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THE INTERFACE OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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THE INTERFACE OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The comprehensive view of development presented by Eber Eldridge [9] defines development as "the process that informs, involves, motivates people of the community to examine realistic alternatives and take actions which result in a positive change in the quality of life..." This is achieved by measures to improve the economic well-being of persons and by improving the economic, social, cultural, and political character of the communities where they live and work. The purpose of this paper is to indicate the role of political¹ systems as a crucial part of the endeavor. There are political consequences which clearly follow from development. But, additionally, development is shaped by the character of the political system. As we are concerned with rural development focusing on the community, the discussion will center on local political considerations.

The Political Domain of Development

The wide range of criteria for development places a heavy burden on the political domain. At the least, it requires public order in the community; not only law enforcement, but the provision for housing, utilities, industry and commerce, public institutions and facilities, transportation, and other communications. It requires schools and training facilities. It certainly implies cultural and recreational facilities. Today, it must require the protection and enhancement of the physical environment. These requirements are quite evident and are seldom ignored although the standard of performance is often quite low.

As the economic and social aspects of the community are linked to a broader society, the political aspects are also linked. The local political unit is a fragment of a complex whole which contributes to, and constrains, the ability to perform the local functions. The ability of local leaders and institutions to utilize the resources of the broader system can be an important aspect of development. This is particularly important in rural areas with few resources of their own.

Further, the process of development entails some degree of politization of the community. This would seem to be a requirement if development is to reflect the aspirations of the public. It is an almost inevitable consequence of an increasing complex, differentiated socio-economic system. As government becomes more active and spends and taxes at a higher level, as it regulates land use (or misuse), as a class structure of sorts develops, the potential for conflict increases. The service and regulatory functions of government are indeed evident; the conflict channeling or arbitrating function is perhaps more important and often less successful [3, Ch.2]. This is to say that as a rural community develops it acquires some urban characteristics--although it may be small and more-or-less isolated.

Rural Government, U.S.A.

When we look at rural governments we see a mosaic of counties, towns and townships, villages, and a mixed assortment of special districts. With a number of exceptions (which is increasing) the style and organization of these governments is reminiscent of the Colonial period. Without belaboring the point, these characteristics include an exclusive localism; part-time, amateurish leadership; little executive authority; non-centralized organizational structure; little expertise in administration; minimal levels of service; and low participation by the citizens [17, Chs. 1-2; 5, pp. 11-13]. (The last aspect probably represents a weakening of the Colonial pattern.)

This picture is not universally gloomy. In urban and metropolitan areas, particularly, the county executive has been strengthened, organization structure has been modernized, professionalization has occurred, and efficiency of scale has been improved through city-county consolidation or similar arrangements [7]. However, many rural areas have been untouched by these developments or have been bolstered by a patchwork of special districts and local branches of federal and state agencies. At the root of this pattern is a mistrust of change reinforced by the paucity of resources and obsolete legal framework [18; 7, p. 240]. If we have not proven our point, the assumption that rural governments are ill-prepared for the process of development is not too hard to accept.

Toward Political Systems for Development

A responsive and active political system for development must be able to plan, to make decisions, to deliver services, and to channel conflict with some effectiveness. Planning is necessary to set goals, to marshal resources, and to program activities which support the goals. Decision-making requires that authority reside in positions centralized enough to have a significant impact and must rest on information from the public, from expert professionals, and from organizational channels. The delivery of services requires rational organization, staffed by skilled personnel, accessible to the clients. Efficient, equitable delivery of services may require some bureaucratization of organization [2, Ch. 2]. The channelling of conflict includes adjudication but more essential for our purposes the ability to respond to the range of interests and demands from the public.

The typical governmental model for these activities includes a strong executive, a representative board, and hierarchical organization structure. Additionally, it should be based on a vital and actively participating public--a condition found more often in theory than practice. Finally, it should have jurisdiction over sufficient area to be effective and efficient.

Most of these objectives are obtainable and can be patterned after existing models. However, there is no model which optimizes the mix of these features, indeed, some aspects are apparently inconsistent with one another.

(1) The manager form of government provides a basis for professional, expert, administrative leadership and effective organization. The capacity to plan alone may increase resources by increasing the ability to use local resources more effectively and the ability to utilize a better mix of state and federal resources. The development of bureaucracy, although carrying pitfalls of red-tape and indifference, increases the ability to deliver services more equitably and, indeed, to innovate [16, pp. 128-133]. However, with its weak governing board the manager form may founder on political leadership--it tends in fact, to be uninnovative and evidence indicates the city manager form, at least, is less responsive to the needs of the poor and disadvantaged than unreformed, "inefficient" forms of urban government [13]. The manager approach may be useful but it is no guarantee of the responsive style we have in mind.

