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National Rural Development Partnership

ERS Staff Paper

Number 9508

AN OVERVIEW

ASSESSMENT OF THE

NATIONAL RURAL

DEVELOPMENT

PARTNERSHIP

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Intergovernmental Partnerships and Rural Development: An Overview Assessment of the National Rural Development Partnership. By Beryl A. Radin, Robert Agranoff, Ann O'M. Bowman, C. Gregory Buntz, J. Steven Ott, Barbara S. Romzek, and Robert H. Wilson. Rural Economy Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Staff Paper No. AGES 9508.

Abstract

In 1990, a new intergovernmental mechanism was adopted in an attempt to improve the way rural development programs and policies are developed and administered. Now known as the National Rural Development Partnership, this initiative centers around the activities of Rural Development Councils established at the State and National level. Based on case studies of 16 State Councils and their Washington, DC-based counterpart, this report examines how the Councils have evolved and what they have accomplished, individually and in partnership with one another, during their formative years.

Keywords: State Rural Development Councils, National Rural Development Partnership, rural development policy, rural policy networks

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Acknowledgements

In September 1992, the Economic Research Service (ERS) entered into a cooperative research agreement with the Washington Public Affairs Center of the University of Southern California to study the National Rural Development Partnership, focusing on State Rural Development Councils in 16 States and the associated Washington-based activities. In addition to ERS support, financial resources were also made available by the Rural Policy Program of the Aspen Institute. This study continued an effort supported by the Ford Foundation that monitored the original 8 State Councils.

Headed by Beryl A. Radin, now with the State University of New York at Albany, the research team was composed of 8 individuals, located in academic institutions around the country: Robert Agranoff with Indiana University; Ann O'M. Bowman with the University of South Carolina; C. Gregory Buntz with the University of Pacific; J. Steven Ott with the University of Maine; Barbara S. Romzek with the University of Kansas; Thomas M. Sykes with Evergreen State College; and Robert H. Wilson with the University of Texas at Austin. David W. Sears with ERS provided oversight for the research, along with a group of individuals on the National Rural Development Council's Outcome Monitoring Team. Research assistance was provided by Melissa Benton, Anita Bose, Jill Holtzman, Elizabeth Hubbard, and Lisa Lucadamo. Editorial assistance was provided by Thomas McDonald.

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Highlights

About the National Rural Development Partnership

In 1990, the Federal Government, in conjunction with 8 State governments, embarked on an experiment to conduct business differently in the rural development arena. This new approach--the National Rural Development Partnership--is built around the establishment of a new set of institutions. At the center of this initiative are State Rural Development Councils.

In the years since the initial "pilot" Councils were established, new Councils have been created in most States so that by late 1994, 39 State Councils were operating. A handful of additional Councils will probably be added in 1995. Each Council is initiated by a formal joint agreement between the Federal Government and the State's Governor. These 2 parties--along with local and tribal governments and the private and nonprofit sectors--voluntarily join hands in an effort to improve the way rural development activities within the State are conducted. Council participation is not driven by access to new program dollars; rather, with its limited budget, the Council aims to use existing Federal, State, and local resources more effectively.

The organization and activities of the Councils vary as each responds to the specific needs and conditions of its State. Headed by a full-time paid executive director, each Council relies heavily upon the time and energy volunteered by its members, who represent many of the key rural development players in the State.

The National Rural Development Partnership has, over the past 5 years, undertaken a number of assessments intended to provide feedback on the Partnership experience. This report provides an overview of the most ambitious of these studies. Looking at the Partnership over the first 4 years of its existence, the authors focused on 16 State Councils, representing 3 different generations. Eight of the Councils--Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington--were the first generation, often referred to as the "pilot" Councils, established in 1990. Four Councils--Iowa, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Vermont--represent the second generation, those that were created in response to a late 1991 Presidential call for new State Councils. The other 4 Councils studied--New York, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming--were established more recently.

In addition to this report, 2 companion volumes were published by the National Rural Development Partnership. **Intergovernmental Partnerships and Rural Development: State Rural Development Councils in 16 States** provides detailed information on each of the State Councils studied, and **Intergovernmental Partnerships and Rural Development: Profiles of 29 State Rural Development Councils** provides background statistics on each of the States that had an active Rural Development Council by mid-1994.

The National Rural Development Partnership and the State Councils are all works in progress. They are evolving mechanisms that are being designed--and constantly redesigned--as they operate. Thus, the research team's findings must be viewed as an interim report on how things are progressing, not as a final report on the Partnership's impact on rural America. The

main purpose of these findings is to provide feedback to those involved in the design and operation of the Partnership.

Key Findings

While each Council is different, and generalizations do not apply equally to all, the research team identified several characteristics and trends that frame the development of the State Councils and help define them. In the broadest terms, this study concludes that:

- ◆ the Partnership effort is unique among intergovernmental arrangements;
- ◆ the key and pervasive characteristic of the Partnership is collaboration among participants;
- ◆ despite limited resources, the Partnership effort reflects a great deal of energy at all levels;
- ◆ in their early years, Councils have tended to focus heavily on organization and process issues as they dealt with a constantly changing environment; and
- ◆ while some Councils appear to have been more effective than others, as a group the Councils can boast of modest early successes along a number of dimensions.

The Partnership Is Unique

The Partnership represents a unique combination of intergovernmental relationships. Most attempts at improving relationships among governmental entities concentrate entirely on either vertical (Federal-State-local) or horizontal (interagency or interorganizational within a single government) relationships. In contrast, the Partnership is aimed at both. The Partnership is intended to deal with all the issues facing rural America and to cut across virtually every public program and policy at all levels of government. Each State Council reflects an attempt to improve relationships among several governments as well as among several agencies within each of these governments--all on behalf of rural development goals.

- ◆ **The overriding Federal role is that of participant and facilitator, not controller.** The Councils have come to view the Federal agencies and actors as resources, not as roadblocks with imposing sets of rules and regulations. Councils only slowly learned and accepted this nontraditional role for the Federal Government, although the newer Councils spent less time on this discovery process than did the 8 pilot Councils. This facilitator role of the Federal players helped create within the Councils a sense of collective enterprise.
- ◆ **Specific Council relationships with State and local governments varied considerably** across Councils and over time. Initially, few of the 8 pilot Councils emphasized the involvement of local officials (or their surrogates). By 1993, however, both the original and newer Councils had developed methods for reaching beyond the State government to focus on localities and their concerns.

The second-generation Councils differ in 2 ways from the first generation. First, during their organizing phase, the second-generation Councils tended to be much closer to the governor and other top State officials. Their agendas, therefore, meshed more harmoniously with ongoing State activities, and the membership was more likely to include top State officials. Second, the second-generation Councils learned from the

experience of the first generation and "caught on" faster, especially in their ability to work effectively and advantageously with Washington, DC-based Partnership officials.

Collaboration Is Key

Collaboration is a key and pervasive characteristic of the Partnership. The Partnership combines aspects of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to designing and operating a new institutional structure. This means that ideas for action originate in many places and move both upward and downward and that decision-making is widely shared among partners. This applies both to the Partnership as a whole and to the individual State Councils. The collaborative ethic both supports and draws upon the wide array of constituent groups participating in the Partnership. Collaboration within the Councils has improved coordination across agency and government boundaries on policymaking and program implementation.

- ◆ The **top-down approach was designed to facilitate various bottom-up initiatives**. In Washington, and within Federal agencies, a top-down approach was used to announce the Partnership's original basic direction and to communicate the expectation that Federal agencies would participate. Within the Councils, however, Federal actors serve as equals with other Council members. The bottom-up aspect of the Partnership involves a process in which the Councils serve as the primary source of ideas for action and the Federal actors play a facilitative role in responding to Council-generated ideas.
- ◆ During their initial months (even years), the State Councils spent much of their time and energy establishing themselves as **networks to facilitate collaboration**. They were "contrived networks" in that they were not created spontaneously but instead were stimulated by the Federal Government. On the other hand, the Councils were not mandated in law, and few new resources accompanied the Councils. Thus, the rapidity and enthusiasm with which Councils were formed suggests that these networks filled a need.

Networks are valuable in policy arenas like rural development because the individual members cannot achieve their goals by operating alone. Formally autonomous but functionally interdependent organizations require collaborative mechanisms to implement meaningful initiatives. Through their collaborative networks, the Councils have smoothed the process of program implementation.

Key to the success of Council collaborative efforts is convening the actors--in short, getting the right people to the table. This has been a major accomplishment, as past contact among officials had tended to be limited in scope and effect. The collaborative approach does not always end conflicts or solve disagreements, but does provide a mechanism for participants to manage their points of tension and to appreciate better the perspectives of other players.

- ◆ A key aspect of the Partnership was the establishment of a **learning system**, where the participants can learn from one another. Councils are provided multiple opportunities each year to share ideas and experiences with other Councils. In general, the Councils are stronger because of these opportunities for learning and feedback.

Councils Embody High Energy, But Keep A Low Profile

State Council members bring a very high level of commitment and energy to the effort. Despite the vagaries of intra-Council relationships and the constantly changing environment in which the Councils operate, participants were willing to spend their time and energy--extremely scarce resources for most Council members--on Council activities. In most Councils, members were not content to let the full-time paid executive director provide all the leadership for the Council; instead, Council members participated in shared leadership.

The Councils generally adopted a **low visibility, low risk** posture. The Councils were designed, by-and-large, to fill gaps and take advantage of opportunities, not to charge ahead as strong leaders. Councils do not deliver services or make policy decisions. Rather, they try to get existing institutions to work better together. To do so, Councils try to avoid turf battles with their member institutions and shun strong positions on politically charged issues.

The "low visibility, low risk" description of the Council role applies to all Councils, but to different degrees. The Councils were more important and more visible in small, homogeneous, and largely rural States. In contrast, the Councils tended to be less visible and play a less important role in larger States with their more diverse population and tension between urban and rural constituencies. Nonetheless, none of the Councils is viewed as "the" rural policy center of their State and none has yet attempted to define a comprehensive rural development strategy for their State.

Emphasis on Organization and Process

Throughout the study period, the Councils have focused most of their attention on organizational and process issues. It is not surprising that the creation of entirely new intergovernmental mechanisms should require attention to the way things are done rather than on tangible traditional products. Efforts such as this one require tremendous investment in process issues.

- ◆ Within the State Councils is found both a **synergy and a tension between an emphasis on process and an emphasis on product**. On the one hand, because of the emphasis on collaboration and flexibility and the inclusion of many partners, the State Council must devote substantial time and energy to developing a process in which its members will invest. For without a widely and strongly supported process, a Council cannot hope to produce a significant product. On the other hand, some Council members and observers have been impatient about the amount of time and energy devoted to setting up a process rather than dealing with substantive rural development issues. Many Councils have had difficulty in agreeing on the proper balance between process and product.
- ◆ Part of the reason that process issues are paramount is because the Councils operate within an environment characterized by turbulence and **constant change**. This change comes from several sources. First, the political environment has shifted. Many State Councils have lived through a change of State government administration. At the national level, the Clinton administration inherited the Partnership only 2 years after its formation. In addition, the Federal role has been moving from a controlling or directing posture to a role as catalyst, facilitator, and collaborative partner. Second, changes have occurred in

the economic environment, as both national and regional economic contractions and expansions have occurred over the past 4 years. In addition, the physical environment has produced some important changes; for instance, many Councils in the Midwest found it necessary to respond to the problems created by the 1993 floods.

Other changes within the Councils are internally generated, as membership evolves over time, constantly bringing in new players with their own ideas and agendas for Council action. This constantly changing environment has meant that the Partnership as a whole has not focused on a single unwavering goal. Because of the constant change, State Councils must be acutely aware that what works today may not be effective tomorrow.

Expectations Should Be Modest

The Partnership has achieved no consensus on what might--or should--be accomplished through the Councils. The diverse institutions and individuals participating on the Councils and in the Partnership result in multiple viewpoints which change as circumstances warrant. And given an environment of constant change (including changing goals and objectives) and limited resources, expecting the Councils to have major impacts on rural policy and programs would be unrealistic. Rather, modest expectations, both for the Partnership as a whole and for the individual State Councils, are warranted.

- ◆ Judging success of the Councils and the Partnership is not easy when the participants have not reached consensus on what is to be achieved. While most rural development efforts are ultimately aimed at improving the economy of rural areas (and, as a result, indirectly aimed at improving the living conditions of rural residents), **the Councils cannot be assessed in terms of their immediate effect on jobs and income.** This is true for at least 2 reasons. First, the Councils' impact on jobs and income would necessarily be quite indirect, through the building of collaborative arrangements that might in turn lead to a stronger rural economy. Second, the Councils are too new to expect such impacts; this is true because development is a process requiring considerable patience.
- ◆ Assessed along other dimensions, however, **the Councils can boast of modest successes** based on extremely early returns. A relatively small budget produced visible and often useful activity. All the Councils succeeded in establishing networks--or upgrading existing ones--that enable key rural development players to collaborate more effectively. Participants were willing to spend time and energy on the effort. The Councils have been able to deal with a wide range of rural issues, going well beyond traditional agricultural concerns into areas such as human services and environmental quality. Most Councils have had some impact on rural development resource allocation, but this effect generally has been quite indirect and modest. Looking across all Councils, a number of examples can be found of projects that demonstrate new ways of thinking and acting. On the other hand, the Councils have had little or no success increasing the visibility of rural development as an issue.

Some Councils have been more effective than others; this is true whether effectiveness is measured against each Council's own goals or against an absolute standard. Yet, overall, the Partnership has been useful and has made some significant contributions.

Nonetheless, the Partnership is extremely fragile and vulnerable. It is a challenge to embark on a journey that rejects conducting business as usual. In the case of the Partnership, this effort is not yet firmly institutionalized. Successes to date, however, indicate that the Partnership is worth defending.

