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RURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH UNDER SCRUTINY*

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Second thoughts about the assigned title of this paper (Rural Development Research—One Perspective) prompted a change — there is a not too subtle implication that the “one perspective” may not be the correct perspective. Also, I had envisioned assimilating a number of perspectives attributable to others into my own — and at least attempting not to miss the target altogether. However, such would be a rather placid and inappropriate approach to the topic. Consequently, I propose to confront the topic of rural development research more directly, scrutinizing it as closely as possible, and attempting to make a contribution to a better understanding of the problems facing rural development researchers and those concerned with action programs in “rural development.”

It is my intention to propose questions and suggest answers that will cause you to consider rural development research in a more critical manner. And, to borrow a phrase, we all need to be more “critical lovers” rather than “uncritical lovers.”

NATURE AND PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

What is research? Very simply it is the searching out of answers to questions — a gathering of evidence to support common sense notions. More rigorously, it is the process of adding to the body of knowledge that constitutes a part of science. If the majority of man's occupation is concerned with decisions regarding the allocation of scarce resources among competing ends, then a body of knowledge from which to make these decisions is essential. Because this body of knowledge will not be useful if it is

static, it is necessary that this body be added to, that old and outmoded ideas be rejected, and that new concepts be developed. Most of the discussion (especially regarding rural development research needs) will focus on research that is intended to be used directly or indirectly for decision making (applied research rather than basic or pure research).

Research has two other dimensions, i.e., positive versus normative. Positive research is distinguished from normative in that answers derived are potentially independent of the ideologies or ethical values of the research worker. However, the complexity of the social world, coupled with our limited understanding of it, often limits the use of certain objective procedures in research and encourages or requires the use of other methods. Although we can never be sure about the degree to which the researcher's ideologies result in biased research results, the role of agricultural economics research in emphasizing the positive approach has been well discussed in the literature of the profession. Thus, a second requirement that should be placed on rural development research is that it be positive or conditionally normative (what *could be*, given a certain set of constraints).¹

One further general remark about research needs to be made. A description of “what is” or “was” is insufficient without explaining “why.” Although ideas about causal ordering of phenomena are prerequisite to securing facts relevant to describing what is or was, “... much of (rural development) research apparently has been fact-gathering insufficiently guided by meaningful conceptual

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¹ See [8] for more complete discussion.

frameworks, hypotheses, and purposes.”²

It is not my intention to develop such an unsupported conclusion and drop it. Although I have not attempted to support this conclusion (i.e., to develop a logical argument that rural development research has not been guided by meaningful conceptual frameworks, hypotheses, and purposes), I find such a conclusion a plausible explanation for currently voiced dissatisfaction with past and current rural development research. It is also a leading and intriguing hypothesis. If the hypothesis is in fact true, what are the reasons?

IS RURAL DEVELOPMENT A SPECIAL CASE?

Rural development has been defined in numerous and conflicting ways. Exposure to these multitudinous definitions of rural development should make it clear that research progress is contingent on selection of an objective definition.

Rural development has been characterized as being economic development, community development, natural resource development, human development, or any one of a number of other things depending on the focus of the defining entity. In contrast to arriving at a definition for farm management research, for example, defining rural development seems to be an almost insurmountable task. Because of the different perspectives, the different levels of human activity involved, and the different definitions that have been advanced for rural development, one could argue convincingly that rural development is indeed a special case.

But it need not be. Ineffective floundering amongst the myriad of definitions can be avoided by the decision to adopt a specific objective definition for rural development. The USDA Regulations for Programs under Title V of the Rural Development Act of 1972 interpret the overriding purpose of rural development as “to encourage and speed economic growth in rural areas, to provide for jobs and income required to support better community facilities and services, to improve the quality of rural life, and to do so on a self-earned, self-sustaining basis.”

My belief is that agricultural economists should direct their attention to research designed to provide information which will speed up economic growth in rural areas, providing the jobs and income which are necessary to support people in rural areas. Adequate economic activity will allow them to develop better community facilities and services. This, to me, provides an objective approach to the otherwise

elusive goal of “improving the quality of life in rural areas.”

