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TOWARD EFFECTIVE RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN BLACK BELT COUNTIES: CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

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Abstract

The objectives of this paper are to (1) specify what “rural”, “community”, and “development” mean, and (2) what should be the essential steps to be taken to achieve an effective rural community development. Rural is a territorial concept, and it means an extent of dispersion of people in a local ecology. Community is a natural disposition among people who interact with one another on different matters that compromise a common life. Development is an organized intentional effort of local people to work together towards a shared goal. Community development is building the capacity of community residents to act effectively and collectively to solve their common problems and pursue their common interest. Three essential steps, local level efforts, federal and state government level efforts, and science and education level efforts, to achieve rural community development are posited and explained as solutions to rural community development in the Black Belt.

Keywords: Rural, Community, Development, Community Development, Black Belt Counties

Introduction

The Black Belt area is one of the poorest in the nation and the majority of the residents are welfare dependent. It is one of those categorized as in “persistent poverty” (Zekeri, 2015). Despite their persistence, rural black communities have become “places left behind” in many respects. Although much has been written about the return of African-Americans to the South, and the southern economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s, these developments have not rejuvenated rural black communities. There is ample evidence that economic development in the South is highly uneven, concentrated in urban areas, bypassing African-Americans in rural places (Zekeri, 2015). The poverty-stricken character of these places contrasts sharply with the affluence of white society. This disparity reflects in some respects the stratification of African-Americans, namely, the division between middle-class African-Americans and the so-called underclass.

Although the area was the cradle of the civil rights movement, the poor residents are still faced with many of the same inequities of years past. Living in the area has not been idyllic experience. Residents are still living in the same shacks and shanties described in numerous reports during the 1960s, only now, in 2018, there have been more years of deterioration. The Black Belt’s remote location, paucity of employment opportunities, and other requirements for industrial development are detrimental to both in-migration and population retention. Therefore, what is needed to develop the Black Belt area in the 21st Century is rural community development. Though rural community development is easy to endorse rhetorically, it is difficult,

if not impossible, to achieve. Part of the difficulty, no doubt, is lack of precision in use of the term

“rural”, “community”, and “development” in policies, programs, and research.

The specific objectives of this paper are to (1) specify what each of these terms mean and how they affect one another and (2) what steps should be the essential steps, and by whom should these be taken to achieve an effective rural community development in Black Belt Counties? Definitions of rural, community, and development are legion, each with consequences of operationalizing and measuring these concepts (Kaufman and Wilkinson, 1967; Murdock and Sotton, 1974; Zekeri, 2015; 1999; 1997). These objectives will be achieved based on the author’s professional experience in the Black Belt Counties and review of the relevant literature.

Rural

In America, the Census’ definition for rural is “that which is not urban and has population of under 2,500 residents.” This statistical definition is suggestive, but it is slippery. Though the number of residents influences opportunities for different kinds of social interaction, labelling a place rural because of the population of the residents, outside the city is inadequate. Thus, it is worthwhile to consider the concept in terms of its components.

First, an area is rural when it has relatively small population and low population density. Second, occupation - labor force participation in the rural areas are considerably more limited than in urban areas. Particular occupational patterns are in the extractive industries such as farming, forestry, and others producing raw materials as the basis of sustenance. Third, sociocultural - rural areas exhibit greater homogeneity in population, both culturally and in world-view (Wilkinson, 1991; Zekeri, 2015). Individual and group relationships tend to be personal, face-to-face, and expectations, norms, rules and values are traditional. In other words, farmers and other residents tend to follow traditional and conservative patterns of life.

Careful observation will indicate that these three elements are not correlated and so will not suffice for precise definition. For example, none of the traditional industries in rural areas as practiced today can be said to be simple or unrefined. Most of the extractive industries tend to use complex modern technologies. Furthermore, works in the industries are not the principal means of support for the residents with low population density. The traditional and conservative patterns of living are as likely to be found in large population centers too. Thus, to call one’s occupation or lifestyle rural in the modern world is not accurate. The only element of rural that should continue to be known as rural is size or territory. Rural is a territorial concept. It means an extent of dispersion of people in a local ecology.