Other Key Findings

- ◆ In their membership, operations, and goals, the State Councils have exhibited **great diversity**. The Partnership has been designed to encourage this diversity. While some of the differences found among State Councils reflect the unique environment encountered by each, many of the differences result from the Councils' varying responses to similar circumstances. The Partnership design acknowledges that "one size doesn't fit all." Many of the specific activities that have taken place in the Councils were developed to take advantage of unique opportunities to share information, to develop common norms, and to solve problems.
- ◆ A look at the Councils over the 1992-94 period shows the **extraordinary flexibility** these institutions possess. Council operations and membership evolved in response to environmental changes and to take advantage of opportunities to pursue unique rural development approaches. The State Councils' flexibility is both a reflection of and a response to flexibility at the Federal level.

Unlike most public sector initiatives, the Partnership has worked hard to structure itself in non-rigid, non-bureaucratic ways. At the Federal level, the Partnership has been very willing to change procedures and move resources around to better serve the State Councils. This, in turn, has stimulated the Councils to think in new ways and to engage in new behaviors. While a feature of the effort, flexibility is difficult to protect inside traditional large bureaucratic organizations. The flexibility of the Partnership, therefore, hangs by a slender thread.

- ◆ Typically, **Councils focus on specific problems** brought to their attention by members or by the State's rural communities. Within this framework, 3 different Council approaches have emerged. The first is "fine-tuning," which involves the Council in improving coordination and/or cooperation among existing programs. A second approach is "project-oriented," which involves working on a specific issue or on a variety of problems for a specific region or community. In choosing projects on which to focus, Councils are typically reactive, dealing with issues one at a time as they come up rather than in a proactive and systematic fashion. The third approach--found only in a few cases--involves the Council in a "major shift" away from rural development business as usual.
- ◆ **Executive directors have played a key role** in guiding the Councils as staff facilitators. Effective executive directors were those who had organizational skills, were able to deal with a diverse array of individuals, were able to think and act strategically (i.e., they could work simultaneously on short-term and long-term activities, and they could work simultaneously on process and product goals), and were able to tolerate ambiguity. Council members played strong roles in most Councils, sharing leadership with the executive director. While executive directors must often work closely with the State's

political institutions, it was also important for them to keep some distance from short-term political turmoil.

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Introduction

This is an analysis of governmental problem solving by an unusual group of public and private officials, located in Washington, DC and across the country, committed to improving opportunities for rural Americans. In January 1990, President George Bush announced the steps his administration would take "to strengthen the delivery of Federal support for rural development." Then-Secretary of Agriculture Clayton Yeutter was instructed "to implement six proposals designed to improve the coordination of rural development programs and serve as a catalyst for future initiatives."¹ On its face, this effort looked much like past attempts to "do something" about rural America. Rural policy prescriptions had emerged from previous administrations only to disappear as those administrations left office. This initiative, by contrast, has transcended a change of administration as the Clinton administration has seen that this approach to rural development meshes with its desire to "reinvent government."

Among the efforts undertaken by this initiative was the creation of State-level Rural Development Councils to coordinate rural development efforts among Federal departments and agencies and establish collaborative relationships with States, local governments, tribal governments, and the private sector. By the end of 1990, State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs) were established in 8 States. By the end of 1994, despite the change of administration that had occurred in January 1993, SRDCs were operating in 39 States (figure 1). In addition, the Washington-based interagency activity that also began in 1990 (today known as the NRDC--the National Rural Development Council) continued with representatives from 60 agencies. All of these activities comprise the National Rural Development Partnership.

This overview provides an analysis of this effort and traces the development of the Partnership over time. It focuses on SRDCs in 16 States and explores the structures, processes, and activities that have emerged from these Councils.² Given the constant change that surrounds the Partnership's activities, this overview should be viewed as a snap shot of an evolving process. The situations described here are likely to have already changed, reflecting

¹ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, January 22, 1990.

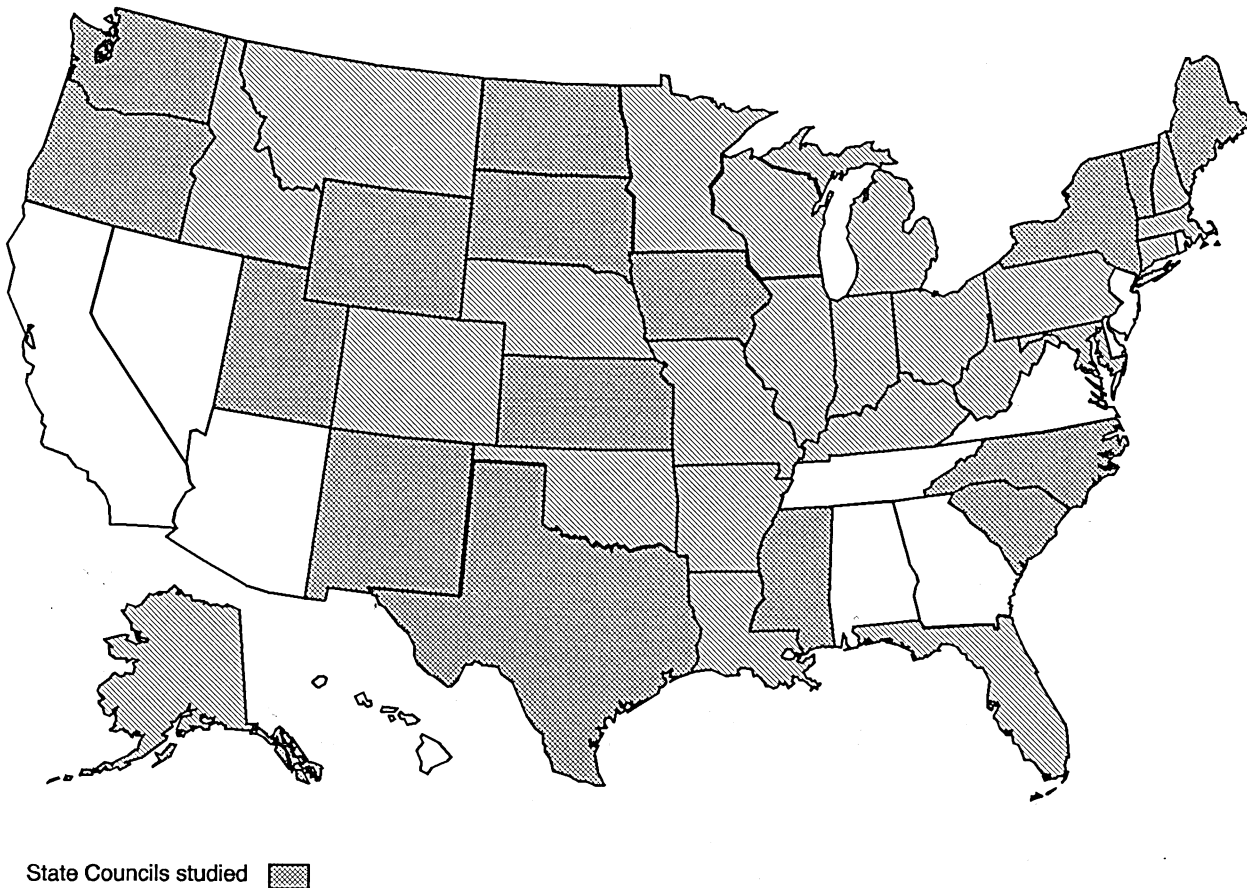
² Individual case studies of the 16 states are found in a separate volume, Intergovernmental Partnerships and Rural Development: State Rural Development Councils in 16 States (Washington, DC: National Rural Development Partnership, 1995).

the range of political, social, and economic developments that constantly occur both within the States and in the National Government. However, while the details may no longer reflect today's reality, the general patterns described in this volume continue.

The 16 States studied represent three different generations of Rural Development Council activity. Eight of the States--Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington--were the original pilot States set up in 1990; they have been classified as "the first generation." Four States--Iowa, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Vermont--are viewed as "the second generation" since they responded to the initial request for expansion. Four States--New York, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming--were more recent entrants into the Council activity and represent the "third generation" of SRDCs.

Figure 1

States with Active SRDCs, 1994



The Methodology and Study Approach

Since 1991, a team of 8 academics has studied the State Rural Development Councils and associated Washington-based activities of the National Rural Development Partnership. Using a variation on the field network methodology,³ the team was organized to monitor the original 8 pilot States during their formative stages. An initial study of the 8 pilot State Councils was supported by the Ford Foundation through the State Policy Program of the Aspen Institute.⁴ The continuing study was funded by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and by the Aspen Institute.

As the SRDC effort expanded, the study was enlarged beyond the original 8 States to include 8 additional States--for a total of 16 State Councils. The additional 8 States were chosen to reflect geographic variation, diverse socioeconomic characteristics, and accessibility to the research team members. The study included extensive interviews with Council participants, analysis of written materials, and observation at various Council meetings. In addition, information on the Partnership's Washington-based activities was collected through similar observations, including in-depth interviews with participants in the interagency National Rural Development Council.

The data collection approach was devised to capture the multiple perspectives of the various participants in the process, providing both a bottom-up (from participants in the 16 State Councils) as well as a top-down (from the Washington-based participants) vantage point. The organization of the study itself emphasized a high degree of collaboration and interaction. Each member of the study team was responsible for preparing case studies on at least 1 and up to 4 SRDCs. Regular team meetings provided the setting for the exchange of data (allowing a comparative analysis) as well as the formulation of conclusions and generalizations.

³ See Richard P. Nathan, "The Methodology for Field Network Evaluation Studies," in Studying Implementation, edited by Walter Williams (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1982). Also Robert Agranoff and Beryl A. Radin, "The Comparative Case Study Approach in Public Administration," in Research in Public Administration, Volume I, pp. 203-231.

⁴ Beryl A. Radin, Rural Development Councils: Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. A Report to the State Rural Policy Program of the Aspen Institute (Washington, DC: University of Southern California, Washington Public Affairs Center, 1991).

The Conceptual Framework for the Study

There are two bodies of literature used to frame this study: one deals with federalism and intergovernmental relationships; the second focuses on rural development.

Federalism and Intergovernmental Relationships

Federalism in the United States has been characterized by constantly changing expectations about the relationships between levels of government and accusations about the appropriateness of behaviors of Federal, State, or local governments. The tension between Federal concerns for control (sometimes described as accountability systems) and demands for autonomy (particularly by State governments) has surfaced on a regular basis. Depending on the political philosophy that is predominant, the pendulum has swung between bottom-up approaches (where the Federal Government defers to States or localities through mechanisms such as block grants) and top-down approaches (where the Federal Government emphasizes compliance with national requirements or standards).

The methods used in the past to develop relationships between levels of government reflect social expectations that produce diverse and often conflicting goals. The strategies that have been employed have had difficulty addressing interdependencies among issues and actors. These approaches to federalism have tended to exacerbate the fragmentation of the American political system, to exclude rather than include interested parties, and to minimize opportunities for cooperation or collaboration across jurisdictions or policy systems.

Over the past decade, however, another approach has developed for handling intergovernmental relations that emphasizes the importance of bargaining, compromise, and networking as essential to decision-making rather than relying on traditional hierarchical command and control approaches. This approach highlights a movement away from a "sorting-out" of intergovernmental roles to an interdependent approach. It focuses on the development of interorganizational networks that include both governmental and non-governmental actors and proceed along a path that includes the acceptance of the independent and separate character of the various members, avoidance of superior-subordinate relationships, interfacing of political and career actors, inclusion of appropriate specialists when needed to focus on technical issues, and agreement to abide by tasks and goals.⁵

The alternative approach focuses on both the process and substantive nature of contemporary issues. It suggests that different processes must be used to reach decisions. But it also draws on the notion of issue networks. Under this concept, developed by Hugh Hecl, an issue network is a "web" of largely autonomous participants with variable degrees of

⁵ Robert Agranoff, Intergovernmental Management: Human Services Problem-Solving in Six Metropolitan Areas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

commitment to or dependence on each other.⁶ The issue network approach provides a way to include various interests in a process, cutting both horizontally (across multiple issues) as well as vertically (down the intergovernmental chain). It also establishes a framework that is responsive to the transient nature of policy coalitions, with various networks established for a particular situation but dissolved when that situation changes.

While this approach has intrigued scholars, it has not been used extensively in the world of practice. Intergovernmental dialogue continues to be characterized by a focus on separate programs, policies, or organizations and a search for clarity and simplicity in the delineation of roles and responsibilities. The debate around intergovernmental issues has been waged at two often contradictory levels: a general, macro and sometimes symbolic approach and, sometimes at the same time, a specific policy approach. Both, however, reflect the high political stakes frequently involved in the determination of lines of authority as well as allocation of resources. As a result, the intergovernmental terrain has been subject to constant uprooting that reflects the ideology and political agenda of the party and officials in power.

However, this policy initiative--the National Rural Development Partnership--seems to be different from other intergovernmental efforts. It has attempted to establish mechanisms that build on both Washington-based and State-based institutions and perspectives. While it does not avoid the natural tension between various participants in the intergovernmental process, it has worked to devise mechanisms that manage that conflict along both vertical (Federal, State, and local) and horizontal (interagency) dimensions. It deals with all of the issues facing rural America and cuts across virtually every public program and policy at all levels of government.

Rural Development

In this study, as in many others, "rural" eludes easy definition. In fact, according to two leading observers of the rural scene, "no universally accepted definition exists".⁷ In their work, these observers have used a practical designation: sparsely populated areas. Even the Federal Government is of more than one mind on what is rural. The U.S. Bureau of the Census designates as rural those areas outside places with populations of 2,500 or more. Alternatively, other agencies classify all counties beyond the borders of Metropolitan Statistical Areas as rural.

