

The New Realities of Rural America

“It is increasingly clear that not only are the fates of rural and urban people and places linked, but that these links grow stronger as globalization, de-industrialization, suburbanization and climate change accelerate. They provide an entry point for creative new strategies regarding jobs, education, health, the environment, race/ethnicity, political representation and the values of community that cross political boundaries, value systems and economic theories”



— Our Shared Fate: Bridging the Rural-Urban Divide
by the Roundtable on Community Change and
Community Strategies Group, The Aspen Institute

We as a country continue to look to the past, sometimes in reverence, to our rural communities; to a time and place of seeming simplicity compared to today when all the rules seem to be changing with whirlwind speed. Yet the truth of rural life has veered dramatically away from our nation’s antiquated perceptions, and the immediate trend lines to a shared future are intertwined with the new realities of rural America.

Today, “urban” Americans can live in small towns or the countryside without forgoing their professions. The intersection of urban and rural interests is both politically dynamic and dictated by self-interest: Rural America has skills needed by all Americans as tenders of our small towns, countryside and the environment; the health of rural America and all Americans in the face of scarce resources is intimately linked; and high-speed Internet removes the distance from educational opportunity and from many marketplaces.

The potential for improved life in our countryside, in small towns and at their urban intersections should provide hope for the future of all Americans. Philanthropy has an urgent and increasing role to play in helping us as a nation reframe our understanding of the interconnectedness of all our communities and the need to shift from

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silos of inquiry and response to systems of analysis and leverage. The biggest barrier to community-friendly development is often outdated political jurisdictions, the subject of the growing regionalism movement. In the fluidity of foundation practices and boundaries communities can find ways to cross those barriers without waiting for the glacial pace of reform.

The gap between American's perceptions of rural life and the truth is well documented by the Center for Rural Strategies and through research commissioned by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Americans still picture rural residents primarily as part of the agricultural economy, white folks on tractors growing our nation's crops in the communities of their grandparents. The truth of today, in which only about 4 percent of people who live in the country are tied to the farm economy, is far more dynamic and diverse, and the rate of change increasing. The people least served by our nation's prosperity are of color *and* of rural communities.

Meanwhile, global, national and regional dynamics are changing the outlook for rural communities in America at a rate unprecedented in at least the last hundred years. Four vortexes are driving change: economic restructuring, environmental degradation, population growth and migration, and digital communication. While these forces are affecting virtually all of humanity, there are particular challenges and opportunities being created in America's small towns and countryside. Community foundations, in particular, are proving to have a powerful role to play:

“Community foundations are not inoculations against unforeseen change and unexpected cataclysm, but at their best they are measured, democratic practices that can marshal community aspiration and invigorate meaningful cooperation. And when that happens resources and opportunities seem to follow even in the poorest communities—sometimes when the outlook is bleakest. Neighbors become donors and give themselves a fighting chance for a decent future.”

— Dee Davis, president of the Center for Rural Strategies,
from *Donors Ourselves*

The Rise in Rural Development Philanthropy

The rise of Rural Development Philanthropy (RDP) is helping advance community philanthropy as an effective tool in meeting the challenges of rural development. RDP began as peer learning funded by the Ford Foundation and convened by the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group in 1991, and continues independently as a growing field of practice. RDP practitioners believe that success must be measured by

the accomplishment of tangible systems improvement in specific communities, not by the aggregation of funds or the giving of grants, although these are among important supporting measurements.

For example, East Tennessee's Coker Creek and Greeneville are among many well-documented examples of RDP at work. Both Coker Creek and Greeneville were isolated and ravaged by the decline of the resource economy, and both worked over many years with the East Tennessee Foundation to build an economy and rebuild a dilapidated infrastructure around the skills, knowledge and industry of its residents based on a strong sense of place.

Though a survey is needed so that we know the full extent of RDP examples, other examples include: The Kenya Community Development Foundation has organized villagers to prioritize and organize efforts—as a result, a new network of reservoirs now guarantees water for crops; the Vermont Community Foundation uses its investment portfolio to provide loans to low-income people; and the Seventh Generation Fund has helped Native communities across the country develop sustainable agriculture. My own foundation, the Humboldt Area Foundation, has been a catalyst for regional agencies and community-based leaders to successfully rebuild the economies in our most central small towns after the catastrophic decline of the timber industry. We are now working to spread the benefits throughout the region.

Need for More Foundation Help in Meeting Rural Challenges

The long-term decline of farm, timber and other resource-based rural economies, for decades the root of an ongoing rural depression in many parts of the country, is giving way to a new era of entrepreneurship. Theories of economic and community development, nurtured and tested by such places as the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in Lincoln, Nebraska, are demonstrating that rural economies can thrive, and increasingly are thriving, based on the capacity of rural people to both civically engage and grow small business and diversified economies. Private foundations such as Kellogg have supported the work of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship and community foundations such as the Nebraska Community Foundation and Humboldt Area Foundation have leveraged this investment with measurable and significant success.

