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Special Edition: From Rural Research to Policy and Back Again

Authors: Lars K. Hallstrom, William (Bill) White, & Holly Dolan

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Introduction

From Rural Research to Policy and Back Again

Lars K. Hallstrom

University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
lars.hallstrom@ualberta.ca

William (Bill) White

NRCan
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
bwhite@nrcan.ca

Holly Dolan

Rural and Co-operatives Secretariat
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
Guelph, Ontario, Canada
holly.dolan@agr.gc.ca

1.0 Introduction

Concerns about the sustainability of rural communities Canada are far from new. The multiple stressors on rural communities that have emerged over the past two generations, which include economic forces related to liberalization and globalization, demographic change due to labour flight, and environmental concerns due to increased demand for natural resources, are, however, now compounded by the recognition that global variables such as climate change and international economic development can increase, modify and diversify the extent and impacts of these stressors. Issues of management, policy development, implementation and impact are complicated by incongruence between ecological, agricultural and political boundaries, varying jurisdictions and scope of governance and institutions, and conflicting perspectives on social, economic, and ecological goals and risks.

Many of these issues can, and have, been considered by both research and public policy initiatives. However, there have been only limited fora where research and policy communities can explicitly and openly connect to consider both the larger goals, benefits and complexities of the research-policy nexus, as well as the specific research and knowledge transfer projects that have been undertaken and speak to the needs, action and social transformation of Canadian rural communities. While science and research have long been assumed to play a significant role in public policy (Lasswell, 1951), the reality is that rural policies are rarely based upon or connected to extant research in the ways that many people assume. In fact, it is quite rare for policy actors and the research communities to explicitly and deliberately overlap, yet this is exactly what happened in May of 2011.

Following many months of planning and discussions, a larger collective of policy and research actors from across the country agreed to find a way to link researchers

working on rural and rural policy-relevant projects with the Annual General Meeting of the Rural Development Network, a multi-ministerial collective functioning across Canada. Held in Ottawa immediately following the AGM, the specific objectives of this conference, and thus of this special edition, were to:

- provide a forum for the sharing of recent research initiatives and findings relating to rural development in Canada;
- communicate the emerging agendas for research relevant to rural Canada;
- provide comparative information from rural research in a variety of other international contexts;
- identify gaps and collaborative opportunities in Canada's rural research profile; and
- critically explore the connection between research and rural development policy in this country and in comparable contexts.

2.0 Significance and Timeliness of the theme(s):

Targeted research can have both instrumental (i.e., direct) impacts on policy or practice, and conceptual (i.e., indirect) impacts on the knowledge, understanding, and attitudes of decision-makers (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007; Rigby, 2005; Rudd et al., 2010). It can contribute to policy formulation, when research on problem definition, causality and alternative solutions can make problems both identifiable and more manageable, as well as during decision-making itself, when both analyses and policy design can help minimize risk and manage political values by hedging against adverse future economic, social, and political consequences (Bobrow & Dryzek 1987; Dobell, 2002; Howlett & Ramesh, 2003). As in fields such as health and medicine (Howlett et al., 2003; Nutley et al., 2007), evidence-based or informed policy-making is increasingly being advocated for in terms of rural development and sustainability, yet there are limited mechanisms for making knowledge transfer and fostering the presence of research in rural policymaking.

This special edition, therefore, offers a timely and important opportunity to connect researchers from across the country working in the complex domain of “rural Canada.” In addition to presenting individual research, it will hopefully provide an opportunity for building connections and common understanding about the research needs, strengths and opportunities in rural Canada across multiple policy domains.

This issue is particularly timely given the growing recognition and awareness of the importance of rural Canada. While there are certainly new and historical pressures upon rural landscapes and populations, there are also new initiatives, events and opportunities that speak to both the forces of change and the ways in which policy and populations can respond. Events and initiatives such as the SSHRC-funded “Taking the Next Steps” conference and the RDI conference in October 2010, the activities of the Rural and Co-operatives Secretariat and funds such as the Rural Alberta Development Fund speak to the growing attention that rural issues garner from both research and policy circles, and this is further reflected federally. The Rural Development Network has evolved to consist of over 200 federal civil servants with an interest or engagement with rural public policy across many ministries, and served as a foundational audience for the conference from which these articles are drawn.

3.0 References

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