A recent attempt at resolving the definitional impasse differentiates rural from urban.⁸ Rural areas are characterized by (1) small scale, low density development as is the case with small

⁶ Hugh Hecl, "Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment," in Anthony King, editor, The New American Political System (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1979), p. 102.

⁷ J. Norman Reid and David W. Sears, 1992, "Symposium on Rural Development Strategies: Introduction," Policy Studies Journal, Vol. 20 (2), p. 215.

⁸ Ken Deavers, as reported in Rural Development: Rural America Faces Many Challenges (Washington, DC: General Accounting Office, 1992), p. 31.

towns and open country, (2) their distance from large urban centers (not only physical distance, but also remoteness due to geographic barriers as well as social and cultural isolation), and (3) the specialization of their economies. In sum, rural areas tend to be somewhat unrelated to the rest of society.

"Development" is another problematic word. Long associated with progress and modernization, the word has generally carried positive connotations. More recently, however, the development process is no longer automatically seen in a positive or neutral light. The rethinking of development has come, in large measure, as a result of the environmental costs associated with the process. Thus development, which had traditionally been measured in terms of economic growth, is increasingly being thought of more broadly with some attention to "natural capital."⁹ Sustainable development, one of the watchwords of the 1990s, grew out of this rethinking of development. "Sustainable development" too suffers from definitional confusion. John¹⁰ reports that one expert stopped counting the various definitions of the term when the count reached sixty.

Understanding rural development requires an untangling of several other phrases: economic development, community development, and agricultural development. Economic development is frequently equated with economic growth and is measured by indicators such as income levels or number of jobs. However, economic development is more than simple growth. It implies a change in the character or structure of the economy of an area. "It refers to a qualitative shift in resource use, labor force skills, production methods, marketing measures, income distribution, and financial capital arrangements."¹¹ One of the broadest definitions of economic development is: "an ongoing process of building and maintaining local and regional institutions which not only generates an acceptable quality of life today but promotes continued and/or enhanced viability into the future."¹² The more developed the community, the greater its ability to adjust to demographic trends and economic shifts. In other words, economic development creates resilience.

Community development and agricultural development are specific, but not necessarily unrelated, types of economic development. Community development focuses upon the economic and social conditions of particular places, large and small. In terms of government programs, those associated with community development have tended to be "bricks and mortar" programs that provide funds for activities such as infrastructure installation and housing rehabilitation. However, more people-oriented government programs such as welfare assistance, job training, and public education are also forms of community development. In

⁹ Gareth Porter and Janet Welsh Brown, Global Environmental Politics (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 30-32.

¹⁰ Dewitt John, Civic Environmentalism (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1994).

¹¹ Matt Kane and Peggy Sand, Economic Development: What Works at the Local Level (Washington, DC: National League of Cities, 1988), p. 10.

¹² David W. Sears, et al., Gearing Up for Success: Organizing a State for Rural Development, (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 1992), p.13.

fact, greater attention to the "human infrastructure" increasingly characterizes community development.

Agricultural development focuses on a sector of the national economy and has traditionally been equated with farming. Rural development differs from agricultural development because of its nonsectoral nature. It has moved beyond agricultural improvement to include other economic sectors such as manufacturing and services. Yet rural development is distinctive in that it focuses on all less populated areas and attendant conditions, not just those dominated by agriculture.

Characteristics of the 16 States

The 16 States where the research team studied the State Rural Development Councils in depth represent a cross-section of the regions of the country, providing good variation in the types of rural economies. The empirical analysis of rural areas confronts a problem of geographic definition, especially when changes over time are analyzed.¹³ At the same time, several patterns are evident in this experience related to population patterns, regional characteristics, political structure and culture, and past rural development activities.

Population Shifts

Over the 1980-90 period, the nonmetropolitan population actually increased in the 16 States by just over 700,000 individuals although 6 of the States did register a decline. A regional pattern can be observed. The Midwestern States--Iowa, Kansas, North Dakota, and South Dakota--lost population while the New England, Southern, and Western States recorded increases in nonmetropolitan population. Even so, all States but 1 had a somewhat smaller share of State population in nonmetropolitan counties in 1990 than in 1980, indicating an increasingly urban population.

With respect to the distribution of the nonmetropolitan population within a State, great variation is found. In most States, the share of the nonmetropolitan population residing in counties with less than 2,500 population declined slightly. In 12 of these 16 States, nonmetropolitan counties adjacent to metropolitan counties increased their share of the nonmetropolitan population, again reflecting the trend observed nationally. Midwestern States had the highest shares of nonmetropolitan population in such counties. New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, New York, and Maine have a majority of their nonmetropolitan population living in counties with between 2,500 and 20,000 population while the remaining States have majorities living in smaller counties.

The age distribution of the nonmetropolitan population in the 16 States followed the national trend. The share of the population over 65 years of age increased in all States and the share of residents less than 18 years of age decreased in all States. The highest levels of the over 65 population were found in the Midwestern States and in Texas, Oregon, and Washington (ranging from 15 to 18 percent). The education levels of the nonmetropolitan population improved in all States, although significant differences in both interstate and intrastate levels remain. Starting from quite low shares of individuals with at least a high school degree, the Southern States improved dramatically in the 1980s.

¹³ Most demographic and economic data are available by county but such a definition masks rural-urban distinctions within a single county. In addition, a rural county may grow over time and eventually become urban. Data from such a community would be classified as rural in one time period and urban the next, complicating the analysis of changes in the rural area. Our solution to this problem is to use the same geographic definition, based on counties, for two points in time. We use the metropolitan/nonmetropolitan definition developed by the Office of Management and Budget in 1983. As a result, our comparisons are consistent in terms of the geographic definition. However, this method does result in the loss of information about rural areas in metropolitan counties and does not provide a means to recognize that a nonmetropolitan county in 1980 may have grown and been reclassified into the metropolitan category by 1990.

The race/ethnic composition of the nonmetropolitan population, although overwhelmingly white, does show some regional variation. The 3 Southern States have around one-third African-American population (Texas has around 9 percent) in nonmetropolitan areas and the share changed little during the 1980s. Texas and, especially, New Mexico have large shares of Hispanic population in nonmetropolitan areas. A sizeable Native American population is found in New Mexico (13 percent of nonmetropolitan population in 1990) and smaller, but notable, shares are found in Utah, Washington, Oregon, North Carolina, South and North Dakota.

In all States studied except Wyoming, the share of the State's income originating in nonmetropolitan counties declined between 1979 and 1989, with declines ranging from 3 to 4 percentage points in most States. There are diverse sources of nonmetropolitan county income; although the farm sector's contribution to nonmetropolitan county income declined in most States, substantially higher levels were found in the Midwestern States. Similarly, income derived from manufacturing declined in most States; the Southern States continued to show the highest levels with the New England States and the Northwestern States somewhat lower. Income attributed to the service sectors increased by 2 to 3 percentage points in all States.

The nonmetropolitan share of total State employment declined between 1979 and 1989 in all States but New York and Wyoming. The relative employment in agricultural and natural resource extraction industries declined in all States but Oregon. Most States experienced a substantial decline in this share, in the range of 3 to 5 percentage points. The share of employment in the manufacturing sector declined in 9 of the 16 States; the other States showed very modest increases in manufacturing employment. The largest employment generator in all States was the service sector. Its share of relative employment increased by 3.5 to 5 percentage points in most States.

Regional Characteristics

Rural demographic and economic characteristics in the 16 States demonstrate a pattern largely regional in nature. States in the same region have similar characteristics. These regional patterns are quite distinct in two regions--the Midwest and South--but are noticeable in all. The rural economy of the Midwestern States (Iowa, Kansas, North Dakota, and South Dakota) is highly-dependent upon agricultural income and employment, but both demonstrated a relative decline between 1979 and 1989. A loss in nonmetropolitan population resulted. The region is sparsely populated, has aged significantly during the decade, is virtually all white, but is relatively well-educated.

The Southern States (Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina) are quite distinct in both their demographic characteristics and rural economies. All are heavily rural and the nonmetropolitan population has grown substantially in North and South Carolina, although not in Mississippi. These States have a large share of African-American population (around 30 percent) and the rural populations are relatively poorly educated, although substantial improvements in educational attainment occurred during the 1980s. The rural economies have much higher shares of income and employment being generated by the manufacturing sector than in any other region, even though the role of the manufacturing sector declined somewhat during the decade. Although substantial growth occurred in nonmetropolitan

counties, the relative share these counties represented in total State employment declined in all 3 States.

The 2 New England States (Maine and Vermont) are unlike New York with respect to the relative importance of nonmetropolitan counties in the State as a whole. Only 9 percent of New York's population resides in rural areas while 76 percent in Maine and 60 percent in Vermont do. The demographic characteristics are somewhat different as well. The New England States have higher educational attainment and although few minorities are found in the rural areas of all 3 States, their share is somewhat higher in New York. In terms of the rural economy of the 3 States, substantial similarities are seen. In all 3 States, very little employment and income are generated by the agriculture and natural resource sectors. Relatively high levels of income and employment are found in rural manufacturing and quite high levels are found in the services sector. Nonmetropolitan counties adjacent to metropolitan populations have tended to increase their share of the nonmetropolitan population.

The patterns among the Western States are complex. In all these States but Utah, the nonmetropolitan population grew in absolute terms but declined in terms of relative share of the total State population. There was a tendency for the nonmetropolitan counties adjacent to metropolitan counties to grow somewhat more quickly than nonadjacent counties. Educational levels were quite high in the far Western States but lower in New Mexico and Texas. All Western States had somewhat large shares of income and employment linked to agriculture and natural resource extraction although farming itself was of average size, and the manufacturing sector was significant in 3 States (Washington, Oregon, and Utah). The relative importance of all 3 sectors in the rural economies of these States experienced a decline between 1979 and 1989. New Mexico and, to a lesser extent, Utah and Wyoming had significant specialization in the government sector. Compared to the 3 other regional groupings, the Western States had somewhat more diversified and stronger rural economies.

Political Structure and Culture

Structure of State Governments

During the last 2 decades performance of State Government has improved for a variety of institutional and political reasons. Institutional reform has tended to strengthen the executive branch of government; reform of administrative structures and budgeting processes has enhanced the authority and responsibility of governors. The importance of gubernatorial leadership is also reflected in the increased prominence of the National Governors' Association in policymaking. Although the general trend to enhanced gubernatorial power is clear, there is a substantial degree of variation among States in terms of formal powers. In the 16 States studied here, there is a considerable variation in the formal powers of governors (see Table 1).

A governor gains formal strength through the power of appointment (especially in a cabinet-style State Government), control of the budget process, and veto power. In some States, such as New Mexico, relatively strong formal powers are diluted by the inability of a governor to be reelected and succeed himself. The policy agenda of a State may fluctuate when the governorship changes hands frequently.

Table 1. Powers of Governors¹⁴

Weak	Moderate	Moderate to Strong	Strong
North Carolina	Maine	Iowa	New York
Texas	Mississippi	Kansas	South Dakota
Vermont	South Carolina	New Mexico	
	Washington	North Dakota	
		Oregon	
		Utah	
		Wyoming	

Source: Thad Beyle (ed.), "The Powers of the Governors," in State Government, CQ's Guide to Current Issues and Activities, 1990-1991 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1990), pp. 121-129.

In addition to the relative strength of the governor, which may be the primary structuring element of a State's government, the formal powers of the other branches of government and of local government are important in policymaking. Again, substantial variation among the States exists. In the absence of a strong governor, States are likely to have a strong legislature, such as in the Southern States (North and South Carolina, Mississippi, and Texas) which exerts great influence over State Government. Some legislatures, such as those in Washington, have developed very sophisticated policy analysis capabilities and influence outcomes in this fashion. A number of States have legislatures that meet infrequently, thus reducing their roles in policymaking. The Vermont legislature prides itself on being citizen-driven, rather than professional politician-driven.

In a number of States, executive branch agencies are relatively independent and powerful. This most frequently results from the so-called long ballot where directors of some agencies are elected in statewide elections, giving them an independent political base; this happened especially in Southern States. This is true for a number of agricultural agencies within the States. State legislatures may also create special links to agencies, again giving them a somewhat independent base, as in North Carolina. Such States can give the appearance of a quite fragmented, decentralized State Government. Further variation is found in those States, such as New Mexico, with large Native American populations and reservations with their tribal governments. A number of States have attempted reform efforts related to their economic development or commerce agencies, either attempting to revitalize them or reorganize their scope of responsibility.

States are affected by partisan politics in quite different ways. With the decline in the internal coherence and discipline of the two national political parties, governors in recent decades have tended to become less tied to national parties and more pragmatic in their efforts within States. Nevertheless, in some States, partisan competition greatly influences policymaking. In the Southern States, the move from the domination by the Democratic Party to a bipartisan

¹⁴ Values for power of governor are calculated by averaging Beyle's scores for the following categories: tenure potential, appointment power, removal power, governor controls budget, legislature can change budget, and veto power.

political system, with the strengthening of the Republican Party, has made State policymaking quite contentious. In this region, the growth of the political power of African-Americans (and Mexican-Americans in Texas) has further complicated policymaking in that more and diverse interests are represented in the process. In some States, bipartisan competition may lead to policy gridlock, as in Maine, but in other States, such as Iowa and Kansas, cooperation between the two parties exists, at least in State policymaking. In a number of Western States, Republican domination of State politics reduces the contentiousness.

The formal and informal relations between State and local government varies quite widely in these 16 States, as a result of both formal powers and the political process. In all States, the powers of local government are specified by State Government; that specification, however, varies quite widely among States. In some States, local governments are fairly independent with respect to financial capabilities and/or ordinance making authority. Two States--South Dakota and Texas--provide strong powers to municipal government, but counties are weak.