(2) Improving participation raises many questions which range beyond the scope of this paper but some aspects of the problem should not be ignored. We assume on ideological grounds that participation is desired and we observe that it is likely to increase with development in any case [2, Ch. 2]. If it is to influence development in a constructive way, however, we note a number of problems.

The rural poor have traditionally been outside the effective range of political participation [6;5, pp. 41-116]. To simply attribute this to apathy, or a cultural characteristic may be misleading. What passes as apathy may emerge as a deep-rooted alienation with dysfunctional consequences for the community. It may mask a normlessness which undermines a productive community. It may reflect tangible constraints in the political system. Even "benign" apathy may obstruct support for community development.

The dynamics of development itself tend to frustrate participation. Development requires the leadership of experts who may overwhelm or ignore the citizen. The growth of efficient bureaucracies may intimidate, insulate, and patronize. Increasing complexity may bewilder. Increased geographic scale may isolate centers for decision-making. To overcome these tendencies will require deliberate efforts by leaders and citizens alike.

Local governments can pursue policies to minimize this non-participation. At the least, decision processes should be open to public view and public offices open for discussion. A strong emphasis should be placed on disseminating information and hearings should occur at the grass roots level. Instruments for interest articulation should be encouraged: labor unions, civic and voluntary associations. Finally, activities to involve and mobilize those with the least civic competence should be encouraged and expanded. These prescriptions are a nuisance and annoyance to those eager to get on with the job but are essential if development is to reach those in the greatest need.

(3) Enlarging the scale of government also increases capacity for effective action [6;15;4, p. 275]. Many, if not most, of our local governments are too small to provide very adequate services, comprehensive planning, or to achieve much efficiency. Ostram [15] suggests that appropriate scale might

be determined by the criteria of efficiency, control, political representation, and self-determination. Each of these criteria presents its own dilemmas.

(a) An efficient scale for one activity (e.g. airport development) may not be efficient for another (e.g. waste disposal). Furthermore, at some point merely increasing the size of a unit will not always increase its efficiency /1, p. 52/ although few rural units are in danger of reaching this point.

(b) The concept of control has similar weakness. Many areas of control lie outside the competence of even rather large local areas and there is no firm scale criterion for others. (c) Political representation may be more nearly approached in rural areas. People affected by decisions should play a role in reaching them. If the rural region is self-contained this may present fewer problems. However, effective representation becomes more difficult with a complex socio-economic structure and with professional, bureaucratic, and expert styles in government. (d) Local self-determination is the thorniest issue of all. Many people remain in rural areas to preserve their local identity--we are all familiar with the absolute lack of enthusiasm for county or regional consolidation. This criterion runs counter to the previous three in most instances.

In spite of the inconsistency and imprecision of the criteria for scale, regional organization is an attractive approach to achieving the objective of effective rural government. It would provide a base to support modernization, more comprehensive economic development, and a broader aggregation of interests. But a commitment to democracy as well as the practical reality of public attitudes prevents our recommending regional government which is merely a "bigger" small government.

The need is to develop an approach to area government which is compatible with the perceptions and interests of the people in the local unit. Regional or area government might better come by degrees and in stages. This would permit building on what we have and remain in line with public sentiments. Intergovernmental agreements and contracts, regional councils of government, regional planning agencies, regional special districts, and the like are well-tested and are reasonably effective. These do have the drawback that they are either limited to a highly specialized activity (special districts) or have advisory authority only. They do not have the capacity to operate as a general government. A compromise approach could be a transitional federal form. In general, area-wide functions would be located in the area government and local functions in the local governments. If public interests and perceptions merge sufficiently, a unitary area government could develop but this is not essential to our objectives. The following discussion suggests features of such an approach. It is designed to provide effective scale for decision-making and administration, to encourage responsive and innovative leadership, and maintain effective access to citizen preferences and participation.

Scale. This presentation makes no brief for a particular scale but assumes that for rural areas it would generally be larger than most present counties. The functional economic area /10/ or similar criterion might be used.

Process. As a first step existing area functions (such as regional planning agencies, or regional special districts) should be brought into as nearly the same boundaries as possible. Deliberate efforts to coordinate these bodies should be made (perhaps modeled after regional councils of government). A second step would be to superimpose a general government over the area and, as possible, absorb the functions of the original organizations and add additional functions. A third step might be to fully absorb the local governments, re-establishing a unitary local unit. The argument, however, does not assume the third step unless the citizens of the local units establish an effective identity with the area unit.

Division of functions. In general, activities of an area-wide nature would be located in the area government. In practice this would include most, if any, functions currently carried out on an area basis and additional functions which benefit most from efficiency of scale and which for a given area are not controversial. (Examples might include such activities as central purchasing, tax assessment and collection, water supply control, or sewage and waste disposal). In addition, it might be easier to place new functions at the area level than traditional functions. Traditional functions would generally be left at the local level until the process is well advanced.

