

## **Exploring Diversity in Rural Canada\***

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\* As usual, these ideas reflect the contribution of many people in the New Rural Economy Project (NRE) of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF). I thank them for their insights and inspiration. Whereas I have borrowed liberally from their ideas, the particular formulation here is not an official position of the NRE or CRRF. Primary funding support for this project has been provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would especially like to thank Tara Lyons who provided timely and valuable assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.

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# **Exploring Diversity in Rural Canada**

## **ABSTRACT**

Typologies and indicators require frequent evaluation to ensure that they are accurate reflections of changing conditions. This paper uses a framework developed by the New Rural Economy Project (NRE) as an example of one such classification for rural places. It compares sites on the basis of four measures representing key processes driving rural change and a fifth one regarding economic and social outcomes. The utility of this framework is illustrated by an examination of population, health, and employment characteristics in the Canadian context. The results reinforce the value of the framework, the interdependency of the processes involved, and the importance of local institutions and capacity. Three examples are provided of the ways in which these interdependencies might reinforce the emergence of new institutions around watersheds, environmental footprints, and trade networks. All of them focus on interests common to both rural and urban people.

# Exploring Diversity in Rural Canada

## Introduction

Typologies and indicators are highly selective windows on the world. They direct our attention to particular phenomenon, and exclude others in the process. For that reason, discussions of typologies, indicators, and units of analysis are far from benign – they have theoretical and policy implications that go well beyond the sometimes technical debates over definitions and measures.

This is an elementary observation, but it can often be forgotten as we seek to refine the indicators we can count on and develop more sensitive measures for the concepts we feel are important. Like paradigms, they can easily lead us astray by making important things invisible even as they reveal critical aspects of the world. This process is compounded when the typologies, indicators, and units of analysis get institutionalized. Vested interests get attached to particular approaches and they tend to resist change even in the face of new conditions.

I assume this conference was inspired by a recognition of this process. It asks us to pause in our preoccupation with the details and consider whether the old frameworks might make us insensitive to new conditions and blind to some of the most important processes. It should also cause us to ask “Whose interests are served by a particular typology, and who stands to lose by it?”

This latter question reflects my sociological bias that treats words, classifications, and typologies as part of the way we construct social reality. They are often contested spheres where the claim of ‘objectivity’ is only one rhetorical strategy to protect and advance particular interests. A good example of this can be found in the dramatic differences between Canada and the USA with respect to the debates about ‘rural’ and ‘poverty.’ In the USA, both concepts have direct implications for the allocation of substantial funds. As a result, the debates over their meaning and measurement far outweigh comparable discussions in Canada. In Canada, we spend our time debating the meaning of ‘multi-culturalism,’ ‘regionalism,’ and ‘separation’ since that is where the money lies.

One result of these research and institutional preoccupations is that we have different views of rural diversity. Rather than identify it with respect to the distribution of assets and resources, our representations have tended to focus more on the processes that may be driving them – a search for the relations sustaining inequality, for example, rather than the documentation of the outcomes. In doing so, we often work with similar materials and data, but we do so within different frameworks. These are the frameworks we need to compare.

I will take up this challenge by focusing on two things. The first is how we in the *Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation* (CRRF) have dealt with diversity within the changing conditions of rural Canada. To do this, I will outline the research framework we have used to represent this diversity. The second is by outlining some of the insights we have gained in our

research that suggest more appropriate conceptual and institutional frameworks for the new rural economy.

## **CRRF**

When referring to “we”, I am referring to those of us in the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation. CRRF is a network of rural researchers, policy-makers, and rural citizens who have been collaborating over the last 15 years around our common interest in rural issues ([www.crrf.ca](http://www.crrf.ca)). In 1997, we initiated a 5-year project entitled Understanding the New Rural Economy: Options and Choices (NRE). This project includes data collection and analysis at macro, meso, and micro levels, the integration of rural people into the research process, annual conferences and workshops, and the establishment of a research infrastructure across the country. It also includes collaboration with a number of international partners, primarily from Europe and Japan. It is this NRE project that forms the basis for the results and insights I will outline today.