Beyond the formal powers and relations between State and local governments, the practice of governance varies greatly. In some States, such as Kansas, councils of governments provide the principal link between State and local governments. In other States, such as Oregon, the connection between State and local governments varies among subregions and depends on the actions of local officials. In a number of States, significant antagonism exists between State and local officials (e.g., New Mexico and Kansas). Local officials may feel that their State Government is distant and unconcerned. Diversity in the State's rural sector may make it difficult for the State Government to respond to individual community needs (that is, targeting of State programs to rural areas is difficult because of diversity in the State's rural sector) leaving local governments feeling neglected.

Political Culture

Political culture refers to the attitudes, values, and beliefs that people hold toward government.¹⁵ Within a region, States that may vary widely on socioeconomic dimensions often share a common character that unites them. The most commonly used typology of political culture specifies 3 political subcultures: individualistic, moralistic, and traditionalistic. In an individualistic setting, politics is an open marketplace in which people participate because of essentially private motivations. A very different orientation exists in a moralistic community, where politics is an effort to establish a good and just society. Citizens are expected to be active in public affairs. In a traditionalistic political culture, politics function to maintain the existing order, and political participation may be confined to social elites.

¹⁵ Daniel Elazar defined the term in the 1960s as the way in which people think about their government and the manner in which the political system operates. According to Elazar, the United States is a synthesis of three major political subcultures, each of which has distinctive characteristics. These political subcultures developed out of the sociocultural differences among the peoples who settled this country. He notes: "Sectional concentrations of distinctive cultural groups have helped create the social interests that tie contiguous states to one another even in the face of marked differences in the standard measures of similarity." Daniel Elazar, Federalism: A View from the States, Third Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 122.

These differing concepts about the purpose of government and the role of politics lead to different behaviors. For example, with regard to the initiation of a new program, officials in the 3 subcultures will react differently. In an individualistic community, officials will resist initiating a program unless public opinion demands it. However, leaders in moralistic areas would adopt the new program, even without pressure, if they believed it to be in the public interest. Rulers of traditionalistic communities would initiate the program only if they thought it would serve the interests of the governing elite.

Table 2. The Political Subcultures of the 16 States

Traditionalistic	Traditionalistic/ moralistic	Traditionalistic/ individualistic	Individualistic/ moralistic	Moralistic/ individualistic	Moralistic
Mississippi South Carolina	North Carolina	New Mexico Texas	New York Wyoming	Iowa Kansas South Dakota Washington	Maine Oregon Utah Vermont North Dakota

Source: Adapted from Daniel Elazar, Federalism: A View from the States, Third Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

Few States are characterized by a single subculture. Instead, cultural change and synthesis have produced a mixture within most States. In general, political culture has been found to affect the level of political participation in a State, the operation of a State's political institutions, and the types of public policies that a State enacts.

Past State Rural Development Activities

Most States substantially increased their economic development activities in the 1980s. By 1988, rural development began to emerge as a gubernatorial issue. Erik Herzik's analysis of agenda items mentioned by governors from 1970 to 1988 shows the rural issue appearing for the first time in 1988; during that year it showed up as the eighth most frequently mentioned item¹⁶. During the 1980s, States took a number of actions that had the effect of increasing their role in the delivery of public resources for rural development¹⁷. The national pattern is reflected in many of the 16 States studied here. Iowa, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Vermont adopted major rural development initiatives. The level of rural development initiatives in the 1980s can be partially explained by several political factors, including the importance of the rural sector in the State's legislature and the nature of the State's rural sector.

¹⁶ See Eric B. Herzik, "Policy Agendas and Gubernatorial Leadership," in Eric B. Herzik and Brent W. Brown, Gubernatorial Leadership and State Policy (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 33.

¹⁷ See Brandon Roberts, States: Catalysts for Development in Rural America (Washington, DC: Council of State Community Affairs Agencies, 1990).

A number of the 16 States, including Iowa, Maine, South Dakota, and Wyoming, are predominately rural and rural interests dominate the State legislature. Although such States do not necessarily expect the public sector to promote development--Wyoming, in particular, has historically adopted a fairly minimal role for the public sector--to the extent that economic development is promoted it will necessarily have a decidedly rural (often agricultural) orientation. A substantial number of the 16 States, including Kansas, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, and Washington, have witnessed a relative decline in rural population and subsequently a decline in the representation of rural interests in their State legislatures. The extent of the decline of rural influence varies, but the overall tendency in these States during the 1980s was less attention and resources devoted to rural issues as compared to the urban interests in the State.

In some States, the heterogeneity in the rural sector complicates the formation of rural policy. States such as New Mexico, Mississippi, Texas, North Carolina, and Washington have diverse rural sectors, resulting from agricultural specialization and/or the racial/ethnic composition in various subregions, and thus consensus building at the State level is difficult. In at least 2 States, New Mexico and Texas, the lack of targeted rural policy in the past is in part explained by the difficulty in forming consensus given the diversity of interests in their rural sectors.

Many States have given priority to human resource development in their rural sectors in order that communities can be self-sustaining. States such as Kansas, Oregon, South Carolina, and Texas have adopted efforts to improve the capacity of local communities which will empower them to develop their own initiatives. In a variation on this concept, some States, including Iowa, Maine, and South Carolina, focus efforts on leadership development in rural communities; these efforts are frequently funded from nongovernmental sources.

Six of the 16 States (Iowa, Maine, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Wyoming) participated in the 1990 and/or 1992 Rural Academy of the Council of Governors' Policy Advisors. The Academy was designed to bring together diverse interests from participating States, including governmental officials and private sector representatives, to assess and develop strategies for rural development. This experience was found to have a very important impact on some of the State Rural Development Councils. In several States, the overall direction established in the State's Academy team was subsequently adopted by the SRDC.

Development of the Partnership

Since the Kennedy administration, there have been a series of presidential initiatives focusing on the problems of citizens who live in rural America.¹⁸ Problems of poverty, access to urban services, and education have been among the issues highlighted by these efforts. The Johnson administration commission report--The People Left Behind-- documented a series of problems that were, as one analyst put it, "hidden in the hollows of mountains, out-of-the-way towns, and declining farms."¹⁹ A part of the Federal strategy over these years was to create mechanisms to target rural development assistance outside of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). These mechanisms focused on community development, human resource development, and economic development. In the 1960s, programs included the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Economic Development Administration, as well as various efforts within the Office of Economic Opportunity. But another part of the strategy was targeted at USDA itself and approaches within the Department that would support a shift from a purely agricultural agency to one with a broader rural focus. This focus, by definition, reached beyond the Federal Government to involve a range of other intergovernmental actors. The Rural Development Act of 1972 attempted such an effort as did activities during the Carter administration (including the creation of 13 State Rural Development Councils).

By 1990, despite disagreements about the form of an initiative, it was clear that something had to be done about rural America. Attention to these problems emerged from both the Congress and the White House as a divided government sought to demonstrate its attention to the problems of rural Americans. The 1990 Farm Bill, largely crafted by Democratic members of Congress, included provisions authorizing the creation of a separate Rural Development Administration in USDA. And in January 1990, President Bush announced the steps his administration would take to foster rural development.

The Early Phase

In addition to 5 other rural development activities, in 1990 the administration began the creation of State-level Rural Development Councils that would coordinate rural development efforts among Federal departments and agencies and establish collaborative relationships with States, local governments, and the private sector.

Initially called the President's Rural Development Initiative, by 1993 this effort was renamed the National Rural Development Partnership (called the Partnership for short). The changes that took place over this period reflected the need to wrestle with a classical dilemma of intergovernmental relations: pursuit of national goals through induced compliance with Federal Government directives (usually issued by a single lead agency), while preserving local, State, and other Federal agencies' autonomy to pursue (or ignore) national goals using self-selected strategies. Although the trial-and-error learning methods that characterized this

¹⁸ Much of this discussion is taken from Beryl A. Radin, "Rural Development Councils: An Intergovernmental Coordination Experiment, Publius: The Journal of Federalism, Vol. 22 (Summer 1992), pp. 111-127.

¹⁹ John N. Cornman and Barbara K. Kincaid, Lessons From Rural America (Washington, DC: Seven Locks Press, 1984), p. 1.

process did produce some inconsistencies, the Partnership has emphasized collaboration among independent and--at least in theory--co-equal agencies rather than the Federal Government's traditional top-down way of doing business through imposed program requirements backed with grant dollars.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up Strategies

The Federal role in this endeavor has two different dynamics: one that is top-down and another that is responsive to initiatives from the States. Federal actors in Washington, DC, especially the National Partnership Office and the National Rural Development Council, have adopted a hybrid top-down and bottom-up approach. The top-down approach facilitates various bottom-up initiatives. Within Federal agencies, a top-down approach was used to announce the program direction and communicate the expectation that Federal agencies would participate. Federal actors within the States participate in collaborative activities within the SRDCs as one-among-equals. The bottom-up aspect of the partnership derives from the fact that collaboration among rural development actors within the State Rural Development Councils has been the primary source of ideas and initiatives. DC-based Federal actors play a facilitative role in response to SRDC-originated ideas. This process became institutionalized in a procedure known as the Impediments Removal Process, a strategy that assumed that SRDCs would identify the Federal rules and requirements that were impediments to achieving rural development goals within individual States and that Federal agencies would respond by removing many of the identified impediments.

Over the past 4 years, the Washington-based activities took different forms. During the first few years of the effort, the President's Economic Policy Council (subsequently renamed the Policy Coordinating Group) established a standing committee devoted to rural economic development, known as the Working Group on Rural Development. The Working Group was staffed with policy-level decision-makers represented virtually all Federal departments, independent agencies, and commissions that had "rural" policies (very broadly defined) in their missions. The Group was designed as a White House mechanism to provide policy oversight of the Rural Initiative at the Federal level, opportunities for joint rural development planning and policy implementation, and a way to eliminate what were viewed as unnecessary governmental barriers to economic development. However, this mechanism was neither active nor effective.

The NRDC--the National Council on Rural Development (earlier known as the Monday Management Group)--became a key element in the management support structure of the effort early in its life. The NRDC is a group of senior career and appointed Federal officials from a range of departments and agencies with some interest or direct involvement in rural issues. Their role is to resolve operational problems, monitor SRDC outcomes, and coordinate between participating Federal agencies, the National Partnership Office, and the SRDCs. The activity of Washington, DC-based groups is organized around a series of teams and task forces to focus on functions that are deemed most crucial to the Partnership effort. Federal agencies are also expected to contribute to the Partnership's budget. These contributions are variable and many departments and agencies seem more willing to donate staff rather than dollars to the endeavor.

The day-to-day operational aspect of the Partnership is provided by the National Partnership Office (NPO) (originally the National Initiative Office). Operating with a small staff that is largely borrowed from other organizations, the NPO has attempted to provide support to the SRDCs in both their organizational and operational phases. Three issues have been paramount for the Rural Partnership's management support structure: (1) how to maintain flexibility as the SRDCs and their tasks became more complex; (2) how to divide leadership responsibility among the Federal-level agencies and support structures and between Washington, DC and the SRDCs; and, (3) how the support structure should respond to external pressures. In addition, the Rural Development Institute (RDI) at the University of Wisconsin was supported to provide group facilitation, leadership and strategic planning training, and technical assistance to Partnership participants.

The Bottom-Up Approach: Organizing the SRDCs

The early stages of the Partnership effort followed a familiar pattern. States were invited by the President to establish SRDCs. Once States accepted the invitations, the Federal Government convened the initial SRDC organizing meetings. Speakers and many of the participants at the organizing meetings were Federal officials and State actors who were known to be interested in or knowledgeable about rural issues.

The organizing meetings for the 8 pilot SRDCs were held in the fall of 1990. The USDA appointed organizers in each of the pilot States; in most instances, the organizer was the highest ranking Farmers Home Administration official in the State. Representatives from Washington, led by the USDA Deputy Under Secretary of Agriculture for Small Community and Rural Development, flew to the pilot States to join with governors, locally based Federal officials, and other notables from the private and public sectors to announce the launching of the Rural Initiative and SRDCs. The original agenda for the effort emphasized rural economic development, was consistent with Bush's deregulation domestic policy approach, and accentuated the role of the Federal officials in the organizing effort.

As one might expect, skepticism abounded at the organizing meetings. Few if any participants truly believed that the Federal Government would ever let go of its top-down powers to join SRDCs as equal partners. The Federal agency managers who had established careers under a more traditional model of federalism were among the most skeptical. Some participants, particularly in-state Federal government officials, had been directed to participate by their superiors. Others were there to protect turf, making sure that their own agencies and agendas were not adversely impacted by any SRDC initiatives. For many of the first participants, a primary motivation for involvement was their belief that future Federal money to States for rural economic development would require participation in an SRDC. It soon became clear that this expectation would not materialize. Indeed, the only funding available to the Councils was a modest stipend that allowed the SRDCs to hire staff and support activities (the average yearly payment to each Council was \$125,000).

The pilot SRDCs were instructed to develop mission statements, assess the economic development needs of rural areas in their States, develop an inventory of available rural development resources, and create a strategic plan. Some members of the pilot SRDCs interpreted these suggestions as evidence of continued Federal control. Some Councils

adopted a minimal compliance mode to conform with the requirements; others took the requirements seriously. Still others decided to ignore the substance of the requirements.

In October 1991, President Bush invited the governors of all other States and territories (45 in total) to participate in an expansion of the effort. After the change of administration in January 1993, despite vacancies in many Washington positions, the Partnership continued to operate. By spring 1994, 29 Councils had chosen an executive director and were active.²⁰ Other States were in the process of organizing and several others were considering establishing a Council.

The change of administration signaled a new set of expectations. The Rural Partnership has been cloaked in the language, concepts, and symbols of "New Governance" since the arrival of the Clinton administration. While these were not present during the formative days of the initiative, many of the guiding principles in this approach had emerged during the early years.

²⁰ See the companion volume to this study, Intergovernmental Partnerships and Rural Development: Profiles of 29 State Rural Development Councils (Washington, DC: National Rural Development Partnership, 1995).

