NRE²

Strategic observations for rural community decisions
(ideas for communities that have decided that they want to grow)

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1. Rural Canada is diverse

Each rural community is different. Alessandro Alasia has identified seven relatively independent dimensions by which rural census divisions can be differentiated – and he maps these dimensions to show the nature of this diversity.

Implications: Different communities have different assets and they will confront different decisions. National programs will impact each community differently. Thus, information about these local assets plus local involvement and initiative that build on these assets are critical to the revitalization of rural places.

Strategies to consider:
a) Learn about your unique assets.
b) Develop strategies that build on these strengths.
c) Seek alliances with other communities of similar nature to exchange information, experience, and insights.
d) Invest in the uniqueness of your local situation.

Questions to ask:
a) What are the unique assets of your community?
b) How can these assets be made attractive to others?

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2. Primary industries are shedding labour
Resource-based industries are continuing to replace people with machines, requiring fewer people to be employed even as the level of production has increased. Thus, many resource-based communities are continuing to experience population declines.

      Implications: These communities need to find something new to export or sell to maintain their employment base (because the resource-based industries will keep shipping more and more commodities with less and less labour). In the long run, continuous reliance on mechanized resource-based industries is expected to increase wage and income disparity between these industries and other sectors within rural communities (Hecksher-Ohlin, Polèse and Shearmur).

      Strategies to consider:
         a) Find new potential regional, national, or global markets for potential new products and services.
         b) Identify new products or services that can be produced in this community and sold into these markets.
         c) Build local skills for the new products and services
      Questions to ask:
         a) What are possible metro niche markets that entrepreneurs can sell into (or that metro residents would come to buy, such as a riding school, mental health centre, or a white water rafting experience)?
         b) What local skills are available for creating new jobs?
         c) What local "assets" can the community enhance or build?
         d) What municipal, provincial, or federal government policies or programs would facilitate the implementation of the above strategies?

3. Rural Canada is competitive in manufacturing and tradable services
The intensity of manufacturing and tradable services employment in rural Canada is increasing, relatively. David Freshwater, among others, has suggested that successful rural communities in the future will have a manufacturing base (except for the few with a beautiful vista of mountains and lakes). Jack Stabler argues that tradable services will also provide a strong economic base. Peter Apedaile argues that rural communities will become a habitat economy -- a friendly locally-based environment in which to live without being tied to the hustle and bustle economic imperative of the metro economy.

      Implications: Communities that develop manufacturing expertise or tradable services will have an advantage over others.

      Strategies to consider:
         a) Identify manufacturing and tradable service capacity in the local community
         b) Develop knowledge about external markets for manufactured goods and tradable services.
         c) Develop local skills and infrastructure to support manufactured goods and tradable services
         d) Alternatively, let metro create wealth -- let rural create wellness.

Questions to ask:
   a) What local assets currently serve as a source of manufactured goods or tradable services?
   b) How have other communities built their capacity for manufactured goods or tradable services?
   c) What are potential markets for manufactured goods or tradable services?
   d) What conditions promote wellness?

4. The (local) environment is becoming more important as a quality of life issue

People are placing a higher value on the local environment in which they live and raise their children.

Implications: A pristine local environment is a community asset.

Strategies to consider:
   a) Identify and develop awareness of local environmental assets (current and potential)
   b) Develop strategies to maintain these assets over the long term and with the collaboration of multiple stakeholders.

Questions to ask:
   a) What are the local environmental assets?
   b) What parts of the local environment are vulnerable or particularly sensitive?
   c) Who are the key stakeholders in local environmental issues?
   d) What groups or organizations provide support for the key environmental assets?
   e) How have other communities and organizations dealt with these environmental issues?
   f) What have been the consequences of the approaches taken by other communities and organizations?
   g) When is the stewardship of the environment an asset, and when is it a constraint on rural economic growth and development?

5. Knowledge-intensive employment has increased and is growing

Countries, and regions within countries, with knowledge workers have a competitive advantage and they are able to grow faster. Thus, knowledge and skills are a community asset.

Implications: Many knowledge workers are able to do their job via the Internet. Thus, if you have a community where a knowledge worker wants to live, this person can likely also work from this community.