## **Four Rural Challenges**

As stated in our name, our central concern is ‘rural revitalization’. This concern emerged from our perspective that rural people face significant challenges that were devitalizing their economic and social conditions, especially at a local level. We were also aware of the considerable diversity within rural Canada regarding the impacts and responses to those challenges. This diversity not only reflects the varying conditions within the country, but it was also a result of the considerable capacity and the many options available to rural people. What

was needed was high quality research and collaboration to understand those conditions and expand the available options.

Our analysis at that time identified four important challenges to rural Canada. The first was trade, especially the changing conditions of commodity trade that has traditionally been part of the Canadian economy. The export of fish, timber, agricultural products, minerals, and oil has always been a key element of the Canadian economy and it continues to contribute to our balance of trade in a major way (Wallace 2002). All of these resource-based industries are labour-shedding, however, creating a population crisis especially for the more remote rural locations (Bollman and Biggs 1992).

The second rural challenge we identified was economic fluctuation and de-stabilization. Economic uncertainty has been particularly difficult for smaller centres to deal with, since their relatively specialized and small economies make them vulnerable to dramatic changes even if it is only one industry or enterprise that faces the crisis (Polèse and Shearmur 2002).

The growing influence of metropolitan regions through labour force, political, and cultural hegemony is a third rural challenge (Freshwater and Deavers 1992; Newby 1986; Sassen 2000; Stabler and Olfert 1992; Savoie 1992). It is reflected in migration, changing commuting patterns, homogeneity of mass culture, and growing urban political representation.

The fourth challenge was the reorganization and restructuring of basic institutional structures, especially those relating to the state such as health, welfare, and education (Flora 1998; Bollman 1999). Evidence of this restructuring is seen in the withdrawal of state services, the dismantling of the welfare state, and the undermining of the traditional institutional bases of rural places. This includes the more informal organizations found in voluntary groups and family relationships as well as the more formal ones.

We were also struck by the increasing complexity of the rural economy, society, and political spheres. All of the pressures above interacted to make the traditional modes of operating less reliable and the future look more unpredictable and risky. Our research approach was rooted in all these insights.

### **The NRE Sample Frame<sup>1</sup>**

To build on these insights, our research agenda requires considerable attention to the details of local circumstances as well as the macro-level processes that condition the local options. Above all, it requires a systematic and consistent comparative analysis in order to separate the unique features of local communities from the more general ones they may share with similar locales. We designed the NRE sample frame to meet these conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Full details for the design, rationale, and implementation of the NRE Sample Frame can be found in Reimer (2002).



We started with units of analysis that were sufficiently small to reflect the diversity and social organization of rural places – Census Subdivisions (CSD). This choice carries important assumptions, as does any decision regarding the unit of analysis. In this case, it reflects another element of our perception regarding the revitalization of rural Canada. Specifically, we recognized that many of the challenges facing rural Canadians were not of their doing. Many of the underlying processes were global in origin and most of the policy decisions were made without the participation of rural Canadians. Yet we also recognized that smaller social groups are well placed for social action. In fact, we had many examples of these groups taking charge, by identifying the challenges, searching for solutions, and taking action to improve their conditions. We felt that we should include an examination of this capacity within our study since it went to the heart of the options and opportunities that may emerge under the new economy. Therefore, the CSD provided the most appropriate level of analysis for the types of social groups and action that we had in mind. Our subsequent research has led us to nuance this decision in many different ways.

Since they are primarily administrative units, CSDs do not correspond ideally with local perceptions of community networks, labour force regions, or other geographical regions typically found in the literature. Indeed, some CSDs are structured as locations totally encircling others, the latter often representing small municipalities. In spite of these limitations, we chose the CSD as the basic unit for our sampling frame since it offered the best compromise between the demands of the theoretical literature on community, the existing empirical studies in rural locales, the centres of policy formation and administration, and the availability of data.

We then operationalized the four challenges outlined above into four dimensions along which the CSDs might be ordered:

- whether they are integrated into the global economy or dominated by economies that are predominantly local (based on industry employment);
- whether their local economies are fluctuating or stable (based on industry employment);
- whether they are adjacent to or distant from major urban centres; and
- whether they have a high level of institutional capacity (e.g. schools, hospitals, and other services) or whether this capacity was low.