This picture is complicated by the existence of townships and municipal governments. However, in rural areas, townships have been losing their identity and their functions could be transferred to either level [17, pp. 538-40]. Municipalities would generally retain their identity and special character. However, it is technically feasible to merge them with a broader government and retain service levels typical of urban areas.

Area government form. In order to enhance policy leadership and responsiveness to the public the government should be headed by an elected executive and a board elected by district (perhaps corresponding to constituent units). To enhance administration an administrative officer should be appointed and have responsibilities similar to those of a city or county manager. This differs from the typical manager system, however, by virtue of the strong executive and district elections for the board. The form most nearly resembles the strong mayor-chief administrative officer form found in some cities. However, in most cases neither the executive nor board would serve full time in rural areas. To encourage effective participation functions which are most closely associated with people should be conducted through decentralized offices with some discretionary authority [14, ch. 10] and citizen advisory councils should be used in conjunction with planning and administration.

Feasibility. This has been an attempt to outline an approach to regional government which has the advantages of large scale but which does not unduly threaten local interests and sentiments. It has, in fact, the potential of better serving the interests of those who are most disadvantaged and frequently bypassed by our present local governments. The plan is complex but hardly more complex than the fragmented systems emerging in many areas. In terms of development it should be much more effective than individual local units. Finally, it is not a radical departure from existing forms although it would

generally require additional legislation by the states. (The states have varied considerably in their willingness to innovate but the plan does not threaten state interests and is consistent with some state policies for regional planning and development.)

The Interaction of Politics and Economics

It is probably pointless to ask whether political or economic development must precede the other. One could find rather well-developed economic institutions in areas without much political infrastructure. However, as we are interested in a development process which integrates economics with other aspects of the community, this would seem to be a moot point. Comparative studies of modernization place a heavy emphasis on political development to respond to political demands [8, p. 124]. Brief attention will be given here as to effect of political and economic factors on the adequacy of government services to its citizens.

Hawkins [11, Ch. 4] has recently reviewed a series of studies in an attempt to clarify this point. In his examination he has compared political system effects on policy variation with the effects of "environmental" (economic and social) factors. The policy variables include the level and type of public expenditures, police and court policies, educational policies, and the provision of various services by local governments. The political system variables include form of government, power structure, political party and interest group development, and the perceptions and attitudes of leaders. Environmental factors include social, demographic and various economic indicators. The studies are all of urban or metropolitan areas, including some small urban areas. The absence of rural areas in his review may be a disadvantage for our purposes, however, there is no reason to expect that different conclusions would have been reached had rural areas been included.

Although the individual studies generally did not permit a rigorous comparison of political with economic effects, the greatest weight of evidence supported the contention that the environmental (social and economic) effects were more important to policy outputs than political system effects. In other words, variation in policy is better explained by variation in the socio-economic structure of communities than by variation in form of government, party system, power structure, leader attitudes, or the like [11, pp. 99-100]. The political system plays an important intervening role chiefly when environmental factors are equal or in cases when particular political decisions are crucial [11, p. 99].

However, the conclusion that political development is a mere reflection of socio-economic reality, while plausible, is almost certainly misleading. We can consider the following tautology: the political system is important to development to the extent that development is affected by the political system. The notion of development in rural areas involves the intervention of political system decisions and actions to set and achieve goals. A static view of policy outputs will not reveal this. The political system must utilize economic resources and is generally committed

to improving the economic base of the community. The system's success here may indeed help shape its own future. Rural development in the United States also hinges on the ability of the political leadership to sort out, acquire, and coordinate resources (of information as well as money and materials) available from state and federal programs. Local leadership also intervenes in state and national political processes to shape these programs. Although economic institutions can exist without support of a viable political system, the political system can potentially develop a viable local economy where none has existed. (While this observation applies to particular local areas, it would be harder to support with reference to a national system.)

A second consideration in viewing Hawkins' conclusions (or similar ones) is that the policy outputs are usually measured by economic-type indicators; for example, the level of expenditures for particular types of services. More qualitative aspects of governmental services may be as important but difficult to measure. This reflects a problem of definition and measurement and undoubtedly gives an economic bias when comparing the effects of the political and economic systems.

As a final point, neither the theory nor practice of political science and economics provides a very certain guide for community development. We have many fragments but little pattern. This should be no surprise. If we were to identify successful communities today there would be many patterns. In addition to giving people potential, they are entitled to choice. The objectives of development might be achieved through many approaches. This suggests a new line of questioning: What conditions are essential for development? Do we have choices in these? What conditions, then, shape the direction of development? How can we make the right choices in these?

Notes

1

The term "political" is taken broadly to include both the structural elements of government and the processes of influence and decision-making associated with government. References to "government" will refer specifically to the legitimate and authoritative structure of decision-making.

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