The SRDCs in Operation: Patterns in 16 States

SRDCs are the cornerstone of the Rural Partnership. They are the vehicles for implementing rural development through new governance principles. Each SRDC includes Federal, State, local, private for-profit, nonprofit, and (in most States with significant numbers of Native Americans) tribal members. The flexibility to respond to specific rural interests in each State guarantees that each SRDC is different. Each creates its own identity and implements its own agenda.

Realization of SRDC autonomy was slow to develop among the pilot SRDCs. Federal and State participants in SRDCs were accustomed to top-down imposition of priorities and requirements by the Federal Government in exchange for financial support. Several of the pilot Councils were created as Federal Councils--not partnerships. Texas was the last holdout; until 1992, only Federal administrators were full voting members of the Texas Council, which was officially known as the Texas Federal Rural Development Council. All other participants were "associate members."

Deliberations in SRDCs during the early years revealed a tendency to conceive of opportunities in conventional, categorical, Federal control/State compliance terms. A number of the SRDCs looked to their Federal members to be told what was expected and how to do it. It was not uncommon for an SRDC to ask its assigned Federal Government liaison person ("desk officer") to clarify expectations, rules, regulations, and requirements, only to find that such particulars did not exist.

Even after several years of operation, many of the SRDCs continue to evolve into self-initiating, flexible, and collaborative bodies. It has not been an easy process, however. Four years into the Rural Partnership experiment, participants are beginning to realize that this initiative and the SRDCs have been constructed on the principle of State (and often local) problem definition and solution generation. Federal agencies and actors are viewed as potential resources, not sources of rules and regulations. The role of the Federal Government in rural development is evolving into that of facilitator, not controller.

The SRDCs were the initial laboratories for designing and implementing the Partnership and faced a variety of practical problems. There were no categorical grant guidelines or funds that could be used to mandate or entice skeptical State Government administrators, bankers, farmers, or county commissioners into participating. There were no road maps to guide them in their searches for new ways to do Federal-State-local-private collaborative problem-solving. Each had to find ways to overcome or circumvent histories of failed Federal-State-local "partnership" ventures, skepticism, agency turf protectionism, and emotionally charged contexts that included spotted owls, severe economic recessions, and racial discrimination.

SRDCs learned quickly that problems could not be solved by calling Washington. It also did not take long for people to discover that ideas and strategies that appeared to work in one State often were difficult to import to other settings. Yet, learning occurred from experiences within SRDCs and States, and among SRDCs and the various offices and groups in Washington. Even though early participants in the Rural Initiative had some previous experience with Federal-State partnership ventures, each had to develop a new vision of rural

development as well as the structures and processes for implementing (or sometimes fine-tuning) their vision. In addition, they were dealing with a Washington-based set of activities that was also in flux, moving from a controlling or directing posture to the role as catalyst, enabler, and collaborative partner.

Although the second- and third-generation SRDCs spent less time learning that this initiative was not doing business as usual, they, too, had to go through a similar process discovering the nontraditional nature of the effort.

The overall design of the Partnership emphasized several guiding principles; while the SRDCs had discretion to operate within these general parameters, for the most part the Councils accepted these values. First, the Partnership emphasized collaboration and the development of collegial relationships between a variety of players. Second, it conceptualized a body that would not make policy decisions, would not deliver services, and would avoid politically charged issues. Third, it called for the development of a strategic planning process that was flexible and allowed the Councils to organize themselves as they wished. Fourth, it established a national support structure that, for the most part, provided a way for players in the Partnership to learn from each other, to create and constantly modify norms and procedures. Fifth, it promoted both short-term and long-term efforts, process as well as product outcomes, and encouraged spinoff activities by the participants that might not take place under the Council umbrella.

SRDC Structures and Processes

Membership Patterns

Each of the SRDCs was formed around a similar template regarding membership--5 partnership groups, consisting of Federal, State, and local government; the private sector (often subdivided into for-profit and non-profit categories²¹); and tribal government. However, Councils varied tremendously in the way that they approached the membership issue. Some reached broadly into the State for involvement, emphasizing outreach activities and adopting an inclusive approach to membership. Others, by contrast, kept their membership smaller, adopting a more exclusive approach. Total membership of 2 Councils illustrates the differences: in spring 1994, the South Carolina Council had 53 members while the Texas Council had 2,800 members.

All the SRDCs have established Executive Committees that meet more frequently than the full Council and provide the accountability structure for staff supervision and relationships with the National Partnership Office. Generally, each of the 5 sectors is represented on SRDC Executive Committees. Also, in most Councils, representatives from each constituency are in the "inner circle" of decisionmakers, although the intensity of their involvement varies considerably from State to State. In some States, the entire Executive Committee plays a central role in setting the agenda and directing the business of the Council. In other States, there is an inner circle which includes some persons who are members of the Executive Committee and some who are not. Organizational affiliation and position do play an important role in determining leadership roles.

Analysis of membership patterns suggests movement over the past 4 years. Most Councils began with Federal officials assuming leadership roles; by late 1993, this had changed and State officials were more likely to assume those roles. State participants were drawn from economic and community development agencies and, increasingly over time, from State agricultural agencies. An increased level of involvement by nonprofit groups has also been seen. While both local government and for-profit involvement increased to some degree, in few cases did they play pivotal leadership roles. Relationships with governors' offices shifted over time, ebbing and flowing depending on the activities undertaken and the fit between those efforts and gubernatorial agendas. In some States, governors actually named the non-Federal members. In several States, individuals from the offices of the State's congressional delegation also participated.

A number of States also made attempts to reach out to critical categories of membership for that State, such as timber in Washington and Oregon. Because of the critical or potential role of education in rural development, most of the States added a variety of educational leaders to their Councils. These often included State education agency officials, vocational and technical education representatives and, in a few States, local school board or school district representation. Tribal representation was maintained as a special category in States with large Native American populations, such as Washington, New Mexico, and South Dakota,

²¹ This was largely because nonprofit organizations representing local governments and statewide associations of private businesses were involved.

whereas other States have much lower numbers of Council members from tribes (in some States, the Council has only one tribal representative or no representation). Those State Rural Development Councils that hold their meetings out in rural communities like Oregon and New Mexico also bring to the table different sets of actors from meeting to meeting depending upon the location and the agenda of the meeting.

In the aggregate, the Economic Development Administration and the Farmers Home Administration are the most active Federal agencies. State economic development departments and governor's offices are most active at the State level. Councils of governments and local government departments are the most active of the locals. Utilities are the most active from the business sector, and community-based organizations are the most active nonprofit sector participants. Tribal governments are rarely among the most active members. Councils have sought increased involvement from local governments, business in general, tribal governments, and governor's offices.

Council membership outreach involves expanding the definition of the intergovernmental partnership to include a more extensive membership. Virtually every Council in some way went through a process of discussing rural issues and problems, discovering a wider circle of potentially affected interests, and bringing in new members. Some Councils, such as Texas, were originally restrictive, but later became more inclusive. South Dakota experienced minor conflict regarding the inclusion of some nominated members, but in the end invited all entities that were nominated. However, some of those contacted showed no interest. Many Councils sought to maintain a balance among the various sectors. A number of Councils experienced difficulty in getting much interest from certain categories of members, such as the business or tribal groups.

Relationship to Existing Rural Development Policy Systems

State rural development policy systems operate within economic contexts that have created variable pressures for action by the SRDCs. None of the Councils studied found it simple to develop programs, policies, or strategies related to rural development; in many States, this activity provoked complex policy and political responses. A clear policy agenda on rural development was found in only a few States; most, however, were challenged to deal with multiple definitions and approaches to rural issues. Some voices accentuated the rural dimensions of the task; others focused on statewide development. Rural development was not easily disentangled from other problems, institutions, and economic and political realities. The voices of change wrestled with the strategic advantages of separating a specific "rural" focus from other sectors within the State. In other States, advocates called for a general development strategy, arguing that community or economic development in the State as a whole would lift up all sectors. In some States, the governor was not a major actor in rural policy; thus the closer the Council was to the governor, the less likely it was to influence the activities that were actually taking place within the State.

Many of the Councils were designed as low-visibility, nonthreatening organizations that would not compete with the multiple voices already involved in rural development within the State. These Councils consciously attempted to avoid direct involvement in the State's policy dialogues. For example, it was relatively rare for the Councils to play an active role in interagency coordination activities involving rural development within the States. In two

instances--Oregon and Iowa--Councils were included in Federal-State interagency activity. Similarly, in North Carolina and New Mexico, Councils were players in State-level interagency efforts. By contrast, the SRDC was purposely excluded from certain Federal-State efforts in Washington and State activities in Texas. Councils in Oregon and Iowa were excluded from participation in State-level rural development activities by default. Interagency activity for most of the SRDCs involved efforts that were defined by the Council itself.

The Executive Director

The executive director of an SRDC is the only person whose job it is to devote full time to the Council's work. Thus, the selection of the executive director is one of the most important decisions made by the SRDC. The process of selecting an SRDC executive director has shifted over the course of the Partnership's life. Of the original 8 pilot States, 2 individuals became executive directors by "parachuting" into the State from Washington, DC. One was assigned to the position even before the Council was organized (he is no longer in that position); the other was assigned afterwards. Two individuals were short-term detailees and left the position soon after the Council began functioning. Four individuals were selected by the Council and continue in that role.²² Some of these individuals had long involvement with rural development issues in the State; some were politically connected; still others were new to the field but had appropriate skills.

The process of selecting the executive director in the newer State Councils was more deliberate than that used in most of the original pilot Councils. SRDCs were given the choice between hiring an individual as a Federal employee or as a State employee. If hired as a Federal employee, the person was appointed at the GS-14 or -15 level, earning a salary that was out of line with local pay scales in many rural States. Individuals hired as State employees received a rate of pay commensurate with existing State pay scales. This salary issue influenced the decision of how the executive director was hired in a number of States.

During the first years of Council activity, several models for the executive director role emerged, with no single model appropriate for all States.²³

The Chief Executive Officer (The executive director is the pivotal and most influential figure in the process, serving as the administrator and substantive policy expert for a less informed and active Council.) Several Councils adopted this model in their early stages. In most cases, however, this model was not sustained because the Council members themselves took an active role in the effort. They valued the collaborative effort and were not willing to play a "rubber stamp" role.

²² The Texas Council did not choose an executive director until the Council was already functioning.

²³ See Beryl A. Radin, Rural Development Councils: Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. A Report to the State Rural Policy Program of the Aspen Institute (Washington, DC: University of Southern California, Washington Public Affairs Center, 1991), p. 23.

The Staffer (The executive director provides day-to-day continuity for the Council, serving the Executive Committee and the officers.) A number of the executive directors have assumed this role.

The Policy Leader (The executive director has experience, expertise, good relationships, and influence in the broader policymaking process.) Several executive directors are in this category.

The Hybrid Policy Leader and Staffer (The executive director combines the Policy Leader and Staffer roles.) This model, combining facilitating skills with expertise in the rural development policy field, has emerged in several Councils since 1992.

The Bureaucrat (The executive director serves as the arm of one of the Federal or State agencies participating in the process.) Although somewhat less common, this model continues in several States in which the executive director is viewed as an employee of and spokesperson for the governor.

The Federal Officer (The executive director brings the Council into conformity with the national White House agenda.) This model faded as a possibility soon after the initial organization of the Councils.

Effective executive directors appear to be individuals with organizational skills, able to deal with a diverse array of individuals, to think strategically (e.g., to combine short-term and long-term efforts, processes as well as products), and tolerate ambiguity. While executive directors are required to work closely with the State's political institutions, it is also important for them to keep some distance from short-term political turmoil.

The SRDCs as Networks

Few Federal initiatives have been designed to facilitate collaborative intergovernmental relationships.²⁴ The State Council effort, by contrast, has emphasized the development of shared relationships among diverse players. In this sense, the effort's administrative arrangements appear to be closer to those of a voluntary mutual-aid organization than of a market or a hierarchical structure. At the same time, the SRDCs are clearly State-focused. State government agencies are focal actors in every Council as a result of the extent of their action and degree of participation. State interest in the Council effort can determine whether the SRDC is a central part of an important policy network, a support network for broader strategies, or marginalized from major State development activities.

The structure of organizational interdependencies in a policy sector is often dependent on the distribution of resources within the network. The SRDCs were formed because of this recognition of resource interdependency. This is based on the assumption that each organization in a sector acts solely as an independent entity, but has the potential to contribute. Networking activity, such as SRDC efforts, enhance resource exchanges. Moreover, networks are necessary in policy sectors like rural development because the individual members cannot achieve their goals operating alone. Formally autonomous but functionally interdependent organizations require mechanisms for implementing tasks, as is the case with virtually every effort undertaken by rural development networks. An argument can thus be made that SRDCs have smoothed the process of program implementation.

The focus of power in the SRDC networks is reflected in the various players in the effort. Federal officials, who in many cases have been quite passive (or only react to specific requests), have largely played a supportive role. Key State and interest group members, and in a few cases active citizens, have played important coordinating and administrative roles. Rural communities, their representative organizations, and some State agency heads have been able to make specific demands on the SRDC. However, many players have been reluctant to share policy development authority with SRDCs.

The SRDC represents an emergent type of network: the players largely represent governmental (and nonprofit) organizations that work on rural development. They are "intergovernmental bodies," comprised of sectoral elements involved in the chain of programming (grants, loans, and regulatory activities) that cross governmental sectors. Their interorganizational activities almost never involve the core activities of the "home" agencies, but involve problem-solving, demonstrations, or cooperative ventures that are at the periphery of the work of the participating agencies. Rather than being part of some comprehensive strategy or policy effort, the type of issues and problems undertaken by the networks are highly segmented. Indeed, the work of the SRDCs is an integral part of some comprehensive rural policy strategy in only a few cases. The issues they deal with come up one at a time or at least not in a systematic fashion.