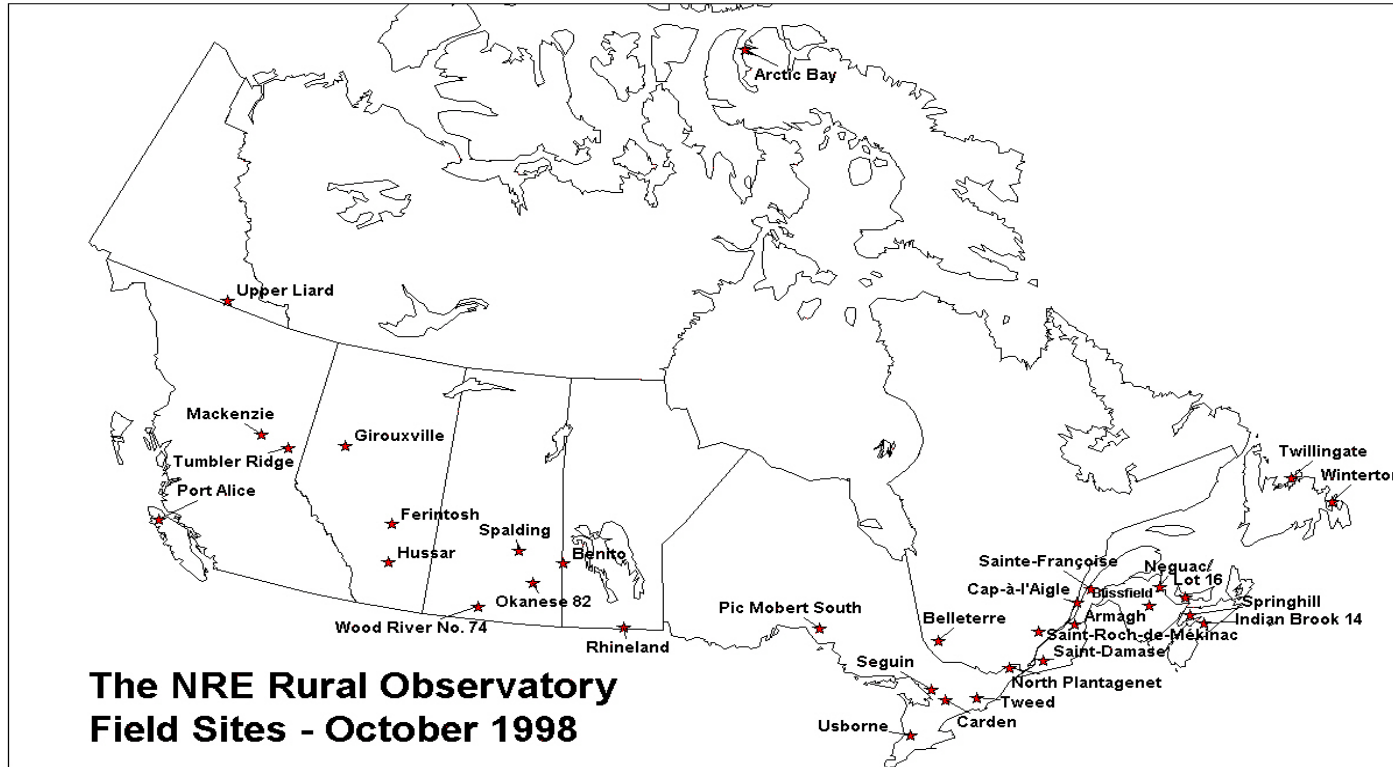
In addition, we included a fifth dimension reflecting the type of socio-economic outcomes of interest to policy-makers. Using factor analysis techniques, we classified CSDs into those that were 'leading' and those that were 'lagging' on a number of socio-economic indicators. This dimension was included with the other four to produce a 32-cell matrix (2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 2). We placed all of the rural CSDs in one of the cells according to their location on these five dimensions. This produced the distribution identified in Table 1.

**Table 1: Number of Rural CSDs by Sample Frame Classification**

			High Capacity		Low Capacity	
			Leading	Lagging	Leading	Lagging
Globally Exposed	Fluctuating Economy	Metro Adjacent	175	27	46	15
		Not Adjacent	251	13	124	44
	Stable Economy	Metro Adjacent	4	26	8	19
		Not Adjacent	5	16	18	30
Less Globally Exposed	Fluctuating Economy	Metro Adjacent	4	5	4	9
		Not Adjacent	12	16	5	13
	Stable Economy	Metro Adjacent	12	100	7	45
		Not Adjacent	15	99	16	56

Then we randomly selected one CSD from each cell, which serves as the basis for our ‘Rural Observatory’ (Map 1). We made minor adjustments (again based on randomization principles) in order to ensure representation from all provinces and two of the three northern territories.