Strategies to consider:
   a) Identify current knowledge workers to support and upgrade their assets.
   b) Identify key knowledge industries to plan strategic development.
   c) Identify and build critical infrastructure to attract knowledge workers.

Questions to ask:
   a) Who are the knowledge workers and which are the key knowledge industries in this community?
   b) What is the necessary infrastructure for knowledge industries and how can it be built?
   c) How can knowledge workers be supported?

6. The price of communicating and the price of transportation are falling (relatively at least)

Information and transportation technology has made communication faster, easier, and cheaper, not only within communities, but around the globe. This has affected the way in which financial institutions and businesses operate, our work and workplaces are organized, our community and families function, and even what we do for recreation and leisure.

Implication: Businesses and governments can provide services to rural people without having employees in rural areas (e.g. automated teller machines, Internet travel agencies). However, local organizations, equally, can provide services to urban people without having to travel to urban locations

Strategies to consider:
   a) Encourage entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial communities to use telecommunications technologies to access metro markets
   b) Identify how these new technologies are currently used within the community and build upon these uses.
   c) Build the infrastructure to support extensive communication and transportation for local businesses and citizens.

Possibly useful information:
   a) Who currently uses the new information and transportation technology?
   b) How do they use it?
   c) How might it be used to expand opportunities for economic, social, and political objectives?
   d) Who might benefit from the use of this new technology?
   e) How can their use be supported?

7. Youth are leaving, but young families return

Youth usually want to leave home. They will benefit from education and worldly experiences. If your community is an attractive place to raise a young family, you can attract them BACK – and they would likely create their own job!

Strategies to consider:
   a) Five-year (or seven-year) high school reunions where you have researched the interests and capacities of each former student and you make them an offer they cannot refuse.
   b) Community bulletins sent regularly to past residents to keep them informed about local activities.
   c) Use your diaspora for market intelligence and opportunities.
   d) Small community venture capital funds for returning youth.

e) Mentors for new entrepreneurs

Possibly useful information:
  a) Assets of this community that would attract a young family.
  b) Assets of this community that would attract a young entrepreneur.
  c) Information about the community diaspora: where they have gone, what they have done, their stage in life, what their plans are.

8. The concentration of industry has increased

Local industries are often owned by companies outside of the local community, either directly or through franchises and contract arrangements. Subsequently decisions about local operations are often made outside of the community, with little attention to local conditions. People and organizations in these communities often have little influence over those decisions.

Implication: Local residents receive few benefits from this economic activity.

Strategies to consider:
  a) Improve community linkages or communications with these organizations
  b) Encourage, foster, and develop locally-owned organizations
  c) Communicate local concerns and interests to external organizations on a regular basis.
  d) Identify and build relationships with people in external organizations.
  e) Learn about the structure and interests of these external organizations.

Possibly useful information:
  a) Which are the primary external companies that operate in the local community?
  b) How do they make decisions?
  c) How might these decisions be influenced?
  d) How are local people connected to these external organizations?
  e) How have other communities dealt with these challenges?

9. Government services have become more centralized

It is now more efficient (at least according to some) to operate service facilities (such as hospitals and schools) at a larger scale, partly because the technology requires more 'clients' to make it pay. Thus, these facilities are moving to larger centres. Consequently, rural people must often go greater distances for education, health, welfare, legal, and other government services.

Implications: Rural people will need to find new ways to access these services. Some populations are now more vulnerable than others (e.g., youth, women, elderly and other similar groups that have less access to transportation). Local voluntary organizations and households (largely women) face greater demands on their time and energy.

Strategies to consider:
   a) Tele-health
   b) Distance education
   c) Organize community transportation facilities to travel to the larger centres
   d) Organize respite care alternatives
   e) Collaborate with regional people and organizations to organize more efficient services
   f) Foster local leaders to serve on regional service delivery boards
   g) Lobby regional and national policy-makers for more appropriate services.

Questions to ask:
   a) How are local and regional services organized and what are the pressures they face?
   b) How have other communities dealt with these pressures?
   c) How many people are made vulnerable by these changes? Where are they located? How do they typically cope with these challenges?
   d) What lobby groups are currently operating to meet these challenges?

