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NEW ENGLAND AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS COUNCIL

PROCEEDINGS

1968



UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
DURHAM, NEW HAMPSHIRE

NEW ENGLAND
AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS
COUNCIL

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1968 ANNUAL MEETING

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JUNE 17, 18, 19, 1968

RURAL POVERTY 1/

Complacency about rural poverty is a national norm. The seething unrest in urban centers naturally focuses attention on the needs and shrill demands of the millions of American citizens caught in the degrading, frustrating hopelessness of the urban ghetto. The "agony of the inner city" is so great at this moment in time that those rural people caught in a culture of poverty are hidden from national view by smoke from the burning ghettos. Obviously the urban crisis demands prompt and effective emergency measures and even now the dangers of conflict arising out of domestic turmoil are a graver threat to a continuation of the "American Way" of life than anything existing or threatening in Southeast Asia or any where else outside of continental United States.

Corrective measures necessarily must and will be taken in the urban trouble spots of our nation. Such action is in the nature of an analgesic; the severity of the symptoms are reduced and the patient can continue to function. Aspirin can get many of us through the harassing business of living but it hardly corrects basic organic difficulties. As long as the deplorable conditions of the urban ghetto are superior, as they are, to a life of rural poverty, the rural poor will serve as a wellspring to keep the problems of the inner city flourishing. Based on national hearing experiences, the urban ghetto is preferable to rural poverty primarily since in the urban environment social services are better; medical services more nearly adequate; visibility is higher; there is greater availability of employment; and the educational opportunities for children are significantly better. Given this condition, which is factually demonstrable, there is a need for a national concern and a national effort in the area of rural poverty.

Facts About Rural Poverty

John S. McCauley of the U.S. Department of Labor, in a recent paper presented to the Northeastern Manpower Advisory Committee, summarized the nature of the rural poverty problem exceptionally well. He said:

"Most rural communities (have) provided only limited opportunities for education and employment. In addition, the health and welfare services were generally far more limited than those available in urban areas.

"---Nearly half the poverty in the United States is in rural America. The families of hired farm workers, migratory farm workers, and sharecroppers are chronically poor, with incomes often less than \$1,000 per year. Out-migration has taken some of the more

1/ SOURCE: Dr. Libby, NEAEC Durham, June 18, 1968.

productive workers, while apathy and lack of motivation--due to the frustrations of continued failure and to the accumulated effects of inadequate nutrition and health care--affect many of those who remain.

"The market for skills that are required in agriculture has long been depressed. The quality of elementary and secondary schooling has been and continues to be far below par. Thus the oncoming generation from these areas is ill-prepared to take advantage of the strong market for high skills in other parts of the economy."

Perhaps a few specific statistics arising from the careful documentation assembled by the Commission on Rural Poverty may flesh-out the image a bit.

Here are a few general facts:

**While only 29% of the U.S. population is rural, over 41% of Americans in the poverty class live in rural America.

**Studies on the incidence of poverty indicate that in metropolitan areas one person in every eight falls in the poverty class; in suburbia one in every fifteen; in rural America one person in every four is confronted by the hopelessness of poverty.

**Of the nearly 14 million rural poor it is significant to note that three-quarters (78%) are white and one quarter (22%) are non-white. So while our poverty problem is confused quite commonly with a racial problem, here in poverty is an area in which racial equality may be closer to achievement.

**In fairness, however, it should be noted that the rural non-white has a better opportunity to be poor since 60% of the rural non-whites are in poverty class.

**It should be recognized that essentially the rural poor are not farmers. They live on the land but not from the land.

Observations About Rural Poverty in New England.

Factual information about the incidence of rural poverty in New England is fragmentary and perhaps misleading. National standards at whatever level need interpreting in terms of regional differences. Apparently farm families can secure a comparable level of living at about 5% of what is needed by urban families but even this kind of generalization is dangerous when one recognizes the environmental and social differences which exist between, let us say, Fort Kent, Maine and Biloxi, Mississippi.

Observation leads to the conclusion that poverty data, based on the national census, are basically inadequate. Documentation through in-depth analysis, almost house-by-house, in representative sample areas

is needed. Information on family income in relation to costs of living, including not only the standard items but also qualitative judgments on such things as health services, transportation facilities and education, would be valuable. Rural poverty is unquestionably more serious in northern New England (Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont) than in the more industrialized and affluent states of southern New England. The extent and location of the problem must be known before effective remedies can be applied.

I have no reason to believe that the one in four ratio for the incidence of poverty in rural America is any wider in northern New England unless, of course, the influx of professional people into the area has offset some of the rural native population.

From the mass of available data which are interpreted in various ways, it seems to be an inescapable fact that poverty in rural New England is a very real and pressing social problem. It seems that poverty is much more serious with rural non-farm than with farm people (which is bad enough) and the more rural the area the more serious the problem.

Observation and an examination of often conflicting interpretation of census data lead to the conclusion that there is considerable social and economic decay behind rural New England's white clapboard facade.