**Map 1: The NRE Rural Observatory Field Sites, October 1998**



### **Since the Establishment of the Sample Frame**

Since 1997, when the NRE sample frame was developed, we have established research teams (including local people) in most of the field sites. In 1998 we prepared profiles of the sites. They include historical documents, information about the local labour force, economy, government and governance, third sector (philanthropic, civic, and nonprofit) groups, transportation, communication, and infrastructure. In 2000, we updated the 1998 profiles and gathered site-level information regarding the following topics: major events, small and medium-sized enterprises, co-operatives, voluntary groups, key institutions (formal and informal), and impressions of key informants.

In 2001, the NRE team conducted interviews in just under two thousand households in twenty of the sites. These interviews included information regarding the labour force activities of household members, major changes in the household, responses and tradeoffs they made as a result of those changes, their networks of social support, exchange, and commerce, and their use of new technologies. Information on social cohesion (both perception and behavior-based) as well as the informal economy was also obtained from the interviews.

The NRE rural observatory has become a powerful and unique tool for investigating not only the local characteristics and dynamics of rural sites, but it links those sites to critical features of the conditions within which they operate – including regional, national, and global aspects. Since each site has been carefully chosen within a broader framework, it is possible to locate even non-

NRE place-based or field-site research with respect to that framework, thereby increasing the power of the specific results.

Since 1998, these advantages have been extended to an international level by collaboration with Japanese researchers. They have utilized the same framework to select two sites in rural Japan and since that time, have been replicating most of our work in those sites, thereby providing comparative analysis across national jurisdictions.<sup>2</sup>

### **Do the Differences Matter?**

The next question I will address is “What have we found?” More specifically, “Do the differences we identified matter?” The simple answer is “yes” while the more complicated answer is: “Not in a simple fashion”. I will demonstrate this complicated answer by looking at some of the USDA indicators that are relatively easily available in our data. This includes indicators of population, health, and employment. Second, I will look at some of the complexities revealed by the framework we have designed. In the interest of time, I will touch on only a few of the many results we have generated. Therefore, I invite you to check out the details at our website ([nre.concordia.ca](http://nre.concordia.ca)), where most documents and information can be found.

### **Exposure to Global Economy Matters**

Exposure to the global economy matters – especially for the population of rural places. Canada’s commodity trade policy has been very successful in economic terms. In 1999, rural and small

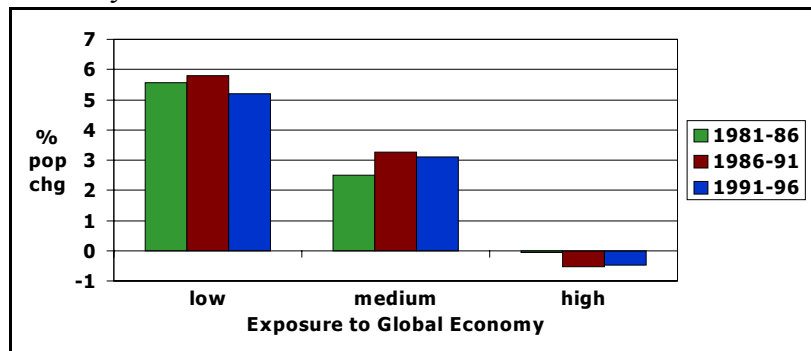
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<sup>2</sup> Information about the Canada-Japan project can be found at: [www.crrf.ca/cj/cjexec.shtml](http://www.crrf.ca/cj/cjexec.shtml)

town activity contributed 15% to GDP and 17% to national employment, largely through the production of resource commodities. Primary and natural resource sectors account for about 40% of our total national exports. These are also the sectors in which technological innovation, competitive pressures, and market concentration are strongest, resulting in the shedding of labour across the board. The impacts on rural communities have been profound.