ORGANIZATION OR DISORGANIZATION FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT?

We need to consider whether the rural development effort can be categorized as organized or whether its most distinguishing feature is disorganization. Part of any disorganization that exists is highly correlated with the inability of all involved to arrive at a satisfactory single definition of rural development and a failure to achieve an understanding or an agreement as to what the needs of rural development are. The attitude that rural development is to be all things to all people is, unfortunately, a severe handicap.

No attempt has been made to develop a comprehensive list or ordering of individuals or agencies or chronological periods in rural development. The following examples are sufficiently illustrative of the agencies, regulations, statements of need, and exhortations for accomplishments that are characteristic of the “rural development effort.” Agencies linked to the rural development effort include Farmers Home Administration, Rural Electrification Administration, Soil Conservation Service, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, the Rural Development Service, various other agencies of the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, and others.

Recent legislation concerned with rural development includes the Rural Development Program of 1955, the Rural Areas Development Program of 1961, the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961, the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962, the Vocational Education Act of 1963, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965, the Rural Community Development Service formed in 1965, the Agricultural Act of 1970, and the Rural Development Act of 1972.

Statements of needs and exhortations for accomplishments have either been included in or are the primary focus of such documents as: *A National Program of Research for Rural Development and Family Living* [2], *Guidelines for Research in Rural Development and Criteria to be Considered in the Selection of Centers of Excellence* [12], *Suggestions for Research Emphasis in Rural Development in the South* [30], *Rural Development (With Suggestions*

² The original statement by Chryst and Back [8, p. 15] was directed at *land economics* research. I believe it is equally applicable to rural development research.

for Research Content) [25], *Current Program and Progress Report of the Economic Development Division* [10], Title IX of the Agricultural Act of 1970, *The People Left Behind* [22], *Rural People in the American Economy* [26], *Rural Poverty in the United States* [21], *Food and Fiber for the Future* [20], the Rural Development Act of 1972, and numerous others.

Add to this researchers in the various disciplines, extension workers, rural development centers, state rural development committees, state rural development advisory councils, planning and development districts, economic development districts, councils of government, resource conservation and development districts (these last four totaled 935 in the U.S. in 1972), multicounty development groups, local development groups, etc. If this constitutes an "organized" approach, it is much too complex for me to comprehend. Surely it is a bewildering phenomenon to people in rural areas who feel the need for more jobs, higher incomes, and more adequate community services.

In addition to the diversity of effort noted above, the rural development approach on a national scale has been characterized by a paucity of funding scattered among pilot projects, agencies, and various other groups and bodies, to demonstrate "what rural development is and how it can be accomplished." The irony of the situation is that (1) there are not enough resources to do this for every needy community or individual, (2) the mixture of approaches undertaken in pilot programs or at local levels may produce results inferior to what our currently available research information suggests could be done, (3) we stand to find out from this effort a great deal we already know, and (4) we eventually must come to recognize that the allocation of scarce resources for rural development should have been guided by the "greatest marginal returns" criterion.

WHAT FOCUS SHOULD RURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH TAKE?

"The answer to the problem of rural migration and the solution to the central city plagues are as close by as America's countryside" [23, p. 2]. Maybe this is too utopian an outlook, helping to explain the lack of success in previous so-called rural development efforts. Further in this report it is stated that "The first function for the Council of Rural Affairs should be to establish appropriate goals, policies, and priorities for the economic and social development of rural countryside America" [23, p. 9]. Whose responsibility indeed is this? I believe that this role must be shared, with researchers, educators,

and policymakers providing appropriate alternatives for consideration and adoption by individuals and groups in rural areas.

Jansma and Day [17, p. 282] state that: "Research priorities, assuming our goal is improving the socio-economic well-being of people in rural areas, should be oriented toward providing adequate training and other mobility aids for the people who wish to move to more urban areas and to providing opportunities and adequate facilities for those who remain in rural areas." This statement, with which I strongly concur, appears to be at divergence with the intent of the Rural Development Act of 1972.