²⁴ For a discussion of networks see Christine Alter and Jerald Hage, Organizations Working Together (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993) and Robert Agranoff, Intergovernmental Management: Human Services Problem-Solving in Six Metropolitan Areas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

SRDC resources tend to be pooled when a problem is being solved or a project is being tackled. Participating organizations, particularly Federal agencies, have actually committed funds for grants, waived rules and requirements, or approved new managerial procedures. Moreover, the SRDCs have begun some new efforts through demonstration and developmental projects and the creation of databases and resource guides. In a few cases, new cooperative ventures involving 2 or more agencies have been undertaken.

The SRDCs have worked on those systemic problems brought to them by member organizations or by individual communities. Inter-sector problems--such as the need for a change of a grant requirement, a new way to deal with a regulation, or a demonstration of a new approach in the rural economy--involve the network in problems that the individual member agencies cannot solve or deal with by themselves. Individual organizations involve other organizations in the network. Although perhaps the SRDCs may have been originally designed to deal with broader rural problems, in fact they have not really attacked rural development in such a fashion, but have limited their actions to selected problems generated by member organizations or from communities within the States.

Network-Building Activities

It is fair to say that the initial months and even years of the SRDCs' existence have been spent in establishing themselves as networks. They were "contrived networks" in that they did not spontaneously rise out of mutually perceived needs; rather the Federal Government stimulated them. On the other hand, they were not mandated in law, and States were not required to form SRDCs. No doubt because they came about through Federal stimulation they took some time in building. Nevertheless, the rapidity with which most SRDCs found a niche and began to work on rural problems suggests that these networks fulfilled a need.

One stage of network-building involved creating the Councils themselves. In some States, a small nucleus of rural-service agencies and organizations formed interim Councils and new members were gradually added. The FmHA served as the nominally designated starter agency for the original pilot States, but Councils emerged beyond this shadow quickly. Some Councils emerged out of the principal State agency having to do with rural development, often the department of economic development or its equivalent. Other States began with large representational bodies.

Most agencies built their networks by designating agencies and positions within organizations (e.g., specifying membership for an agency's commissioner or executive director). Several States (e.g., North Carolina and Iowa) built on previous network activities, primarily choosing "activists" and working members. In many cases this meant organization members and agency program heads rather than directors of organizations. In every State, the process of network definition--who is to be included--was gradual, as SRDCs expanded. Network-building by membership expansion appears to be an ongoing process, even in the 8 pilot Councils.

Another network-building activity is the process of determining the Council's scope of work. What the group chooses to do obviously defines the parameters of the network. Some States--such as New Mexico, South Dakota, and Oregon--appear to have encouraged communities to largely determine their work and define the network. North Carolina, Iowa,

and Vermont seem to have selected their targets of effort by deliberating as a Council. Whichever route was chosen, the network-building activities and emerging Council strategies were linked. What an SRDC chooses to do and who was active in defining Council activity cannot easily be separated.

In most cases network actors are not people who are coming together for the first time. They do not need to establish their agency or interest turf and already know how to work together. This is not to say that new linkages are not established or existing relationships are not improved. In New Mexico, for example, networks of individuals found within the Council are not new, although the structured forum provided by the Council allows for greater and more productive interaction.

Even so, in several States, Federal officials report meeting new individuals and establishing working relationships with them. In Texas, for example, while a core of public officials concerned with rural development had well established networks prior to the formation of the Council, the networks have substantially expanded as a result of the Council. Many individuals in that State mentioned that the Council has provided the opportunity for either creating new relations or further developing old ones, and that being on a first name basis with others was very valuable to them in non-Council business. The formation of the Federal caucus of Council members in New Mexico provided the opportunity for very substantial expansion of interaction among Federal officials there.

Well-developed networks existed in most of the States prior to the existence of the SRDCs. In Iowa, for example, most members either formalized old contacts or extended their previous networking to a new venue. With few exceptions, the entire Iowa Council is built on past relationships. Those who had proven themselves by contributing time, expertise, and energy in related rural or State program networks were tapped for the Council. Membership criteria are simply knowledge, political (but not partisan) connections, trust, and time commitment. Issue networks are found in several Councils, and these networks expand as members discuss other rural issues and as they meet new people in the field.

In a number of cases, one finds a fair amount of skepticism about the network process. This is usually found among Federal officials where, as is the case in Iowa, the Council is perceived to be of minor influence, given the limited scope of its work, the State's own sense of having a rural strategy, and the State's concern about protecting its policy domain. In South Carolina, Federal officials are skeptical about the potential influence of the Council. In South Dakota, the Council has not generated a great deal of visibility, except in communities where it has worked on specific problems. Also, legislators have very little knowledge of the Council's presence or work, and virtually no problem-oriented networking has involved legislators. In Kansas, there is also a report of general skepticism among nonmembers of the Council. In Maine, the situation is a bit different in that the Council does not have much recognition outside of its own circle of participants. It has not been regarded as an important actor in rural development, largely because rural development has been defined narrowly, largely as economic development.

A number of the SRDCs are, in fact, creating new networks to advance rural development. For example, the arts, wood products, and dry hydrants projects in Vermont all involve the creation of new networks. Likewise, Iowa's regulatory compliance and housing demonstration

effort involves the network approach to rural development. The Texas on-line information system would appear to be the beginning of a new network. In contrast, the New Mexico effort to preserve a rural hospital really tapped into existing networks, although to some extent the SRDC was able to effectuate a change in the operation of network elements. The Oregon Rural INFO project is an example of expanding a regional network to operate on a statewide basis. Yet other situations involve SRDC involvement in existing relationships. Several of the Councils were able to use their networking capacities to act as a convener for the Clinton administration's regional meetings on the rural components of the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community program.

The networking that has been conducted by the Councils to date can be characterized as primarily interorganizational problem-solving and brokering. Most project efforts in statutory and regulatory relief, demonstrations, and developmental projects involve bridging the gaps and acquiring resources from the different organizations. There have been some technical assistance aspects to the database and resource directory efforts and, no doubt, a great deal of informal advice has been given on intergovernmental matters. Information such as how to contact agencies, how to secure grants, or how to make regulatory adjustments has been provided. A great deal of brokering activity has obviously followed these activities. The SRDCs have not generally been called upon to mediate interagency or intergovernmental disputes, or to otherwise resolve conflicts. It is possible that some have been approached informally but have chosen to avoid such a course of action.

Federal network participants appear to be less concerned than many State actors about matters of power or power sharing. They appear to have a more circumscribed understanding of their agency's limited and legally defined role. They will always act within these limits. More important, since they view themselves more passively as reacting to State or private sector requests for action, and do not see the Councils as policy actors, sharing of power is not an issue. Their influence on most Councils is minimal by choice except where the force of personality or technical knowledge prevails. Power does not appear to loom as a large concern.

SRDC Activities

The activities and networks undertaken by the SRDCs are defined by the range of actions taken as well as the partnerships forged in accomplishing these activities. While the specific activities may vary, each Council has found a way to handle the complexity of intergovernmental programs.

Most essential of the SRDC roles is that of convening the actors. Convening is an initial and often essential task or step--to get the right persons involved in a problem arena to meet. In rural development, clearly there are multiple stakeholders: the community or communities impacted, local governments, and the private sector; statewide nonprofits and interest groups; and the State and Federal governments. The SRDC has been a forum for bringing these actors together, often serving as a venue for "show and tell" activities. Past contact between officials tended to be limited in scope and effort. Prior to the formation of the Councils a number of these officials, particularly small groups of Federal and State officials had worked together on specific projects.

Convening the actors also has had important spin-off effects. As people on the Councils came to know one another, they felt more comfortable approaching each other to solve non-Council related problems. Officials who had worked together before were able to use the SRDC meetings as a convenient place to conduct additional project-oriented intergovernmental business. In addition, occasionally an individual issue would be "generalized" in the sense that the major actors involved felt that a specific issue could really be generalized to a large group of communities, and thus it would "bubble up" to the Council agenda. This was the case in regard to regulation management. For example, individual community problems of wastewater treatment in a number of States led to broader Council attention and attempts to solve the problem generically. This, in turn, was elevated to consideration by the NRDC for a more generic resolution of this problem.

Synthesis of State Experiences

Scope of Projects

The scope of the Council's efforts has been assessed in terms of the intergovernmental partnership focus of the various projects. Since the Councils were given no specific charge or working mission, except to attempt to improve working relationships and to smooth out managerial impediments to rural development, the scope of efforts chosen by the SRDCs was necessarily broad. These efforts were organized into eleven different types of projects:

1. Changing rural development policy: an attempt to alter the direction in which government at any level addresses some aspect of rural programming.
2. Statutory relief: an attempt to modify a statutory impediment to development.
3. Regulatory relief: an attempt to modify regulatory programs, such as negotiating a different standard, waiving of program guidelines, or finding an alternative means of compliance.
4. Management improvement systems: the development of new means of operating Federal or State programs, such as a joint application forms.

5. Demonstrations/developmental projects: an attempt to develop a new rural development effort or to create new program initiatives that have broader applicability, such as a housing demonstration project.
6. Databases: the creation of a new information system for use by the rural development community.
7. Communication/information: an attempt to broaden knowledge regarding rural problems and rural development.
8. New funding: an attempt to bring new sources of funding into the SRDC itself in order to create new programs for research and development.
9. Cooperative ventures: a project operated jointly by the SRDC and other entities, such as State-sponsored nonprofit agencies.
10. Outreach: the sponsorship of meetings in local communities to provide technical assistance, identify problems, gather information regarding rural problems, and formulate future agendas.
11. Leadership development: an attempt to strengthen the capacity of rural leaders by focused training projects.

The variety of projects undertaken by the SRDCs reflects the broad charge given to the Councils. Since each Council has had the freedom to chart its own course, choosing many or a few projects of one or several types, the variety is understandable. The range of project efforts was considerable, with some States focusing on multiple and broad categories and others focusing in on only a small number of activity types.

Perhaps more important than numbers are the types of projects that Councils carried out. Many of the projects involved statutory or regulatory relief. Database projects were also important, with most States undertaking some of this type. Cooperative ventures and developmental projects and demonstrations were also common. Of moderate importance were management improvement systems communication/information projects, and outreach activities. Of lesser significance were projects relating to new funding initiatives and changing policy. This pattern is not surprising, since these latter types tend to be the domain of State agencies dealing with rural development. To make or change policy or to seek additional funds could easily be perceived as encroaching on the turf of these agencies. Helping program agencies relieve regulatory problems or streamline grant programs, providing information, and demonstrating a new approach are less likely to appear threatening by these agencies. In terms of scope, the Council's projects, therefore, largely steer clear of major State or State-Federal efforts.

Council Project Approaches

Some Councils have given a special emphasis to a particular approach to encouraging intergovernmental partnerships. Three different emphases of note are local community participation, technical assistance, and information gathering.

Local community participation involves the Council in efforts to encourage rural communities to bring real-world problems to the Council. This approach has been manifested in different ways. Many Councils rotate their meetings around the State and allow any local person or local official to address problems and issues of their choice. The New Mexico Council, for example, follows this model. Other Councils are more specific in focus, allowing input on

specific agenda topics, for example environmental regulation. Iowa has followed this model. Councils that emphasize impediments removal, like South Dakota, usually create some mechanism for communities to bring forth issues that they wish to be addressed. The Texas Council has experimented with sending special action teams into communities, helping local residents identify problems and areas for public action.

Technical assistance refers to a variety of actions taken by the Councils to fill knowledge gaps in rural development. The Councils tried to ensure that communities or statewide rural development efforts received information or demonstrations that focus on gaps in technology or professional capacities often found in rural areas. These barriers were overcome in many different ways. The Iowa SRDC used demonstrations of role-playing efforts, which then are expected to develop into demonstrations of new partnerships. Other Councils have lent process assistance to statewide efforts, such as the Maine cranberry growers demonstration and the South Carolina regional wastewater treatment effort.

Information gathering refers to SRDC efforts to examine the extent and type of rural problems and to make them known to a variety of decisionmakers. Many Councils gathered initial information in the "environmental scan" part of their strategic plans. Others worked with university-based research bureaus to gather baseline information on the rural sector and on rural communities in their States. About half of the Councils compiled economic and community development resource guides, providing readily accessible information for volunteers and officials in small communities. Finally, a number of States focused on information gathering related to specific industries or problems such as timber (Washington) and secondary wood products (Maine), or gathered information related to compliance with environmental regulations. This was the single most prevalent approach.

Three different types of SRDC project approaches have emerged. The first type, which is called fine-tuning, involves the Council in improving coordination and/or cooperation at the margins of programs. Agencies represented in the Council continue to carry out their normal activities. For example, Kansas and Texas have been able to get agencies working together, and have fine-tuned the implementation of Federal assistance through such means as single Federal loan assistance applications and electronic processing of project applications. The various resource guides developed by some Councils appear to be a similar form of tuning up the way communities get information to access resources, yet they do not change the basic process. Iowa, South Dakota, South Carolina, and many other States have used the Council both formally and informally to enhance the quantity and quality of contacts between Federal and State officials. The fine tuning approach is among the most prevalent in the SRDCs.

A second approach is one that is project-oriented. In this case, agencies represented on the SRDC convene to engage in a new effort, either focused on a specific issue or on a specific community or region. Examples include Washington's strategic planning process, the Mississippi poultry loan application process for the Small Business Administration, North Carolina's support for their Rural Initiative, New Mexico's community meetings, and Oregon's rural information system. In these and other situations, the intergovernmental attempt is to use the agency representatives on the Council to manage a specific problem that has presented a barrier to development. The Council sees that there is a legitimate need, determines that it is within the scope of participating agencies, and sets out to work through the problem.