Figure 1 illustrates this clearly by comparing population change in rural CSDs according to their exposure to the global economy. It compares CSDs with low, medium, and high exposure for

**Figure 1:** Population change by exposure to the global economy



three different time periods. In all cases, population growth is highest (around 5% over 5 years) for those CSDs that have low exposure to the global economy, whereas those with high exposure show the lowest growth – in fact a slight population decline. Along with this decline go the many social and cultural impacts so closely associated with population: reduction in services, loss of local control, outflow of capital, and reduced or altered social cohesion.

Having identified this relationship, we are now in a position to explore it in a number of directions. First, we can look at the conditions under which exposure to the global economy results in population decline. Since our data covers a number of policy and administrative

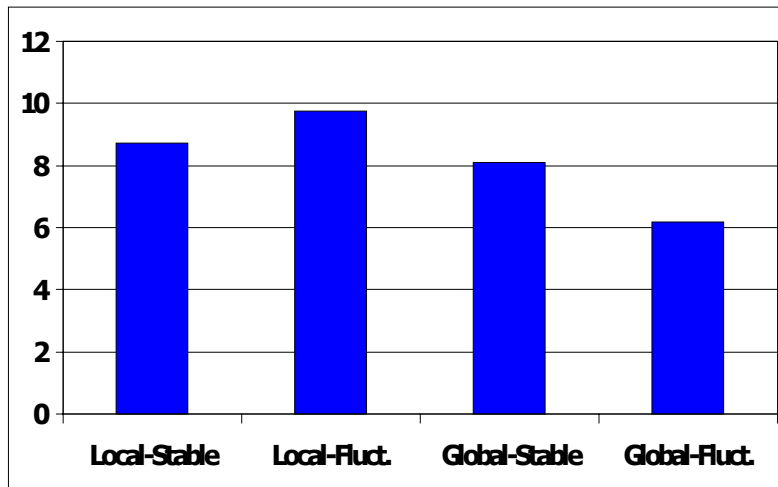
regimes, we will be able to examine the extent to which these institutional forms might mitigate the effects of population change or the nature of that change itself (Rodrik 1999). Second, we can examine the local impacts of population changes since our sample frame provides field sites that vary with respect to the exposure to the global economy and information about them at both the site and household levels. Third, we can examine the ways in which the other sample frame dimensions might condition the extent of population change and its outcomes. As the examples below demonstrate, it is often in the interaction between these conditions that the most revealing results emerge.

### Health Matters

Another example of the utility of our framework can be found in the analysis of health in rural areas<sup>3</sup>. In general, age-

standardized mortality rates are lower in globally-exposed CSDs. However, when taking the role of economic stability into account, we find that important conditional effects occur (Figure 2). In those sites with stable economies, the positive health

**Figure 2:** Age-Standardized Mortality Rate - 614 Ontario Rural CSDs



effects of global exposure are significantly decreased, whereas in fluctuating economies, they are

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<sup>3</sup>I wish to thank Roger Pitblado for making these health-related data available for analysis.



accentuated. Fluctuating economies seem to increase mortality in locally-connected economies, but lower it in globally-connected ones.

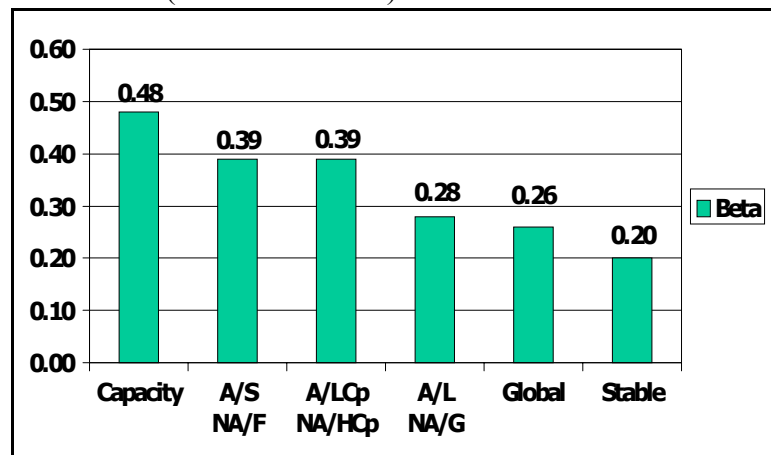
These results point to the complexity inherent in the processes underlying the health of rural areas. The multidimensional structure of our sample frame provides us with an opportunity to identify that complexity and the integration of this structure with the intensive case-study field research provides the resources to explore in depth, the details of those processes. It is to these details that our research agenda is now being directed.