A similar guide to research needs was stated by Heady [13, pp. 50-51]: "The challenging task in rural community development is to identify the nature, location, and extent of inequities falling on rural communities and on various population strata in them; then to evaluate and provide alternative means for alleviating or redressing these inequities."

The most clear-cut dimension of the rural development problem is assisting the decision-maker who has the capability through his own initiative and resources to do something about his problems. The more complex dimensions require policy legislation, funds, and programs at national and state levels. An economic development approach can provide a helpful clarification of basic issues and greatly strengthen the framework for research directions and objectives.

WHY AREN'T RURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH NEEDS BEING MET?

Part of the answer to this question is interspersed through all the above discussion. Inability to define the problem succinctly is a major problem. Inability to state a comprehensive view of the problem so that small but practical pieces could be fitted together is another problem. There seem to be some others, as suggested below.

Our methods of problem recognition have been (1) a felt need of the individual or society, (2) a gap between the achievement and the goal of the individual or society, (3) a deviation from optimum as defined by theory, and (4) an intellectual difficulty felt by the researcher. Often problems as stated by the general public and by many social scientists have dealt with the symptoms of problems rather than the basic causes of the uncertain or unsatisfactory situations [16, p. 22].

Too much emphasis by research and legislation on the individual farmer or too much focus on a particular resource has been a criticism in the past. It also has been argued that treatment of rural

development as both economic and social development has been ignored, that decision units must be groups (not firms), and that the resources which have been investigated have not been those associated with human capital or community capital or social capital. [19, p. 1049]. Most importantly, rural development work has "devoted far too much attention to defining areas in terms of needs rather than in terms of potentials for development" [18, p. 1058]. Other vividly stated criticisms are exemplified in the following:

"Our social programs are designed to adjust poor people rather than the conditions that make people poor" [9, p. 737].

"To do everything is to do nothing" [4, p. 135].

"Policy formulation has been all but buried in a proliferation of narrow categorical problems" [11, p. 252]. It might be more appropriate to paraphrase this for the current situation as, "Implementation of action programs has been all but buried under a proliferation of broad and all-encompassing objectives."

Many articles, memoranda, reports, etc., have been written in the last 10 years and delineate research needs in rural development. Maybe we don't read what each other writes — or is there some other reason for the obvious inability to clarify this area?

One criticism of rural development research which I couldn't pass up is stated as follows: "Analysis of specific land grant college research projects on rural people and places reveals the commitment to these needs is even less than it appears on the surface. The low percentage of scientific man years, the pitiful departmental budgets, and the handful of projects do not begin to plumb the depths of the bankruptcy that exists within this research" [14, p. 53]. A more meaningful and insightful criticism from the same source states, "Research on people and places in rural America is not geared to action. Projects tend to be irrelevant studies of characteristics, and they tend to stem more from curiosity than a desire to change conditions" [14, p. 55]. To me, this criticism has basis in fact — and is inextricably tied to lack of identification of the research audience and extension clientele.

Perhaps a more basic reason for some of the difficulties surrounding rural development research, especially as it relates to the development of rural human resources, can be found by examining

economic theory. We have equilibrium models for the resource allocation, investment, and consumption processes based on assumptions of perfect knowledge, mobility and free exit-entry. Rural people — as a productive resource and in homogeneous groupings---would flow among alternative employment possibilities until both their marginal value products and returns were equal [29, p. 200]. Departures from these theoretical concepts affect the real situation, and we need to consider the areas in which the equilibrium assumptions are not satisfied.

Models can provide little insight into decisions about allocation of resources or investment generated through the public, since predictions from these models arise from aggregations of individual decisions about their own optimizing endeavors. Public policy-making processes of representative government result in decisions about investment that affect the productivity of the rural citizenry, their consumer behavior, and their participation in policy making itself. The investment processes that we may be concerned with are public; those embodied in equilibrium theory and the models that we deal with are intrinsically private. In theoretical models, supply and demand are recorded by an infinite aggregation of private and individual choices. In the public process an infinite array of individual choices by participants also comes into play. However, the resolution is not through summation but in accommodation, conciliation, or compromise among the choices [29, p. 203].³

The major problem in adapting the aggregated micro theoretical models to provide information for macro problems is that we are dealing with two different kinds of resources. One is private — under the control of a specific decision-making body or an individual decision-maker. Allocation of resources is dictated by conventional micro economic theory. That is, maximizing or minimizing principles apply, and objectives are normally quantitatively defined. The second type of resource is public. It either may be allocated by legislation for rather categorical purposes where allocation is from the top down, or it may be at rather loose ends — available for allocation but the means for acquisition of such resources by the individual or group is unclear.