Community

In many cases the use of the term community indicates a lack of conceptual rigor. Community has been, and continues to be, a concept, which evades a standard sociological definition (Hawley, 1986; 1950; Ryan, 1987; Wilkinson, 1991; 1989; 1986; 1972; Zekeri, 2015). Wilkinson (1986) makes clear the futility of achieving “supra-definition” of community and instead suggests three essential criteria for identifying a community: a territorial presence, a structural organization, and a set of shared actions. Where these converge, community is likely to emerge. Community will, therefore, be

defined using the essential elements identified by Wilkinson. These are a locality, a local society, and locality-oriented collective actions. Locality is a place where people meet their daily needs together. A local society is more or less a complete network of associations for meeting common needs and expressing common interests. A community field of locality-oriented interaction is the process of interrelated actions through which residents express their common interests specifically in a local society. From these three elements community can be defined as a natural disposition among people who interact with one another on different matters that compromise a common life. In other words, community depends on people interacting with one another and it involves all types of relations that are natural among people (Wilkinson, 1991). All other units than community may have one or two of the elements stated above, but a complete community has all three. Community emerges most clearly where people who share a locality and a local society engage in collective actions to address local issues. Thus, the paramount component of a community is community action - collective action by local residents to solve local problems together out of shared interest in the locality and the local society (Wilkinson, 1991). Therefore, a rural community is a local ecology with low population density in which groups of individuals interact as they carry on their daily activities and regularized means of solving common problems have developed.

The above definition of community emphasized a given territory as the necessary element of the community. Although modernization has increased geographic mobility and blurs the boundaries between what were once isolated and self-contained, the local community is still “the setting and the mechanism of empirical contact between the individual and society” (Flora and Flora, 2013; Green and Haines, 2008; Kaufman, 1959; Wilkinson, 1991;1989; 1986; 1979; Ryan, 1987; Zekeri, 2015; 2012; 2010).

Development

The term "development" is multifaceted and widely used - so much so that meanings are sometimes in conflict (Zekeri, 2015). For this analysis, a good reaction to the diversity of meaning is to specify the context for usage of the term. For the task at hand, the idea of community as defined above will provide the context for the use of the term development. “Development,” in a community context is a process of capacity building. An organized intentional effort of local people to work together towards a shared goal is also development. Development as used here is working together for a purpose. The achievement of the purpose or the goal is not important. The action itself is the development. Thus, development as will be used in the rest of the analysis is a process approach (Kaufman, 1959; Wilkinson 1991; Zekeri, 2015; 2012; 2010).

Community Development

From the above definitions, community development can be defined as building the capacity of community residents to act effectively and collectively to solve their common problems and pursue their common interest. Community development is thus, capacity building for meeting local needs (Zekeri, 2015).

As stated above, community is a naturally occurring tendency among people who share a local society and this tendency can be threatened or suppressed due to some extant conditions of some

settings. In other words, community cannot occur or develop when there are barriers or impediments. One major source of suppression of community is rural as defined earlier. Rurality affects the variable community in many ways. The field of locality-oriented social interactions (community), which is essential to social well-being (Wilkinson, 1991; 1972) can be threatened by the extent of dispersion of people in a local ecology (rural location). From experience in Black Belt Counties, a major barrier to community is space. Geographic isolation is a factor that constraints development options of small places in rural areas like the Black Belt (Johansen and Fuguitt, 1984; Murdock and Sutton, 1974). Further, distance suppresses the probability of contact (Wilkinson, 1989), and contact is what community is all about. Distance tends to fragment local societies in rural areas and this suppresses the possibility for community to emerge. Potentials for community to develop in a local population tends to decrease with rurality, mostly such as in nonmetropolitan and Black Belt areas; and the significant reason for this is the decreasing local capacity to meet local needs.

Rural location depresses opportunity structure for contacts (weak ties and strong ties). The probability of any contact between two people diminishes as distance between them increases. Therefore, rurality tends to depress the number of weak ties in a local population. Rural areas tend to have a greater ratio of strong ties to weak ties than do urban areas. However, a “fair” balance of strong ties and weak ties are needed as weak ties are crucial in binding groups of strong ties together. Accessibility to major resources for meeting daily needs of people is a pre-requisite for sustaining a community and ensuring the social well-being of residents in any society. However, distance, which is the most enduring characteristic of “rural” as defined in this analysis impedes accessibility. Accessibility serves the well-being of people, and rural space impedes it.