A Few Possible Answers

No matter what your personal opinions may be about the seriousness of the problem, all will agree that to the extent it exists it needs to be corrected. The National Commission on Poverty issued a Statement of Beliefs to which I subscribe and commend your attention. To quote out of context is hazardous but let me nonetheless give you a summation principle from this statement:

"The cost to the nation of rural poverty is much too high to permit its continuance. We believe the time for action against rural poverty has arrived."

The Commission on Rural Poverty made more than 150 specific recommendations. Many of you have read and discussed these recommendations. It seems desirable to sort out just a few of these and try to give their implementation potentials a New England flavor:

Federal Government as an Employer

The recommendation reads:

That the United States Government stand ready to provide jobs at the national minimum wage, or better, to every unemployed person willing and able to work. (P. 19, Commission Report).

Another quotation which has pertinency and the origin of which is lost in modern antiquity is: "The best cure for poverty is money."

The careful social scientist will call our attention to the fact that this is gross over-simplification and should be hedged about with alot of "providing thats" and a few "whereases". I'll accept any reservations raised about Money and Money Alone as a cure for poverty yet I'll stand on the fact that this particular answer is a resasonable starting point.

I am completely convinced, on the basis of personal knowledge and exposure, that most rural people in a condition of poverty want work. The tremendous gap between the cultures of those in our middle class and those in the poverty class are thoroughly recognized since attitudinal and value differences are certainly very evident and substantial. Yet attitudes towards work between economic groups are very similar. There is general recognition that through work one secures desirable living standards and maintains self respect and dignity.

I thoroughly subscribe to the notion that to the extent the private sector cannot absorb at a national minimum wage level all unemployed people willing and able to work that the public sector should.

To look at this recommendation from the viewpoint of New England is to recognize that it could relate to the deep concern many of us feel for the quite obvious and dismaying deterioration which has taken place in the quality of our natural environment. It is quite conceivable that in some way the need of New England's rural poor for gainful, productive employment could be combined with the possibility for enhancing environmental quality. It does not take too much imagination to conceive of a system whereby communities on a regional basis might qualify for community improvement projects which would be supplied manpower from those unemployed or underemployed rural poor. Such projects could be designed on a regional basis and, in fact, might serve as a focus point about which regional planning might be structured. In Northern New England it has been difficult to involve communities in a regional planning effort. Instead they tend to "go it alone" and thus limit their ability to attract adequate funding to achieve common goals or even to identify common goals.

The Land-grant University and Rural Poverty

A series of recommendations suggest specific areas for land-grant institutional activity. In essence these recommendations call for:

1. Special efforts by Cooperative Extension to help younger, low income farmers decide whether or not to stay in farming.

(Chapter 5).

2. Training of professional and sub-professional aides by Cooperative Extension to work as homemaking teams with low income rural families. (Chapter 5).
3. Development by Cooperative Extension of a more comprehensive youth program focused on individual development. (Chapter 5).
4. Strengthened research and educational programs in the area of the adjustment problems of peoples and communities. (Chapter 5).
5. Broadening the extension education effort to encompass the breadth of disciplines found within the modern university. (Chapter 5).
6. Assignment to C.E.S. of special responsibilities in the area of major social and economic problems with a strengthening of C.E.S. staff through employing staff members in a variety of disciplines to provide the necessary professionals to carry the responsibility . (Chapter 11).
7. Restructuring C.E.S. into an area development basis with close cooperation between the Office of Economic Opportunity and C.E.S. (Chapter 11).

This is a frightening charge if we are to take it seriously. As a member of the Commission I supported these recommendations. They speak for the proven capacity of the various sub-divisions of the land-grant university as an effective force for bringing about change.

While it is not evident in the Commission Report, it should be noted that frequently there were strong elements of doubt expressed as to the ability of Extension in particular and the land-grant university in general to undertake productive programs designed to help with the social and economic problems of the rural underprivileged. Many feel that the orientation of the land-grant university, especially in more rural states, is towards the middle class citizen and his concern. It was accepted that historically the research and educational programs of the land-grant institution have been successful in changing for the better the nature and character of rural America. In the process a highly efficient and industrialized agricultural society has evolved. The components of this rural middle class society have made the colleges of agriculture within the universities their own---looking to them or other institutional sub-divisions for the higher education of their children, for research answers to their economic problems, for educational programs to help resolve their social and economic concerns and for the further development of their leadership. Quite understandably, it is stated, state university are not about to disavow the clientele group from which they have traditionally derived their strength. The land-grant university and middle class rural America have fought the battle

together for about a century and it is not reasonable to expect a sudden change in direction or emphasis.

So many have argued, without in any way condemning the public university, that new institutional arrangements should be made with funding and direction for these new organizations coming from the Federal Government which is not subject to the traditions and mores of local or county government or the citizenry.

Yet this Commission report calls for new institutional effort or for a redirection of present efforts by the land-grant university. Insofar as New England is concerned, is this charge an appropriate one? And if it is, what might be done to bring meaning to the recommendations?

It is my opinion that the charges are entirely appropriate. The land-grant university can and should do those things which have been recommended by the Commission. There is a wide gap, however, between what can and what will be done.