A final approach involves activities that lead to a major shift away from rural development business as usual. That is, the SRDC plays a key role in developing a new way of handling a rural development problem. Examples of these tend to be fewer, not only because the Councils are new, but because intergovernmental bodies, by their nature, are not designed to engage in radical change. Nevertheless, a few examples exist. The new wetlands-permitting process in Maine, the regional wastewater treatment effort in South Carolina, and the regional/multi-agency approach to running a New Mexico hospital constitute new approaches to implementation. Moreover, a number of SRDC efforts, such as Iowa's demonstration effort in developing a consortium of Federal and State agencies and local nonprofit organizations, constitute major changes in the scope of rural programming. More of these types of demonstrations will no doubt occur in the future. The SRDCs are less likely to engage in this activity, however, because the Councils represent partnerships that work more at the margins than at the core of development programs.

While the original intention of the SRDC movement may have been to change rural policy, that policy is driven by State governments. Nevertheless, some States, such as Iowa, Maine, North Carolina, and Utah, saw the SRDC as a way to support existing State rural efforts by creating new partnerships. This has involved bringing various agency representatives together to help smooth out intergovernmental relationships. In most of the States, however, the SRDC took on a more independent role--that of dealing with specific issues of an intersectoral nature. The activities of these latter SRDCs did not appear to be part of a broader strategy, but were more isolated attempts to use a partnership approach to deal with specific problems or to focus on issues generated by the communities themselves.

Few of these issues were of an agricultural nature. Indeed, most of the Council activities have focused on various facets of community and economic development, involving programming in the resource acquisition area (e.g., grants, loans, credit buy-downs), or in regulation management.

Outcomes: A Preliminary Assessment

Changing Expectations

The rural initiative that emerged from the White House in 1990 went through a number of changes during the 1990 to 1994 period. Some of these changes are explained by shifts in personnel and the change in the presidency in January 1993. As important as these changes were, however, the transformation of the Partnership also occurred as a result of a learning process at two levels: first, between the State Councils and the Washington-based staff, and second, within the Councils themselves.

In its early phase, the initiative was largely driven by the general ideology and substantive agenda of the Bush administration--questions of deregulation, reduced Federal activity, emphasis on the private sector, devolution to the States, and a comprehensive rational approach to Council activity. Within a year of its initiation, a different approach took form, characterized by a process rather than a substantive agenda. In this phase, the Partnership focused on means rather than ends, attempted to broaden the range of actors involved in the Councils, and tried to encourage participants to focus on the complexity of the issues that were raised.

The 1992 publication of Reinventing Government,²⁵ gave Partnership participants (particularly Washington-based staff) a language to use to describe their activity to others. That book allowed them to view their own concerns in a broader fashion, highlighting a modified role for the Federal Government (minimizing the traditional control aspects), diminishing the boundaries between levels of government and the public and private sectors, and emphasizing collaborative approaches to decision-making. It also provided a bridge to the Clinton administration's agenda.

The Clinton administration, largely through the National Performance Review and its emphasis on New Governance, embraced many of these principles. At the same time, however, there was also a substantive agenda imposed by the new appointees, particularly those within USDA. This new agenda provided a way for the Clinton appointees to transform what was viewed as a Republican initiative into a Clinton initiative. Concern about the membership composition of the Councils (particularly the representation of racial and ethnic minorities) was articulated. In addition, ways to mesh the State Councils and the Partnership with other Clinton administration policies (such as the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community programs) were explored. In this sense, in 1993 the balance of the initiative tilted to a focus on substantive outcomes, looking to the process approach as a means to support substantive ends.

Expectations also changed within the Councils themselves as the process unfolded. These shifts occurred as a result of the interplay among a broadened set of actors, experience with the complexity of the rural development policy field, and shifts in the State-level political and

²⁵ David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1992).

economic environment. In addition, Councils began to learn from one another and to understand better the similarities and differences among States.

The relationships between the Councils and the Washington-based Partnership staff also changed over the 4 years. Few Councils continued to have a blanket negative characterization of "the Feds" after operating for a few years. In some cases, the Councils reduced their antagonism to Washington, DC. In other cases, the Councils developed a less compliant approach, minimizing their perception that the effort "belonged" to the Federal Government and instead embracing it as an activity within the State. But whichever direction the relationship moved, there continued to be some tension between DC expectations and those of the States.

Partnership Outcomes

The seeming intractability of rural problems and the complexity that surrounds possible solutions makes it difficult to evaluate the contribution of a single intervention, especially in terms that focus only on a single measure of success. Although the real goal of this effort is to change the life conditions of rural Americans (particularly those who live in isolated and poverty-stricken areas), after only 4 years of operation it is unrealistic to expect an initiative that focuses on changes in resource allocation, organizational, and policy shifts to clearly demonstrate its ability to provide new opportunities or services to rural residents. In addition, given the shifts in expectations that characterize the life of the Partnership, there has not been a focused strategy for change that has emerged over these years. At the same time, however, it is possible to assess this initiative in terms of incremental changes that move States (and perhaps the country) toward these ultimate goals.

When assessing the outcomes of the Council activity, at least 2 levels of analysis are possible. One can look at the contribution of the Council in its direct role as a player in the policy-making process; this would involve an assessment of the specific activities undertaken by the organization. However, one can also conceptualize the contribution of the Council in its role as a venue for the development of relationships among players, focusing on the indirect ways in which the Council contributes to the policymaking process. This would accentuate its role as a behind-the-scenes player, raising the visibility of issues that are actually formally considered in different settings.

Within the States themselves, the Councils vary in terms of the processes used to make strategic choices (e.g., goals, objectives, their plan of action, their definition of mission). These are explained by a number of factors, some of which (such as political shifts) are not under the control of the Councils. Some choices are dictated by the type of rural setting within the State; others are a function of personalities and past relationships among Council participants.

Given these constraints, this assessment of Partnership outcomes attempts to identify a number of indicators that reflect the extent to which the way rural development problems are handled has changed. This discussion focuses on six different types of outcomes that can be discerned from this Partnership to this point: networking, developing strategies, allocation or reallocation of resources, visibility and awareness of rural development issues, defining rural policy, and levels of institutionalization.

Networking

The emergence (or expansion) of a variety of networks has been one of the major results of the Partnership. The relationships that developed through the Councils became more complex and differentiated as the effort progressed. The multiple partnership configuration became a way of dealing with difficult or undeveloped relationships between a number of institutional actors. The Council format became a way for some State-level actors to reach out to local levels, establishing connections that had been difficult to develop earlier. In some cases, in the pre-Council era, Federal officials had little contact with State officials, even when they operated in the same program areas. Some Councils provided a setting for new relationships between public sector and private sector actors (both for-profit and nonprofit groups).

While varied, many of the networks that emerged from the process had a number of common attributes. They were able to provide brokering and mediation functions; they were able to defuse past antagonisms, unfreeze some policy logjams, and smooth out conflicts as they created opportunities for participants to deal with one another in face-to-face, personal terms. In addition, they were able to broaden the issue discussion beyond traditional actors (although some traditional actors, such as agriculture agencies and interests, continued to be important in a number of States) and sensitize some participants to the potential breadth of expertise that might be utilized to solve rural development problems.

The relationships that emerged from a number of the Councils were possible only because of a concerted effort to depoliticize the rural development issue; that is, to acknowledge that concern about rural issues was not a monopoly held by one political party or one institution (such as the legislature or the governor). The methods used to accomplish this were nontraditional in many States: holding meetings in different geographic locations, shifting leadership responsibilities, and forming collegial relationships among participants. However, in several States, Council leadership, while shared, was shared only among a select group of inner circle participants.

Networks of those concerned about rural development were not new in a number of States and the Councils in those jurisdictions were able to pick up on investments that had already been made either within the State itself or as a result of activities such as the 1990/92 CGPA Academy. But even though networks may have existed in the past, the Council activity was frequently able to expand their composition or, in a number of States, to create specialized networks around specific policy issues or focused on specific institutional actors. In a few States, creation of the Council provided the first opportunity for network development; no institution previously existed inside the State which facilitated these types of relationships.

As might be expected, Councils were not always able to deal with problems that had historically plagued the State. Some Councils were largely composed of the "same old players;" others existed as parallel institutions to the real power in the State. Political feuds between the governor and legislature or between the governor and lieutenant governor continued to be a part of the Council's environment. Politics, race, and value conflicts could not be ignored in States with those policy battles.

It should be noted that networks also developed within the Partnership among States. A number of Councils developed relationships with other Councils in their geographic areas, often around specific policy issues (such as the timber summit). Other Councils were able to use meetings among executive directors to establish relationships and to share program and strategy ideas.

Developing Strategies for the Council

The Councils have defined themselves, in terms of missions and goals, in quite diverse ways. Most States have adopted a strategic planning process to operationalize their activities but differ in the ways that they use the process. Some States have developed plans that allow for significant flexibility in implementation. For example, a strategic plan may embody missions and goals but Council activities are not necessarily specified. The specific activities to be undertaken may emerge through interactions with local communities or from working groups. Thus the strategic plan incorporates a flexible, decentralized approach to implementing Council activities. In other States, the strategic plan is more detailed and used more formally in determining Council activities. Councils may even derive work plans directly from the strategic plan or assess proposed activities in terms of consistency with the strategic plan. A number of States use an annual review of the strategic plan as the reference point for internal accountability. In still other States, the strategic planning process is either perfunctory, for compliance purposes, or nonexistent. Some Councils believe it is not their charge to determine strategic direction but rather look to other agencies (usually State executive agencies or the legislature) for direction.

Several States that became involved in the strategic planning process at a relatively late date have used the process to address or correct earlier shortcomings. Many States have addressed tensions between those advocating action-oriented, problem-solving approaches and those advocating a long-term policy development agenda by including both approaches in their plans. While some Councils have developed strategic plans or a strategic planning process for the Council, no Council had developed a statewide strategic rural development plan.

Allocation or Reallocation of Resources

One means to measure the effect of Councils is through changes in the allocation of resources in the agencies and organizations that participate on the Councils. Although Councils themselves have very limited resources, they may be able to mobilize or affect the use of resources by others in their attempt to improve rural areas. To date, the Councils have had quite modest effects on the actual use of resources. When such effects occur, they appear to be correlated with the age of the Council and the degree to which the Council is project oriented. The first-generation Councils have had more time to develop relations with agencies and thus greater opportunity to affect resource allocation decisions. In addition, the Councils that are action-oriented, regardless of age, are more likely to affect resource decisions as a result of projects undertaken or promoted by the Council.

Councils can affect resource allocation in a variety of ways. Many Councils assume the role of broker while working with agencies. This role is frequently seen in Council-sponsored projects but can occur indirectly through spin-offs of Council activities. A number of Councils

have been asked to review grant proposals in programs run by other agencies and thus affect resource allocation decisions of those agencies. In one case, a Council actually administered a grant program for another agency. In another case, an agency created a new pilot program as a result of learning about a particular problem in a Council meeting.

The SRDCs affect resource allocation in other, more subtle ways. A substantial number of examples have been found where agencies have started cooperating, opening the possibility of some reallocation of resources, after being brought together through the Council. In these instances, the role of the Council is not that of a broker, but rather the Council provides a forum for agencies to interact. In addition, there is a significant number of examples where agencies assume responsibility for Council functions, such as maintaining databases. These functions may coincide with ongoing agency functions but, nevertheless, represent instances of using their own resources for Council activities. Finally, many agencies use Councils as a means to discuss and promote their programs.

Most Councils adopted a needs assessment exercise as they were formed. This step, which was recommended by Federal officials, appears to have been a useful confidence-building activity for Councils. There was little evidence that the first round of needs assessments or inventories produced any notable results on subsequent Council activities or on agencies. However, Councils which display an ongoing concern with gaps/needs have produced some interesting results, particularly in those Councils that place a high priority on getting input from local communities. Meetings in local communities have been quite useful for informing State officials and agencies about problems of rural communities. Problems of local communities have helped establish work agendas for several Councils.

Visibility and Awareness of Rural Development Issues

Another potential outcome of Councils is a heightened visibility and awareness of rural issues in the State. On this measure, the Councils have had a very limited independent effect. In several States, visibility of the issues had already been established, often as a result of the nature of the economy of the State (as in the Plains States). A number of Councils depend on State agencies or gubernatorial leadership to generate visibility. Some Councils have adopted a low profile in their endeavors so as not to impinge on the leadership roles of other agencies. The nonpartisan posture taken by several Councils may reinforce their low profile. It may also be that increasing the visibility and awareness of rural issues in a State will become a priority for Councils once they have consolidated their institutional base; for the present, however, this is a low priority.

Defining Rural Policy

For the most part, the SRDCs have not become directly involved in rural policy development in their States, much less attempted to define or redefine rural policy. The constraints on becoming active in policy development range from the prohibition against lobbying activities by Federal employees to not wanting to infringe on the prerogatives of agencies or government officials. These constraints are substantial and Councils may never become effective in this role.

The question of redefining rural policy, in the sense of broadening the definition beyond concerns of agriculture development, has been moot for most of the Councils. It appears in virtually all States that the transition from the traditional agriculture-oriented policy to a broader definition has been made without much assistance from the Councils. Even in the Plains States, where agriculture development is central to rural development, a quite sophisticated understanding of policy issues exists independent of Council efforts. Nevertheless, many individuals participating in Council activities report that they have a broader perception on rural issues as a result of their participation.

Level of Institutionalization of the Councils

Most of the Council States that were studied had past experiences with initiatives that originated in Washington, DC, and were skeptical of what they saw as a common pattern around these efforts: the tendency for initiatives to be short-lived, lasting only as long as a particular official or administration was in office. Indeed, several of the States were reluctant to invest in the organization of a Council until they had fairly clear signals that the Bush initiative would be embraced (at least in some form) by the Clinton administration.