### Local Capacity Matters

A key focus of that agenda is the role of local capacity in the conditions and options available to rural places. Using our 2001 survey data from 1995 households, we found that local institutional capacity has a greater impact on employment, for example, than any of the other sample frame dimensions. As shown in Figure 3,

capacity is the most important of the significant beta coefficients, followed by a number of interaction effects. Metro-adjacent, stable or non-metro-adjacent, fluctuating sites have high levels of employment as compared to the other

**Figure 3:** Regression of employment on sample frame dimensions (beta coefficients).



combinations of these two variables<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, metro-adjacent, low-capacity or non-adjacent, high-capacity sites have relatively high levels of employment. The final interaction effect shows that adjacent, local or non-adjacent, global sites have higher employment levels over their counterparts.

These data highlight two important points. First, they identify the relative importance of institutional conditions for employment outcomes. This general point is replicated with respect to a number of other economic and social outcomes in the NRE research project. Second, they reinforce the findings that many of the most critical effects are found in conditional or interaction relations between the variables. The processes underlying these effects are unlikely to be simple.

### **Accomplishments and Plans**

We have been pleased with the explanatory power of the dimensions we chose for our sample frame. This has encouraged us to refine the indicators using new information. The local/global economy dimension, for example, is being improved by integrating trade data with local employment. The fluctuating/stable indicator is also being upgraded using annual economic indicators linked to each site via employment levels. Metro adjacency is now measured by the

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<sup>4</sup>The Adjacency-Stability interaction measure was constructed so that Adjacent, Stable and Not-Adjacent, Fluctuating sites were given the high values, while Not Adjacent, Stable and Adjacent Fluctuating sites were given the low values. Similarly, for the Adjacency-Capacity interaction term, Adjacent, Low Capacity and Not-Adjacent High Capacity sites were given the high values, whereas Not-Adjacent, Low Capacity and Adjacent, High Capacity sites were given the high values. For the Adjacency-Economy interaction, Adjacent, Local and Not-Adjacent, Global combinations were given the high value, and Adjacent, Global and Not-Adjacent, Local were given the low values.

number of kilometres to the nearest CMA with more than 100,000 people, and institutional capacity will be refined using postal codes to link with administrative and NGO data.

We also plan to redefine site boundaries since we have learned so much more about the employment, commerce, governance, service, and recreational behaviour and perceptions of the local people. We will continue to focus on people living in the CSD, but expand our analysis to the relevant boundaries for work, leisure, commerce, education, and other activities.

In 1997 we began adding information collected in the field sites to the longitudinal analysis using census. The site surveys conducted in 1999 and 2001, will be continued in 2003 and 2005. In addition, we are incorporating census data that is linked to constant boundaries from 1986, 1991, 1996, and 2001 to support this analysis. Hierarchical analysis is also employed to take advantage of the household and site-level data that is central to the project.

Recent funding for our project includes a three year major grant awarded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council. This project makes use of the insights and information developed over the last five years of the NRE project and proposes to investigate the implications of those insights for building rural capacity. Now that we have some of the tools, we wish to work with rural people to identify the ways in which they might increase their capacity to understand and choose appropriate courses of action for their future. This work is organized around four themes: services, governance, communications, and environment. We welcome collaboration.

## **Typologies, Indicators, and Units of Analysis for the New Economy**

The NRE project makes use of a framework that is unique and fertile. Rather than focus on a classification based on outcomes, it identifies four dimensions for comparison that have special relevance to the changing conditions in the new economy. It is driven more by analytical potential than administrative objectives, thereby promising greater insights regarding the processes behind the outcomes and a more dynamic quality to the taxonomies generated. The analysis to date has confirmed the value of this approach.

It has also led us to reconsider some of the institutional manifestations of the traditional taxonomies used for rural analysis. This includes those focusing on outcomes such as poverty (Reimer 2001), labour (Reimer 2000), and social services (Bruce and Halseth 2001), but also on the identification of rural itself. I will conclude with a few general examples of these new approaches.