I believe that the Cooperative Extension Services in our several institutions should be given the responsibility and the support for developing the programs called for in these recommendations. I believe, furthermore, that only through Cooperative Extension could a reasonable degree of institutional success be expected. Unfortunately, Cooperative Extension may be unable to rise to the challenge. Powerful forces mitigate against massive involvement in these problems except to the extent that resources can be redirected administratively. Some Extension organizations, among them Maine I am proud to say, have at least tried to develop new approaches and new programs. These efforts, however, are not of sufficient scale or speed to achieve the necessary progress.

Since, in my opinion, involvement of C.E.S. is critical in this war on rural poverty, it is important to identify some of the forces which limit effectiveness. From my experiences, let me cite a few of these which seem to work against implementation of the Committee's recommendations insofar as the land-grant universities are concerned:

1. Given the pressures of undergraduate student enrollment which have continued to mount during the past ten years, the necessary public funds to employ additional and well qualified faculty members are obtained with great difficulty. There is no evidence to indicate that universities are able, willing or even interested in locating and directing new resources or redirecting present resources into this battle. In Maine, for example, no new positions have been created for Extension during the past ten years and our salaries are relatively lower than in other New England States and nationally. Redirection of resources can partially fill the gap. The problems of the rural underprivileged do not press in upon the New England land-grant universities with quite the same force as do other

problems of our society. We can ignore this poverty problem because, perhaps unfortunately, rural New England poor are not an identifiable group; they are not organized; they have neither legislative representatives nor lobby.

2. Given present internal institutional attitudes towards Cooperative Extension I see no indication that faculty members in such social science disciplines as economics, political, science, sociology or psychology are seeking joint or full time appointments with C.E.S. Frankly, the prestige value of C.E.S. employment is not so high as to attract faculty members away from undergraduate or graduate teaching, from research, from adult education or from scholarly activities. The possibility of direct involvement in the current problems of our society through C.E.S. program efforts does not excite the average faculty member even when he espouses a highly developed social consciousness.
3. Given present legal requirements and attitudes it does not seem likely that the Office of Economic Opportunity will contract with Cooperative Extension to do those things which C.E.S. can do better than O.E.O. To illustrate, the Commission recommended that homemaking teams of professional and sub-professional aides be trained to work with families in the poverty class. The need is legitimate; no one can do this better than C.E.S. It seems logical to me that the Rural Services Division of O.E.O. should purchase this kind of program from C.E.S. Such a procedure does not line up with established policy nor the desire to create a strong, separate and independent agency.

All of this adds up, as I view it, to an inability of the land-grant university to undertake substantially more meaningful efforts with the rural poor. No additional state resources will be available and funds from Federal agencies are not apt to be channeled into the land-grant budget even on a contractual job basis. This, then, leaves the land-grant college in a position of meeting the need only through manipulation of present personnel and funds and in response to the sense of justice which may exist in the administrative offices. No sudden revolution in program emphasis will occur.

Summary Recommendations

Rural poverty is a fact of life in New England and-for that matter-in all of the Northeast. The Puritan ethic is strong within the area and our people tend to view poverty as the fitting reward for indolence and lack of economic judgment. There is less awareness of the problem than in many sections where concentrations of rural poverty attract attention.

I wish to suggest that the social scientists in the New England land-grant insitutions could quite reasonably undertake two significant efforts, neither of which should disturb the status quo too seriously nor distract our staff from what may be more significant areas of academic inquiry and study:

1. I would like to see this conference prepare a resolution directed to Dr. John Donovan of Bowdoin College, who is Chairman of the Regional Advisory Manpower Committee, asking that funds be made available on a project basis to enable sociologists in Northern New England to plan and direct a study in selected rural sample areas to measure the degree of unemployment and underemployment with which we are confronted. I would like to see such a study carefully constructed so that the quality of life in rural sections comes in for evaluation also. Furthermore, I would believe it to be desirable for this conference to name three people as an ad hoc committee to study the possibility of a regional study in this area and to promote a study concept with the Department of Labor.
2. I urge departments of agricultural economics and/or rural sociology to evaluate critically those recommendations made by the Commission on Rural Poverty directed towards the land-grant institutions (the seven I have mentioned earlier) to determine whether or not your departments feel any responsibility for attempting to meet the charges as set forth. Certainly if the separate departments represented here feel no particular responsibility for undertaking programs directed towards the rural poor there is little excuse for institutions maintaining the fantasy that we feel a responsibility in this area. It is my opinion that this is a case of unilateral and individual evaluation. If, for example, the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of Maine were to decide that these kinds of activity were not appropriate to the interests and resources of the department I would rest the case there and consider the issue closed with the burden for change falling on the Federal agencies assigned the responsibility.

As a final work, I commend to your earnest attention the publication, "The People Left Behind", which came from the Commission's study and deliberations. It is worthy of our personal and careful thought.

W. C. Libby
June 18, 1968
New England Agricultural Economics Council
Durham, New Hampshire