Despite this, several States organized Councils around an existing State activity. In at least one case (North Carolina), the Council was effectively grafted onto the governor's program. The experience in other States suggested that, even if Federal monies disappear, the institution might become a part of the State apparatus. Efforts have been made in the State of Washington to codify the Council through State legislation. States have varied in the extent to which they have acted on an assumption that the Councils will be permanent bodies. Some Councils behaved as temporary organizations, choosing to assume a low visibility posture within the State, presuming that the Federal funds are likely to be time limited, and spinning off activities to other groups (some of which may have been created through the Council).

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Federal funding occurs through support for staff and administrative support. Given the tight budget crunch in a number of the States, it is not at all clear whether alternative funds would be made available to pay for the support of a coordinating function.

Summary

Looking across the 6 indicators of Council success, the results are mixed. On the one hand, all Councils have succeeded in establishing networks--or upgrading existing ones--that enable key rural development institutions and players in the State to collaborate more effectively. At the other extreme, the Councils seem to have had little or no impact on increasing the visibility of rural development issues, largely because some other body was already successfully playing this role in most States.

Most of the Councils have tried hard not to invade the turf of other rural development players. This has led them to avoid broad policy issues. As a result, it is not surprising that the Councils have had virtually no impact in defining rural policy. While some Councils have put together their own strategic plans, enabling them to be focused in their activities, no Council has developed a statewide rural development strategy. Most Councils have had some impact

on rural development resource allocation, but for most Councils this effect has been quite indirect and modest.

Variables and Outcomes: Patterns or Randomness?

Looking at this range of outcomes, a clear set of attributes does not emerge that seems to be associated with particular outcomes. This is not surprising, given variability among the States. What appears to have facilitated the activity of the Council in one State can surface as a blocking attribute in another. In addition, the 16 States studied represent three different generations of participation in the Partnership.

This discussion includes attention to a number of variables that have emerged during this study: the impact of past and ongoing efforts in the State, generational differences among Councils, membership strategies, relationships with the local level, leadership patterns, agenda development, determinations of degree of visibility, and demographic characteristics.

The impact of past and ongoing efforts in the State. States that had a heritage of efforts related to rural development before establishing a Council clearly got off to a faster start. This was particularly true of the second-generation Councils: the issues were known, potential participants had already been identified, and some level of conversation had already taken place that facilitated the process. A number of the 16 States had participated in one of the CGPA Rural Academies and were able to use much of the work done for that effort in the early stages of the Council process. However, past efforts were not always a positive force. In some cases, these prior activities meant that turf was already established regarding rural development and actors had staked out specific territories. If the Council believed that changes should be made, it was difficult to unfreeze prior arrangements and begin anew.

Similarly, a close relationship between the Council activity and that which was on-going in the State had both positive and negative consequences. Close proximity to ongoing efforts (either through the Council agenda or its physical location) usually meant that the Council would be taken seriously by other actors. In States where rural was already defined to include issues beyond those of farming and agriculture, the Council did not have to invest in the education that was required to achieve that redefinition.

However, if the Council was very close to the governor (or the lieutenant governor or the legislature), then it was difficult to differentiate the activity of the Council from the political agenda of that office holder or institution. While this closeness was productive in some States, such proximity might be viewed as skewing the Council's agenda (for example, in several States, the Councils chose to ignore certain issues because they were effectively told to stay away from them). Councils that were close to key actors also were vulnerable to secondary effects from changes such as elections, budget issues, and reorganizations.

Generational differences between Councils. The 3 generations of Councils studied clearly exhibited different characteristics. The first generation--the 8 pilot States--largely took a trial and error approach to the effort both in terms of State-level activities and in their relationships with Washington, DC-based staff. The pilot Councils had a mixed record in terms of outcomes with most experiencing a pattern of ups-and-downs during their first 4 years.

By contrast, the second-generation Councils studied (Iowa, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Vermont) have 2 attributes that distinguish them from the pilots. First, as a group they were much closer to their governor (or other State officials) during their organizational period than the earlier generation. As such, their agenda more closely meshed with ongoing State activities and the membership of the Council (and the Executive Committee) was more likely to include top officials from State agencies than was the case among the first-generation Councils. One result of this was an early focus on substantive projects and the development of processes that would facilitate these projects. Second, this group of Councils appears to have consciously learned from the experience of the pilots in terms of relationships with Washington, DC officials and, as a result, was able to "work the system" quite effectively. These States did not go through the protracted learning process experienced by the pilot States.

The third-generation Councils studied (New York, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming) had some difficulty getting started. Each had somewhat different reasons for these delays; some involved State-level political issues while others involved the adoption of a wait-and-see attitude toward the Clinton administration.

Membership strategies. By definition, engaging 5 sets of partners in each Council suggests that their membership strategies would tend to be inclusive. A number of the Councils further refined their partnership to include others as well (adding the education sector, differentiating between the for-profit and nonprofit private sector, or including State legislators). A few of the Councils, however, attempted to define the membership in more exclusive terms, basing membership on position within an agency or organization.

The inclusive membership approach provides a way for the Council to identify the breadth of issues involved in rural development and to involve relevant actors in the process. At the same time, an open-door policy may make the Council's agenda unstable and its progress slow. When new members join the group, significant time is required to socialize them to the effort and also to give them an opportunity to reinvent the activity.

Relationships with the local level. During the first stages of the Partnership, few of the original pilot Councils emphasized the involvement of local officials or others who could serve as surrogates for local concerns. By 1993, however, both the original and the newer Councils developed methods for reaching beyond State-level concerns to focus on rural communities. The challenge for the Councils was to find ways to bridge State and local relationships without devolving authority to local governments or involving all of the State's localities. Most Councils wanted to reach beyond the State capitol but do it in a way that did not raise local expectations that the Council could "solve" their immediate problems. SRDCs did not want to have responsibility for "case work," although some behaved somewhat like ombudsmen.

Several approaches were used to create these bridges: through membership on the Council, through contacts with local groups (such as non-profit groups and councils of governments who might be involved in activities of interest to the Council), and through meetings held around the State that could help State and Federal representatives understand the problems experienced by rural citizens. Representatives of local government, substate entities, community-based organizations, and statewide organizations representing local government

(such as the League of Cities and the Association of County Officials) became members of many of the Councils.

Leadership patterns. Although the initial responsibility for organizing the pilot Councils was given to the FmHA State director, few of these officials remained in leadership roles in the Councils once they were up and running. In part, this occurred because of the depoliticization of the Partnership's activities (FmHA State directors are political appointees). But it also was a part of a broader pattern of the absence of leadership by "traditional" rural actors, particularly those from USDA and from State agricultural agencies. Leadership in the Councils rarely stayed with the same individuals; officer positions were rotated and new individuals were often brought into the organization to play leadership roles. Many Councils appeared to select individuals in leadership roles who could play a neutral broker role. In several instances, this meant that leadership came from representatives from the private sector or other groups that were not viewed as traditional rural actors.

Agenda development. Councils frequently struggled to determine the dimensions of their agenda. By the end of the Partnership's second year, several pilot States focused on process issues to the exclusion of projects. Because the creation and development of a Council required attention to process concerns (e.g., methods of communication, internal decision-making protocols), this was not surprising. However, once the developmental stage was largely completed, there was pressure from members to address project and substantive outcomes. Economic problems within States and political scrutiny made many members conscious of the need to justify their existence in project terms. The second-generation SRDCs emphasized the need to balance process and substance.

Councils also struggled with the time dimensions of their agenda. Some Councils devised activities with very short time frames, concerned that they needed some "victories" to justify their operation. Other Councils defined a longer-term agenda, focusing on more systemic problems of rural citizens. Still other Councils decided that both dimensions were important and attempted to include both approaches in their strategies.

Determinations of degree of visibility. Councils differed in the degree of visibility they sought within the State. Many Councils adopted a low-profile approach, seeing their role as advisor or facilitator to others. These Councils were not likely to receive much newspaper publicity but provided assistance to State and Federal agencies (for example, some Councils assisted the Rural Electrification Administration establish priorities for in-State project). Other Councils chose a more high-profile strategy, playing an active role in policy discussions, taking positions on State legislation, and vying with other actors for public attention.

Demographic characteristics of the State. While geographic location does not explain many of the differences among States, there does appear to be a difference between the Councils in small, rural States and all other States. The Councils were more important and visible in small, homogeneous, and essentially rural States. Larger States, with more diversity in population and a tension between urban and rural sectors, were less likely to invest heavily in Council activity.

Themes

Seven themes emerge from this experience.

1. **Change.** This effort has operated in an environment characterized by turbulence and constant change. Participants in the process cannot assume that what works today will be effective tomorrow. Change comes from multiple levels: the churning that occurs through the political environment at both the national and State levels, the economy and occasional natural disasters and other unpleasant surprises (e.g., the Midwest flood). It emerges from the idiosyncrasies of the individuals who participate in such an effort. It requires policy designers to be modest in their efforts.

2. **Diversity.** The Partnership provides evidence that it is possible to create a policy design that acknowledges that "one size doesn't fit all" and yet, at the same time, provides a system where participants can learn from one another. The effort has allowed States to respond differently, in ways that reflected the unique characteristics of their populations, institutions, and processes. Many of the specific activities that took form in the Councils were developed as a result of State-specific opportunities to share information, to develop common norms, and to create a sense of a collective enterprise.

3. **Flexibility.** Unlike most Federal initiatives, the Partnership has worked to institutionalize itself in non-rigid, non-bureaucratic ways. It has been adaptable, has provided opportunities for participants to think in new ways, and has stimulated their receptivity to engage in new behaviors. While a feature of the effort, flexibility is difficult to protect in traditional governmental systems.

4. **New Modes of Intergovernmental Relationships.** The design of the Partnership has provided an unusual opportunity to combine both bottom-up and top-down strategies. Unlike most intergovernmental forms (which choose between one or the other), this effort provided for legitimate vertical (Federal, State, local) as well as horizontal (interagency, interorganizational) involvement.

5. **Collaboration.** The creation of an ethic of collaboration has been pervasive throughout the Partnership and has involved a wide array of constituent groups. The Partnership created forums that provided venues for communication between players and it moved into the creation of arenas that provided a setting for collaborative policymaking and implementation. Collaborative environments were found in the SRDCs as well as in Washington, DC. While conflicts and disagreements continued in those settings, the Partnership provided a way for participants to manage their points of tension and to appreciate--if not always agree with--the perspectives of other players. Care was taken to avoid turf battles both in the States and in Washington.

6. **Process and Product.** The experience with the Partnership indicates that there is a close relationship between investment in process issues and the ability to move toward product outcomes. The complex environment that surrounds the effort makes it difficult to move into a simple, task orientation. SRDCs, for example, provided a way for participants to change attitudes and identify problems that crossed traditional agency or organizational lines. Without

investing in the development of the organizations, the Councils could not reach toward specific product outcomes. At the same time, however, the focus on process issues sometimes made the creation of a product seem remote.

7. **Energy.** Despite the ups and downs of relationships and uncertainties surrounding the Partnership, participants in all aspects of the effort were willing to spend some of their scarcest resources--their time and energy--on Partnership activities. The Partnership evokes unusually sustained and high levels of time and commitment from the participants. SRDC members and others invested heavily in the effort and were willing to fight for its continuation.

Conclusions

The National Rural Development Partnership is a very different initiative in 1995 than was envisioned at its inception in 1990. During these years, the participants learned that there was no consensus on what could be accomplished and that expectations about uniform and consistent performance were unrealistic.

This "learning" posed special challenges for this study. It required the researchers to acknowledge that there are multiple criteria and diverse points of view throughout the process. What is clear and obvious to one set of participants--whether in Washington, DC or within the SRDCs--can be controversial and murky to other participants. Some SRDCs have been more effective in achieving their own goals than have others. Yet, overall, the process has been useful and has made some significant or noticeable contributions throughout.

While most rural development efforts are ultimately aimed at improving the economy of rural areas (and, as a result, indirectly aimed at improving the living conditions of rural residents), the Councils cannot be assessed in terms of their immediate effect on jobs and income. This is true for at least 2 reasons. First, the Councils are not involved in activities that directly affect the economy of rural areas. Rather, their efforts aim at having an impact on institutions that are engaged in the rural development arena. Second, the Councils are too new to expect such an impact.

At the same time, there are a number of indicators of success involving the Partnership. A relatively small and lean budget produced visible and often useful activity. Participants were willing to spend time and energy on the effort. The Partnership was able to deal with a broad range of issues related to rural development, including both the traditional aspects (e.g. agriculture) as well as less traditional areas, such as human services and environmental concerns. The Partnership produced a number of demonstrations and projects that provided examples of new ways of doing things. Overall, the costs of the effort were outweighed by the benefits gleaned from it.

Mechanisms were developed to identify rural issues and to utilize community input in the process. The networks that were created through the SRDCs allowed opportunities to share information, to devise spinoffs, to develop new or improved personal relationships, and to provide the setting for collaboration. For the most part, the process was inclusive and developed ways to bring relevant actors to the table. The Partnership provided the venue for attitude change involving multiple players, particularly in terms of Federal-State relationships. Evidence of an attitude change comes from the willingness of participants to talk about new ways of carrying out their work, even if they are not actually yet doing so. The shared leadership model that emerged in most SRDCs provided evidence that more than the paid staff member cared about the process.

However, one must acknowledge the limitations of the effort. The changes in the external environment over the 4 years of the effort meant it was difficult to define the Partnership's overall purpose. The SRDCs generally adopted a low-visibility posture and were not designed to be major policy actors. As a result, they operated in a way that was tangential to the core State and Federal rural policy system. Relationships that were developed were often at the

individual--not the institutional--level. Although traditional accountability relationships did not appear to be appropriate for the effort, it was difficult to define and measure accountability expectations for the various segments of the Partnership. Most of all, the experience of the Partnership indicates that efforts at shared leadership and new modes of behavior are extremely fragile and vulnerable.

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