously.

The National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty responds to this question when it says, early in its report:

The Commission is convinced that the abolition of rural poverty in the United States, perhaps for the first time in any nation, is completely feasible. The nation has the economic resources and the technical means for doing this. What it has lacked, thus far, has been the will.

It is one matter to decry the absence of a commitment by our nation to abolish rural poverty; it is another, and more difficult, matter to outline reasoned and feasible ways of creating such a national commitment. Expose, example, and exhortation have been attempted in recent years to dramatize the plight of the rural poor and to mobilize Americans to a massive and productive response. But the needs of low-income families in rural America remain largely unmet.

The beginning of wisdom in this matter, then, is the realization that without a clear and commanding commitment on the part of the American people to the alleviation or abolition of rural poverty,

we should expect neither sudden nor spectacular results. Further, more attention and effort should be devoted to the building and the testing of models that will explain the failure of our generation to solve this serious social problem, even though we have the time, tools, and technical competence needed.

#### A MODEL: POVERTY, POWER, AND PAYOFFS

The distribution of governmental advantages and disadvantages, through the authoritative allocation of public benefits and costs, is determined in the American political system through the formulation of public policy. The context within which this policy formulation takes place is characterized by pluralism: a social pluralism of numberless, competing interest groups and a governmental pluralism of multiple and often competing decision-making centers.

This matrix of social diversity and governmental fragmentation makes it improbable that any one interest group will dominate and dictate the policy-making processes. Instead, public policy determinations most commonly are made through the process of bargaining, whereby competing interest groups negotiate and accept a mutually beneficial adjustment of differences, with the resulting compromise then ratified as public policy. Stated negatively, any substantial interest group can exercise a veto against public policy decisions deemed injurious to their interest. In this bargaining process, the interest groups with the most bargaining power get the most payoffs from public policy. Conversely, those interest groups with little or no bargaining power tend to be overlooked or disadvantaged in the formulation of public policy.

It is common for those interested in improving the plight and potential of the rural poor to inveigh against the personnel administering the educational-health-welfare complex of agencies and programs in rural America, accusing them of a casual or even a callous response to the rural needy. In saner moments, these critics remember that the mission of these human development agencies and the limits to their resources are defined by legislative action in Washington, in the state capitals, or in county seats; hence, they then criticize the conservative and unprogressive outlook and actions of local and state legislative bodies or the Congress. Also condemned are the dominant agricultural interest groups in rural United States, for their short-sighted, if not irresponsible, devotion to their own selfish interests and their neglect of the tenant farmer, the migrant, the Indian, and other impoverished groups in rural areas.

While the rural poor in recent years have had an increasing num-

ber of advocates, their interests have gained or been granted little representation in the bargaining process by which public policy is formulated at all levels of government. The rural poor are without the political bargaining power that their numbers might deserve. They are, almost universally, without organization, without experienced leadership, without recognition (to say nothing of status), and without either a voice or a vote in the decisions that affect them.

On the other hand, the interests of commercial agriculture are well represented, if not overrepresented, in the bargaining process by which public policies and programs are determined for the federal, state, and local governments. Through purposeful and persistent organizational efforts, experienced and professional leadership, and effective and sustained political action, patterns of every-day working relations have been built up over the years between the leadership of the dominant farm groups and those elective or appointive leaders of government whose decisions affect commercial agriculture. These so-called "policy clusters" of mutually reinforcing interests within and outside of the governmental system have resulted in centers of power capable of challenging, or at times dictating, the will of governors, state legislatures, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, the entire Congress, or even the President. Operationally, these policy clusters mean political power resulting in positive policies with plentiful payoffs for the privileged of rural America, while the powerlessness of the rural poor leads only to policy neglect and pitiful payoffs.

Two decades ago Saul Alinsky, in his *Reveille for Radicals*, argued that the American poor are poor because they are powerless. They are public dependents because they have had neither the opportunity nor the resources to be independent. The most direct and promising route to the elimination of poverty, Alinsky said, is the sharing of social, economic, and political power with the poor. Since such power has rarely, if ever, been surrendered voluntarily, Alinsky called for the disadvantaged and disenfranchised to organize and demand both participation and payoffs in the public and private sectors alike.

There is a strategy suggested here to supplement and support present efforts to aid the rural poor. Instead of relying on national conferences, public commissions, and reports to expose the personal tragedy and social waste of rural poverty, instead of having liberal organizations and persons appearing before the decision-making bodies of the United States as advocates for the rural poor, let us step up public and private efforts to give a sense of common purpose and direction to the various segments of the rural poor and to



help them obtain the organization and techniques of dealing themselves into the American society, economy, and polity. The firmest and most promising fulcrum to bring about change in existing institutions and programs relative to the rural poor is the organized and operational bargaining power of the poor themselves.

Several encouraging experiences to date suggest that the goal of increasing the bargaining power of the rural poor is both feasible and worth seeking. First, there has been limited but encouraging progress toward "the maximum participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups to be served" in the community action agencies organized in rural America under the Economic Opportunity Act. Many noncommercial farmers, nonfarm rural people, and Negroes are now beginning, for the first time, to participate in matters affecting themselves and their families. Efforts in this direction should be continued, strengthened, and expanded. Second, testimony before the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty indicates that the best tactics in organizing the rural poor are to identify and train indigenous organizers and direct their efforts toward a goal that is recognizable and relevant to the group involved. Third, the story of the Poor People's Campaign illustrates that limited goals can be obtained if a group of poor persons is public, positive, and persistent in its activities. For, although large numbers of people were not involved in the campaign and although problems of organization and leadership abounded, the widespread publicity and the dogged resolution of the group contributed in a substantial way to the action of the Department of Agriculture in extending its food programs to all of the so-called "hunger counties" and to the expansion of the free school lunch program by the Congress.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and its agencies can and should play a central role in organizing the poor in rural areas. Already undertaken by USDA agencies have been the organizing of rural community action agencies and the furnishing of technical assistance to them, the organizing and staffing of area development districts, and the training of indigenous leaders and nonprofessional aides. These efforts should be further explored and imaginative new efforts made. The Cooperative Extension Service should recall the contributions it has made, over a period of decades, to the organization of the commercial agriculture sector of rural America and to the strengthening and stabilizing of the institutions related to commercial agriculture. To turn now to the task of sharing the techniques and benefits of organization with the unorganized rural poor would be in keeping with the history and the high accomplishments of the Extension Service.