Rural America is forging ahead with new solutions, and private foundations are playing an unusually important role in what proves to be fertile ground for innovation. A few areas of notable progress in improving rural America include: improving services

to rural families (Annie E. Casey Foundation), developing combined economic and environmental rural development strategies (Kellogg and Ford Foundations), improving conditions for farm workers (The California Endowment), exploring models of new rural leadership (Oregon's Ford Family Foundation) and supporting essential university research (the California Endowment and the Kellogg, Casey and Ford Foundations). The knowledge and examples provided by these foundations are being adapted by rural community philanthropies, service agencies and other rural activists and advocates.

National and regional foundations should be linking with local philanthropy-based initiatives to help them expand rapidly to meet several major challenges, such as immigration and the environment. The opportunities are immediate and the fruit low-hanging for those community philanthropies that are prepared to act as brokers of knowledge and relationships, and to serve as a voice for vibrant democratic action and, when necessary, against stereotypes and racism.

The flood of immigrants to this country has shifted destination significantly from cities to rural areas, heretofore rarely directly affected since the large migrations of the 19th century. The rate of rural demographic change now often exceeds that of urban America. This is altering the politics of the entire country and is testing our tolerance as a "nation of nations," as Herman Melville wrote, as communities with no experience with large cultural and racial change are abruptly transformed. There is little evidence of action by community foundations in the more volatile regions where demographic change is new and sudden and the need for sound community-building competencies is the greatest.

As normal cycles of drought collide with population increase, areas of the nation, such as the Southeast, which have never before worried about water shortages, are suddenly in crisis. The need to plan and act systemically about the use of water (and by extension other resources) by cities, small towns and the countryside is inescapable. Atlanta realized this too late to avoid the outcomes of its recent drought, the answers to which lay far outside its borders in a four-state region. The El Paso Community Foundation could serve as a model for others to emulate in this regard. It has a distinguished history of mobilizing community response to water shortage in the Rio Grande valley (as well as working with new immigrant communities).

Some of America is at least temporarily losing population, a trend that is apt to reverse in many places where the cost of living is low, and where a diversified job base is only now becoming a potential as broadband Internet expands and makes working location

flexible as never before. Many of these communities are held with passionate regard by those who live there. Nebraska, for example, the country of Willa Cather, recently spawned a movement for “HomeTown Competitiveness,” as Jeff Yost details in his essay in this journal.

Other places in America are facing continued population expansion despite frustrated efforts to contain sprawl, and they are now realizing that small towns and places where almost no one may currently live are the population centers of tomorrow. If infrastructure—roads, electricity, water and high-speed Internet—are systemically developed and watersheds, protection of forest lands for jobs and for carbon sequestration, and clearing of forest under-story for wildfire mitigation are addressed, a new balance may be found for our growing nation. The Humboldt Area Foundation is working with Redwood Coast Rural Action, an inclusive regional leadership initiative, and the California Center for Rural Policy at Humboldt State University to help Sacramento build partnerships and networks with many types of organizations throughout the state.

The Need to Support and Spread Innovations

The dominant political power in most of America is now held by suburbs and exurbs, and conditions in both our small towns and large cities are often similar in educational outcomes, the building of infrastructure and environmental health. There is little political ability to make improvements unless urban and rural common cause can be reached. The role for rural and urban community philanthropy to bridge the gaps between urban and rural interests is ripe for action. Foundations not bound by jurisdictional lines have a critical role to play in building common cause across boundaries not well served by our political system.

The call to build a new consensus around federal rural policy may perhaps only be possible through the active combined engagement of large national or regional foundations, as well as those small and place-based. The fact that the Farm Bill represents too big of a plate of pork to attack directly does not mean that it is moral or palatable to let it obstruct a long overdue overhaul of rural policy and investments in rural America. As stated by Mark Drabenstott in the March 2005 *Main Street Economist*, a publication of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City: “Farm payments are not providing a strong boost to the rural economy in those counties that most depend on them. Job gains are weak and population growth is actually negative in most of the counties where farm payments are the biggest share of income.”

Despite startling inattention, rural America is a hotbed of innovation and growing experience with an emerging economy, effective entrepreneurship and environmental action. Many of our country's largest risks, such as global warming, the water crisis and urban sprawl, can only be remediated through active partnerships that authentically include, and are sometimes led by, residents in America's small towns and countryside.

Those working in community philanthropy, and indeed philanthropy in general, must move fast to help support and spread rural innovations underway, much less attend to the many unprecedented opportunities sweeping around us. We need more private foundations and community foundations stepping out of self-imposed silos to link the regions, issues and collaborative solutions to many of our nation's greatest challenges.

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