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TOWARD FARM POLICY REQUIREMENTS FOR THE 1970's TO IMPROVE THE WELL-BEING OF RURAL AMERICA

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In past decades, agricultural policy was always thought of as policy toward farmers who produce our food and fiber or other rural people who depend on farmers for their livelihood. Accordingly, past policies were translated into programs of research, education, electrification, price supports, and related commodity programs.

After a time, it was realized that many farmers did not benefit from price and income programs in particular. They lacked the resources to enter the commercial market through which price programs operated. It was decided that the problems facing these people called for credit and other special programs to help them graduate into the commercial field.

The decade of the 1960's ended with a renewed awareness that programs for commercial agriculture were not the answer for a great many rural people. In fact, we are now told that three-quarters of the people in rural America are not in commercial agriculture and, therefore, would never benefit directly from commercial programs.

These developments have caused new uncertainties concerning the scope of agricultural policy, the role of rural social science, and that of existing agricultural institutions. As Don Paarlberg observed, "The agricultural policy agenda now includes an array of issues in addition to the more familiar policies for commercial agriculture". The agenda includes poverty, malnutrition, pollution, racial discrimination, and related noncommercial problems that not only go beyond the historical domain of agricultural policy but in many cases are almost indistinguishable from urban policy issues.

Many new items on the agricultural policy agenda seem to have been placed there by the Ralph Naders,

consumers, and "hippies" rather than by the people and institutions who usually fill this role. This in itself has caused confusion if not embarrassment on the part of the so-called agricultural establishment. The problem of adjusting to a new policy environment is intensified by widespread and often emotional pressures for immediate corrective action.

THE GOAL OF IMPROVING WELL-BEING

The ultimate goal of agricultural policy today is the same as it has always been - - to improve the well-being of rural people. This is worth keeping in mind, even though rural people are not the homogeneous group we once thought they were, and many new problems now affect the quality of rural life.

Webster refers to well-being as, "a condition characterized by happiness, health, or prosperity; moral or physical welfare . . . an increased sense of well-being opposed to ill-being." These words tell us that overall well-being depends on many things, that it is largely subjective and immeasurable. No two people will have identical opinions about their respective degrees of well-being, and while some of the components of well-being can be measured, their total effect defies such treatment.

Though Webster's definition should cause no controversy, it might help to relate the meaning of well-being to some thoughts about policy requirements for the 1970's.

Although we recognize that many things contribute to well-being while many others detract from it, we tend to focus our attention on the parts rather than the whole. For example, the economist thinks mainly in terms of economic well-being. The physical scientist stresses physical welfare, and the clergyman focuses on spiritual well-being. Past programs for commercial

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agriculture have emphasized income, or economic well-being. Yet, many new items on the policy agenda seem to call for a new realization that income may not always be the only component of well-being that needs to be improved.

Think about the unhappy millionaire. Obviously his problem is not income. Or, take the case of the welfare recipient who uses the money for "booze," or is too lazy to work. Webster's definition suggests that other components of well-being (education, equality of opportunity, a sense of meaning and motivation) could have been lacking and that these deficiencies might have explained the failure of the recipient.

The problem of malnutrition further illustrates the difficulties created by our tendency to identify and alleviate a single deterrent to well-being. Some feel that the problem can be overcome if the malnourished have enough income. Others believe that lack of nutrition education is the main problem. The two sides probably recognize that both income and education are necessary, but in practice they seem to be victimized by the specialization with which so many social problems are approached.

Our urge to quantify things is another handicap in seeking to improve the well-being of people. The economist would be happier if somehow he could quantify a utility function incorporating money, education, health, and such things as open space or lack of noise, but well-being does not lend itself to such precise treatment.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The implications of these ideas for agricultural policy are probably more critical than ever before. We need somehow to work across, or shift, disciplinary and administrative lines, not only to identify the barriers to well-being for different groups of people, but also to formulate meaningful programs.

The day is past when we can put rural problems into one compartment and urban problems into another. The lines between the two are blurred. True, agricultural price programs have always been reflected in the costs to urban consumers of food and fiber, and the migration of farm workers to urban areas has always affected the urban labor force and city problems, but the interdependence today is even more complex.

Can we improve the well-being of rural people without reducing the well-being of urban people? The answer is "no," in the case of a relative shift to transfer payments under a limited federal budget. There are other questions with a "no" answer. If

well-being is enhanced by the absence of noise, ample open space, and a quiet trout stream, how should the constant supply of these benefits be allocated to a growing population? This leads to the question of alternative goals concerning the location of the one hundred million people that some feel will be added to the U.S. population by the year 2000. Or to ask an even more basic question, what are alternative goals concerning population growth itself?

With the high costs of the war in Vietnam and increasing pressures to resolve domestic issues, the competition for limited public funds is intense. The traditional rural-urban dichotomy can have very serious effects on the allocation of these funds. There is always a danger that some of the conflicts will be resolved without a proper hearing. For example, there are those who might argue that the 3.4 billion dollars now spent on programs for commercial agriculture should be reallocated in whole, or in part, to programs for the poor of rural America who are not benefited by commercial farm policy. One could conceivably arrive at such a reallocation but hopefully not through this kind of reasoning, that is, expenditures for implementing both commercial agriculture and noncommercial policy should not be forced to compete solely with one another. They must also compete with defense, efforts to solve the problems of our cities, and all other demands for public funds.

CONCLUSIONS

We have not presented specific policy requirements for the 1970's, because we do not know what they should be. We have tried only to offer some thoughts that may be useful inputs in the process of policy information.

These thoughts lead to some suggested policy criteria for the 1970's. The time-tested criteria of efficiency, justice, equity, cost, and administrative feasibility remain useful, but perhaps we need to consider other criteria. Does the proposed policy have impact on more than one aspect of well-being? Does it improve one aspect of quality of rural life, say economic, while decreasing (increasing) other aspects? How does it affect the well-being of different groups of people (farmers, nonfarm rural, inner-city and suburban)? Consideration of such additional criteria may well lead to significantly different policy than if the policy proposed is evaluated only by thinking along traditional lines.

There is immediate and critical need for an enlightened determination of national goals and for a strong and continued commitment to those goals. Rural social science has much to contribute to this difficult process. We need additional knowledge about alternative goals and the costs of pursuing them, and

also the costs of doing nothing. We need more information and data describing the current state of well-being in rural America. Of equal importance are ways of helping the citizenry, rural and urban, understand the issues and make informed decisions concerning alternative goals and prescriptions.

Finally, while we need to preserve our professional esprit de corps, we should perhaps recognize that our profession may suffer in the long run if we fail to break with tradition as the need arises and respond with the necessary innovations to solve the problems now facing this country.