Community as defined earlier cannot develop in places like the Black Belt Counties. A concentration of low-skilled jobs within a single industry, coupled with geographic isolation, makes Black Belt Counties more susceptible to economic downswing. As a factor of community development, rurality increases some problems and also reduces some problems. It makes community possible by minimizing some of the most obvious barriers to community such as diversity and barriers to solidarity presented by urban populations found in cities. From the above definitions, rural community development can be defined as building the capacity of rural residents to act effectively and collectively to solve their common problems and pursue their common interest.

Strategy for Effective Rural Community Development in Black Belt Counties

There are three essential steps to achieve rural community development as a natural, ubiquitous tendency in local social life. These are local efforts, federal and state government level efforts, and science and education level efforts. At the local level, efforts are needed to build local capacity for collective action and self-help. At the federal and state government level, efforts should be taken to articulate and implement rural community development as a policy goal in the larger society. At the science and education level, efforts are needed to assist those who promote development in local societies and in the larger society. The process of community development does not occur unless local residents make it occur. Rural community development is a purposive action by local actors and this should be the base or theme in attempt to create and implement community development strategies.

In the national and state policy arena where rural community development can be promoted, an important guide to an effective policy for rural community development would be to emphasize the role of community in the development process. Other forms of area development without community development can be exploitative. Where development of community is the goal, this can be done in such a way as to improve community well-being (Flora and Flora, 2013; Green and Haines, 2008; Ryan, 1987; Wilkinson, 1991; Zekeri, 2015). The emphasis in policy should focus on assuring that local residents can meet their daily needs together and can participate actively in solving their common problems. There is a need for jobs and services in rural areas and the meeting of these and other such needs should be the overriding goal of a rural community development policy.

In science and education, the goal of rural community development should not be on educational programs that emphasize individual leadership skills and technical knowledge in problem areas, such as economic development, service delivery, and environmental resources management. It should rather be on programs designed to focus directly on skills needed to build community structure. Education of residents should be coupled with efforts to deal with the structural sources of rural problems.

A synchronized effort is needed. Action and policies of federal and state agencies can set the stage, but rural community development itself is a process of community building by community actors and groups. Communities develop in the process of action as people work together with the aim of improving their lives together. Most rural problems have their origin in the larger society and are, therefore, beyond local control. Actors in the larger society such as the federal and state governments have to work within local efforts or in cooperation with local efforts to be relevant to the solution of most rural problems.

Rural Community Development in Black Belt Counties

The problems facing Black Belt communities are community problems and an appropriate approach to solving them must be the concern. Cernea (1985) had a good phrase for this, "Putting People First." However, Chambers (1983) called it "Putting People Last." The idea is to assist local development efforts in Bullock, Lowndes, Macon, Dallas, and Wilcox counties of the Alabama Black Belt by taking human needs and human capacities as the building blocks of a planned rural development program. This is consistent with the human capital approach in economics but has a broader meaning as well. "Human capital" implies that residents are means, not ends to development. Putting Black Belt people first means not only paying attention to their endowments

and giving priority to the development of human capital but actually putting them up front, in the driver's seat, in control of the process of development.

With opportunities and support, residents in Black Belt counties can be most effective advocates and agents for their own well-being. The starting place, obviously, has to be rural and economic development; but with the residents up front and in control, economic development would mean more than simply exploiting rural resources and markets; it would mean developing jobs and income and related resources specifically to meet the needs of local residents and to facilitate the natural process

of community development. Building the capacity for community action is the key to social well-being for Black Belt communities. Presented below, is a specific example of community development in “Forestville”, Alabama, an anonymous Black Belt County.

Community Development in Forestville, Alabama

The analysis of community shifts from a focus on territory to a focus on the social life of the people whose behaviors give the territory its social meaning. People who live together tend to interact with one another on place-relevant matters irrespective of the fact that they are involved simultaneously in multiple special interest fields, some of which connect them to the outside world. Community development as used in this section are collective actions that occur when a common interest in place-relevant matters is aroused. For instance, in Forestville, actions, events, and programs that were identified during a field research, are defined as community development because beneficiaries are local residents, with local interests expressed, and action is public rather than private (Zekeri, 2015).

Forestville Council of Excellence, Inc.

The council of excellence is composed of leaders representing diverse segments of the community and possessing a broad understanding of community issues and committed to its improvement. A retreat for the council was held in June, 1995. The purpose of the retreat was to build teamwork, identify shared vision for Forestville, reach consensus on issues facing Forestville, and begin to identify recommendations for implementation. The following statement represents the Council’s vision for the future of Forestville:

Forestville, a unified community guided by sound leadership, rich in cultural diversity, rich in respect for each other, and rich in natural resources, is committed to offering all citizens the opportunity to reach their full spiritual, educational, and economic potential.

The Forestville Council for Excellence, Inc. worked to make Forestville a better place in which to live, work, and play.

Communications and Unity Committee

This committee has the charge of promoting community-wide activities that improves race relations and enable all citizens to communicate and work together. This committee is also to conduct interracial activities and programs for youth and adults and encourage continuous improvements in race relations through activities and projects. This committee also conducts interracial activities and programs for youth and adults.

Education Committee

The education committee is responsible for evaluating opportunities for improving education for all ages in Forestville, conduct programs to promote community-wide belief in the value of education for everyone, find opportunities for increasing involvement by parents and businesses in enhancing education, increase adult education and seek nonlocal resources to help schools and students.

Housing and Utilities Committee

This committee is responsible for examining housing situation in the community and identifying specific needs as well as to prepare a plan of action. The committee is to approach the Rural Economic and Community Development Agency (formerly Farmers Home Administration) and other grant-making officials with specific needs and a plan of action. The housing and utilities committee is responsible for initiating a Habitat for Humanity program to build new homes for low- and moderate-income persons. The committee is also to encourage renovation and improvement of substandard housing.

The Economic Development Committee

The committee is responsible for promoting a positive image for Forestville; continue to promote industrial recruitment, tourism, and retiree development; motivate leadership and increase involvement from the entire community in economic development activities. The committee also promotes value-added businesses that utilize natural resources (such as forest product firms); is expected to establish an industry program that increases support for existing firms, help small businesses, and promote a business climate that is conducive for growth.

Other committees or teams formed and operating are: (1) Industrial sales team, (2) Retiree committee, (3) Tourism committee, and (4) Membership committee. All the preceding, demonstrate the orientation of the community as a group.

Conclusion

Rural community development is easy to endorse, rhetorically, but it is difficult to achieve because concepts and strategies that are based on a dynamic research-practice relationship are lacking. For example, community is still a murky concept in sociology. The position taken here is that a major weakness of community development research is the lack of adequate conception of community as spelled out above. It appears that researchers simply know too little about the process of rural community development and community action to advise actors at local, state, and national levels on appropriate actions and intervention. The inaccurate view that rural and urban societies exist simultaneously but separately in today's world is not only a misconception, but a barrier to the kinds of policies and action that will enhance community development. It is erroneous to describe today's society as being either urban or rural in character; rather, it is better to see the situation as being where the well-being of one set of residents affects others in other locations. Theories of rural community development have not been as well formulated as prescriptive models have been. Much of the literature of rural community development is lacking sufficient scientific studies needed to test and refine theories. Thus, researchers still do not know from research under what conditions community development occurs.

Closing the gap in the research base is a fundamental step towards articulating an appropriate policy at the national level to provide the backup and necessary support for efforts at the local level. Research should focus on community, as a central element in social well-being one threatened by contemporary trends in both rural-urban society. A perspective that takes account of the duality of social life, of the confusing and seemingly magic interplay of order and disorder, cohesion and

disarray, system and turbulence in all social interaction which is used in this analysis may be an ideal frame of reference through which a successful rural community development can be achieved.

An adequate theory of community, from the author's opinion, should be social interaction because if there is no interaction, there is no community. The same can be said about a theory of rural and development. With the idea that community can emerge anywhere if barriers are removed, suggests services for rural development that emphasize a process - the process of community development as a potential outcome of programs to achieve more specific goals such as development of jobs and income, and improvement of services. This idea and others that abound in the literature of rural development, need to be appraised and rigorously tested. Social scientists using the interactional approach to community can contribute to an understanding of why rurality tends to create deficits in access to resources for meeting local needs. With such an understanding only can rural community development be achieved.

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