A SUGGESTED APPROACH IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

What are the needs in rural development research? Are we meeting these needs, or are we

³ In the same vein, Willis and Engel [31, p. 3] state that, "The aggregation theories envision society selecting policies on a democratic basis where each member casts a vote. This contrasts rather sharply, of course, with observed practices in contemporary societies in which the policy decision-making is generally delegated to a small number of decision-makers."

gearing up to meet them? Have we been doing something called rural development research that is not rural development research, or that should be done under some other name, or some other group should be doing?

We should be more circumspect in selection of our research areas, asking: "Who are the decision-makers who most need data? What data do they need, and in what context?" [4, p. 135]. With regard to clientele, Brannen states [6, p. 3]: "In dealing with the problems of rural development we can no longer afford to think in terms of our clientele as consisting only (or even primarily) of farmers." Four principal categories of clientele of extension workers are defined by Cavender [7, p. 110] as: (1) citizens groups involved in making and implementing decisions that relate to community improvement and development; (2) key local citizens who influence or make decisions relevant to the community; (3) public officials who are responsible to the citizens for administering public policy and for programs of economic and social progress, and (4) groups such as development authorities, planning commissions, and private firms engaged in planning community development activities.

Jim Hildreth's clear-cut example [15, pp. 156-157] of the heterogeneity of the research audience identifies that audience at national, state, and community levels in both public and private categories as follows: national public (Congress and executive branch); national private (national organizations and firms); state public (legislators and government officials); state private (state organizations and firms); community public (local government), and community private (local organizations and firms, individuals, and families).

What data or research results do these clients need? Here I find myself at a loss to provide a comprehensive list of needs and maintain the requisite brevity. First, I will say that the tax-paying public needs answers to *current* problems. To say to a client that basic research is underway which should be of help "down the road" seems clearly inappropriate.

Next, if jobs and incomes are to be generated in rural areas, then clients need to know what kinds of industry would be most suitable, the fiscal impact of industrialization on the community, and whether to opt for local development or depend on commuting to a "growth center." Prescriptively oriented analyses of the ties between provision of services and interactions with goods-producing sectors, income

and employment effects of various industry sectors, income and employment effects of alternative tax policies, etc., will also provide urgently needed information.

Answers to two important questions are essential for planning needed community services in rural areas: (1) What is the expected number and spatial distribution of jobs and people in rural areas during future time periods? (2) What is the expected form and quality of community services that will be desired over a planning period? [27, p. 2]. Input to determine "adequate" services will require development of conceptual frameworks for local decision-makers to use in deciding what expenditure of limited funds represents the best investment for their community. Although planning in rural areas must deal with the same variables used in SMSA's, the problem is complicated because of sparse population and a multitude of local government bodies [27, p. 3]. Because a number of counties may be required to master a population large enough to support certain desired services, research to facilitate coordination and organization for efficiency is required.

Research to establish the needs for and means of providing better educations, proper vocational training, adequacy of nutrition and health care, and at least moderate social and cultural activities is obviously called for.

I would like to quote at length from a statement by U.S. Congressman Bill Alexander⁴ of Arkansas. First, regarding specific needs, "I agree that when you are working with a priority item list including communications, comprehensive planning, education, job development, transportation networks, and water and waste disposal system projects, then recreation would have to be placed lower on the list than some of the others. But, I would emphasize that I regard all these areas of work as integral parts of comprehensive community development in nonmetropolitan areas.

"Second, I would agree that more research is needed into the needs, effects, and practical solutions of the development problems plaguing the countryside, but I would again point out that the test of research is in its practical use in achieving our objectives. It is time, I believe, that research and practical application be undertaken concurrently. The Congress is going to want to see tangible results from the use of Title V funds.

"I recognize that there is a philosophical conflict, in the minds of some researchers, about what research actually is. I do not intend to join that discussion in this letter except to say I believe the test of and

⁴Chairman, House Subcommittee on Family Farms and Rural Development.

justification for research is the capability of its results for translation into useful, workable, and rational solutions to community and regional development problems of the countryside" [1].

We certainly have an impressive reservoir of capabilities for meeting these research needs. In addition to appropriate micro economic theory for producer and consumer decisions, we have theoretical approaches to rural development exemplified in trade theory, internal and external combustion theory, and others. Quantitative tools for rural development research include such things as shift analysis, economic base analysis, intersectoral input-output analysis, interregional intersectoral input-output analysis, econometric models, simulation models, spatial programming, activity analysis, and others which provide general guidelines for decision making [3, 5]. Research and extension must work together to refine the research generated so that it can be applied in individual cases, with the extension workers directing action programs where the greatest development potential appears to exist.

The distressing fact about most discussions of rural development research needs is that the prescription usually is: (1) put together a core of researchers to work on current problems using research data that are already available, (2) put together interdisciplinary groups or teams to work on intermediate and long-run problems, and (3) continue with fundamental discipline-oriented research. In other words, the solution appears to be to get organized for rural development research on the basis of length of run. This seems to ignore the essential question: "What are the problems?"

Some excellent opportunities in the past have not been capitalized on because of our failure to fully utilize research results. Continued dependence on research endeavors that are highly general — without serious attempts to provide specific results — will not satisfy the needs of people in rural areas. Information simply will not be able to filter down to the decision-making levels where direction is urgently needed.

We also should be aware of major changes in overall rural development policy. For example, the philosophy existent before the Rural Development Act of 1972 might be described as "(1) doing the very best job possible on those farms that have adequate resources to support farm families and (2) making possible a transfer or combination of resources on those farms that have adequate resources to support farm families" [18, p. 1059]. How large a role will be played by the implications of the Rural Development Act of 1972 for land resettlement?

Ordinarily we would suppose that, aside from immobility and depressed areas, people would be better off living wherever they wanted to. Instead, there appears to be much emphasis on fixing people in rural areas in their present location.

One choice for research is to work to increase economic opportunity in rural areas—depending on people to locate in those viable rural areas that can provide the economic opportunity to enable the provision of desired community facilities and services. The best alternative for some residents of rural areas with little potential can best be attained by increasing their mobility.

The most recent investigation of rural development research needs in the Southern region included the following conclusions with respect to research needs for various rural development objectives [28, pp. 4-7]:

Community services — The single most productive activity would be the pulling together and synthesizing of results of research dealing with increased efficiency in the provision of particular services. Much has been done that needs to be brought together in a consistent fashion and made more usable to the community decision-maker, the planner, extension personnel, etc.

Human resources — It would be helpful to know what kinds of skills will be demanded, manpower requirements by industry, and improvements in employment service networks that would be helpful in matching jobs and workers. As in the community services category, a number of studies have been completed which need to be brought together, summarized, and related.

Income and employment — If the rural development effort is to be effective it must be based on strengthened economic activity in rural areas. Further information is needed regarding what local communities should do to attract and retain industry in order to gain the greatest economic benefits to the community. Especially needed is research to explain the effects of rural industrialization on income

and employment, on the distribution of costs, and on the increased levels of services required to support new jobs. Studies of the income employment effects of taxation appear to be especially timely. State legislatures and local governments are under increasing pressure to find new or alternative revenue sources, and they need to be informed of the possible effects of tax policy on economic activity.

The usual approach of the economist, which has been to study the resources of the rural community in order to determine the alternatives open for economic development and to make recommendations on public policy at the local, state and national levels [24, p. 231], must assume much greater importance, and rural development researchers must be more clearly attuned to needs, if the rural development effort is to produce desirable results.

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