The future of rural Canada largely depends on urban populations and interests. Our research has revealed how shifting markets, technologies, and policies have diminished the power of rural populations and forced them to reconsider their relationship to their urban counterparts. This includes paying more attention to the shared interests between rural and urban people.

Most of these common interests are invisible, partly due to our traditional institutions and their associated taxonomies. Sectoral and rural/urban distinctions are two of the most powerful ones – not only embedded in major private and public-sector organizations, but reinforced by more academic and policy debates over their fine points. The more we spend our time debating the

details of agricultural policy as distinct from forestry or welfare policy the less opportunity we have to see the ways in which they are inter-related. The more we attend to the distinction between rural and urban, the less we pay attention to the places where their interests coincide and create new opportunities for mutual revitalization.

Shifting our attention to new taxonomies can reveal and reshape our understanding of rural and urban relationships. If we are in luck, they will force us to identify new institutions that are more appropriate for the changing conditions and contribute to the advantage of both rural and urban regions. We can already see some of the directions this might take.

Watershed regions provide one example of a basis for a more appropriate taxonomy. By focusing on watersheds, we see the extensive interdependence of flora, fauna, and settlements – along with economic, social, and recreational activities. By organizing institutions around these units, we make initiatives possible that cut across the traditional sectoral and urbanization organizations that are insensitive to the complex interactions between these units. It would contribute to our growing public awareness of the inter-dependence between consumption and environmental impacts just as it would provide a forum for adjusting the public and private responsibilities for those impacts.

We already have many examples of what such a reorganization might look like and the benefits it would generate. The Tennessee Valley Authority initiative provides a good example of the way in which the watershed focus reorganized activities across sectors, supported research and education activities that were broad in scope, and brought organizations and individuals together

that would have otherwise been working in an isolated way. Further examples can be found in the agreements bringing together New York City and the Catskills populations around preservation of the city's watershed —or the surtax on water used by the Japanese to support rural development.

NGOs can make a significant contribution to such reorganization. The Miramichi watershed organization, for example, emerged as a group of people concerned with the wildlife habitat for salmon in the Miramichi watershed region of New Brunswick. It now brings together small business people, larger forestry and fishing industry players, Aboriginal peoples, and several municipal leaders in a partnership of government, business, and civil society groups. By doing so, the watershed organization has generated new information that is more appropriate to the interdependencies they see between such things as sewage, fish, transportation route construction, administrative organization, and many other previously disconnected aspects of their environmental, social, and political world. This information, the organization, and the forums they create for discussion have made significant contributions to public awareness, forest management practice, economic opportunities, and regional development.

Another example can be found in the focus on 'environmental footprints'. Such an approach asks questions like: How much land does it take for Washington to function? A large part of this footprint is found in rural areas where its food is grown, its pollution is processed, and its population is de-stressed and re-energized. This perspective will shift our thinking regarding the types of information that are important, how they might be juxtaposed, and what they imply about how we measure economic growth, development, and sustainability. Already we see shifts

in the approach to environmental and social concerns through modifications of development indicators in the UN and World Bank reports.

Trade networks provide yet another basis for a taxonomy that maps trade at local, regional, national, and international levels. Andrew Errington and his group are examining ways this mapping of trade might be done via transportation records for market towns in England (<http://nre.concordia.ca/Errington/market%20towns%20research.htm>). Such a taxonomy, makes visible our interdependencies for food, processed goods, and services. It highlights the networks and relationships among centres and people rather than their characteristics alone. As a result, we will become more aware and understanding of the interdependencies that bind us together. A similar approach can be adopted with respect to the institutions that condition our activities and entitlements.

A taxonomy of institutional networks can be established by asking questions such as “Who knows who?” and “Who works with who?” The answers reveals access to information, for both rural and urban people and raises options for new forms of service delivery.

As we learn more about the social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of rural people we have made the basic inter-dependencies more visible. Our taxonomies and perspectives must be modified to reflect this. In the NRE project, we have taken an approach that reflects a world which is more dynamic, more complex, and more integrated. Our construction of a systematic, comparative framework is one aspect of this strategy – complemented by extensive collaboration

among researchers, rural people, and policy-makers. The results so far have been very encouraging – we invite you to join us in this endeavor.



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