10. We are all aging – and many rural communities are aging relatively faster

The types of people living in rural areas are changing. In general, the proportion of elderly people is increasing, youth are leaving, and, in some communities, adults with young families are moving in. In some cases the ethnic composition of rural places is also shifting.

Implications: The types of services needed to serve local citizens is changing – fewer playgrounds and more community transportation facilities. The pool of people for voluntary groups is changing, as well as the values for community, the environment, and economic development.

Strategies:
   a) Develop scenarios of the community demographic profile in ten years and invest in services to meet this scenario
   b) Develop strategies to attract and support strategic target populations.
   c) Use and maintain your community diaspora.

Questions to ask:
   a) What is the demographic profile of the community and how is it likely to change over the next few years?
   b) What types of people are most important to attract under conditions of population aging?
   c) What are the most important demands of an aging population?
   d) Where have the outmigrants gone?
   e) What ties do the outmigrants have to the community?

f) How can we maintain contact with those people who have left the community?

11. Rural communities are "perceived" as safe communities

There is a perception that violent crime is increasing (crime rates are actually decreasing). Rural communities are 'perceived' as a relatively safe place to live.

Implications: Being viewed as a safe community is a community asset.
Strategies to consider:

a) Emphasize to potential returning youth, immigrants and other potential in-migrants that your community is a safe community
b) Establish and maintain neighbourhood watch groups
c) Develop emergency plans
d) Maintain local activities for all ages and types of people.
e) Develop physical infrastructure reducing risks.

Questions to ask:

a) What are the highest risks for residents of your community?
b) Who are the people and groups most at risk?
c) How might these risks be reduced?
d) What services and resources are available for preparing and dealing with those risks?
e) What emergency plans are proposed by other communities and by the region?

12. Immigration will remain strong

Population projections for Canada indicate that by 2026, there will be more people dying than will be born within Canada and thus our only source of population growth will be from international immigration. Thus, rural communities able to welcome other cultures are more likely to grow. In addition, within rural Canada, Aboriginal populations are growing and welcoming Aboriginal citizens is another potential source of demographic growth.

Implications: If your community is going to grow, your community will have a greater diversity in the types of people, their activities, and their values. There will be wider networks of connections with a more global distribution. There will be a greater need for new ways of communicating and supporting local norms and customs.

Strategies to consider:

a) Use 'Welcome Wagons' and similar institutions to integrate newcomers.
b) Organize cultural events (e.g. travel 'show and tell')
c) Encourage wider travel and transfer of knowledge gained.
d) Develop norms of exploration, support of diversity, and tolerance.
e) Find ways to use the networks of different cultures to build economic opportunities for your community.

Questions to ask:

a) What are the characteristics of recent immigrants to the community?

b) How are their interests best served?
c) What techniques of integration have been used by other communities? Which ones work well? Which ones don't?
d) Which types of people and cultures are most attracted to your community? How can they be encouraged and supported?

13. The relative influence of rural people is declining

As a result of the demographic, institutional, and urbanization processes identified in many of these other observations, the overall ability of rural people and groups to influence economic and social policy has declined. This is reflected in declining political representation, the relatively limited economic flexibility of small municipalities, increasing income disparities between rural and urban regions, and the reorganization of property rights.

Implications: Rural communities and people must find new ways to represent their interests and influence policies.

Strategies to consider:
a) Develop networks with urban-related people and organizations.
b) Identify common interests of rural and urban people, then focus on them to build alliances.
c) Build political alliances across rural diversity.

Questions to ask:
a) How are rural and urban people, groups, and activities related?
b) Which urban-centric policies, programs, and structures undermine rural revitalization? Which support it?
c) What are the common interests of rural and urban people?
d) What political alliances reflecting urban interests are currently represented? How effective are they in furthering rural interests?

Overall, rural (i.e. distance and density) matters

Rural is (long) distance and (low) population density. Distance means that any product or service will have to be delivered to a buyer over a considerable distance (or the buyer will have to travel a considerable distance to view your icebergs). Low population density means that your community will not have the agglomeration economies to support a large production run of any good or service – the production runs will necessarily be smaller and unique to meet the niche characteristics of your target market. Low population density also means, on the social side, that social networks are thinner – such as fewer volunteers stepping up for each call for volunteers.

The New Rural Economy project is an initiative of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation