RURAL ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL POLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS: MAKING A CASE

Rural local governments cannot afford to be ignored or to allow policies formulated for urban communities to be forced upon them.

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For over a decade, there has been considerable concern among those involved with rural administration over the lack of administrative capacity in rural areas. It is well known that many, if not most, rural governmental units lack the fiscal and personnel resources to carry out their burgeoning responsibilities.[1] It is also generally acknowledged that most rural administrators lack the knowledge and data base to perform their planning and developmental roles, and that the shrinking population base of rural areas is depriving them of the political clout they need to assure themselves of the intergovernmental resources to perform their tasks. The explosion in expectations of local governments by citizens has also had a profound impact on the administrative environment of rural governmental institutions and placed additional pressures on the already strained administrative capacity in rural areas.

The lack of administrative capacity in rural areas represents only part of the problem. Rural America has been losing its capacity to define itself and determine its own policy agenda, but it is not helpless to reverse that trend. The declining percentage of the population

residing in rural areas is used as an excuse to ignore the concerns of rural America. In addition, those rural-based groups which do exist, zealously promote an image of rural America that serves their particularistic interests, but not the general needs of the population. We should, in other words, be as concerned about the decline in the political capacity of rural America as we are about the lack of administrative capacity, and we must recognize that both are inseparably linked.

Urban areas have also suffered a loss of autonomy to intergovernmental actors in the state and federal governments. Urban governments, just like rural governments, are handicapped by externally imposed mandates, the erosion of local control over the policy agenda, and administrative overload. Nevertheless, urban areas have been comparatively more successful in wielding influence in the policy process, directing the policy agenda, and developing the ground rules under which programs will be implemented. Rural governments, if they are to entertain any hope of regaining the policy initiative, need to identify the reasons for this relative success of urban governments, and adapt these circumstances to their indigenous environments.

The core of the problem is not that rural America has lost its sense of direction, but rather that it has been forced to abrogate control over its future and has allowed its interests to be defined by others.[2] Depending upon the issue, rural America has been mistakenly equated to agricultural America, an urban America writ small, or a poverty stricken economic and cultural backwater in need of paternalistic care. Rural America and rural administrators need to find a way to gain control over their policy agenda and chart their own course for the future. In brief, rural governments must assert what needs to be done, by whom, and how. Rural American communities must take a more active role in defining their own futures.

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Loss of Control Over The Public Policy Agenda

Unlike large cities and metropolitan urban areas, rural governments experience a series of handicaps in trying to direct the course of their policy agenda. Specifically, they lack the political, intergovernmental, professional, and empirical support to manage their policy initiation and formulation processes. Furthermore, rural administrative units are not as competitive in the intergovernmental and political arenas as are their urban and metropolitan counterparts and, in order to avoid complete neglect in the policy process, they must often link their fate to the agenda priorities established by urban interests.

People and votes are the fundamental currencies of the U.S. political process. Concentrations of people also form the basis of political districts which, in turn, determine the concerns and agenda of elected political leaders. In this political process and in the designation of electoral district boundaries, rural populations are often treated as political filler to supplement urban districts rather than as natural political units. An unintended result is that rural populations are often fragmented and unnaturally divided so that their political clout is diluted among several urban districts. Thus, over time, rural America receives less representation than its population size would suggest and its influence over the national and state political processes is further weakened.

. . . RURAL POPULATIONS ARE OFTEN FRAGMENTED AND UNNATURALLY DIVIDED SO THAT THEIR POLITICAL CLOUT IS DILUTED . . .

Particularly in those states with mixed urban-rural economies, districting decisions and public policies favor district boundaries with an urban emphasis. As a result, rural area concerns have less importance and political weight for state assemblies than even their diminishing population base would suggest. During redistricting, few state legislatures can afford to consider the territorial, wholistic nature of a rural region as they carve out districts to achieve the goals of political parties and the urban/metropolitan centers.

The political clout of rural areas has also been deteriorating from an intergovernmental perspective. Among urban areas, the Department of Housing and Urban development provides a central coordinating role, but governmental services in rural areas tend to be fragmented among a wide range of agencies and divided up by functions such as agriculture, transportation, etc. In addition, urban areas, because of home rule legislation and other statutes, receive considerably more autonomy from the states than do rural governments. Third, because of the larger size and scale of urban entitities, urban concerns set the state and federal parameters for intergovernmental cooperation; as a result, the needs of rural areas are frequently included only as an afterthought. Thus, urban policy models are extended, often without adaptation, to the rural environment.

Few professional organizations have as their central concern the needs of rural areas, and rural entities lack the political or administrative cohesion that is found in the cities. American rural areas tend to be isolated in spirit as well as geography, and these residents lack the aggressive interest group support for their viewpoints in Washington and in the state capitals. Those rural interests that do have representation (e.g., the Farm Bureau) are justifiably not concerned with the totality of the rural environment and concentrate their energies on narrower

issues of direct concern to their membership, such as agriculture.

Finally, the data base for rural America is hopelessly inadequate to build a case for a policy need and to justify appropriate policy programs. As a nation, we know very little about the public needs and priorities of rural Americans. We have very little hard data about even such basic variables as the infrastructure of these communities.[3] The sad result is that rural America is often not heard over the cacophony of voices seeking policy attention in Washington and in the state capitals.

In summary, the policy process in America demands that policy interests take an aggressive stance. Those interests who speak the loudest and most persuasively can help set the policy agenda. Those who lack the political, intergovernmental, professional and empirical support for their policy needs will be overlooked in the flood of policy concerns and needs. In this process, U.S. rural communities have not been very well prepared and have not been sufficiently vehement or articulate in presenting their case. As a result, the United States does not have a rural policy agenda, and rural communities lack the ability to define and promote their distinctive policy agenda.

Prelude to a Rural Policy Renaissance

As is obvious, rural administrators and others concerned with policy problems outside the urban environment need to seize control over the policy initiation and formulation processes. They must, at a minimum, break the suffocating hold fashioned by three incorrect assumptions about rural life in America. These false assumptions include the following: rural is agricultural; rural is urban (writ small); and rural is homogeneous.

The assumption that agriculture determines the rural environment in the United States is a vast misrepresentation of the reality and is becoming less accurate with the passing of each decade. The proportion of the United States population living in rural areas in 1985 was approximately 26 percent, while only 2.2 percent of the U.S. population was engaged in agriculture. In 1980, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the rural population constituted over 59 million or 26.3 percent of the total, and that the rural non-farm population was nearly 54 million or over 90 percent of the total rural population.[4] While we can assume that many rural residents are dependent upon the agricultural economy (e.g., farm implement dealers), it is also evident that rural farm and non-farm labor forces have increasingly become involved in non-agriculturally dependent occupations.[5] Rural can no longer be equated with agriculture.

. . . RURAL ADMINISTRATORS . . . MUST . . . BREAK THE SUFFOCATING HOLD FASHIONED BY . . . INCORRECT ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT RURAL LIFE IN AMERICA.

A second incorrect assumption about rural America is that rural

America's problems and policy needs are identical to urban America's policy agenda, but on a smaller scale. While sociologists and economists are aware of substantial differences between these two societal types, public administrators and political leaders tend to overlook the differences and suggest that scale and population density are the only relevant considerations.

An interesting approach is to chart the spread of policy concerns and priorities from urban to small town and rural areas. Crime, drugs, water treatment, mass transportation, poverty and even recreational policy concerns have first been articulated and prioritized in the metropolitan areas, and they have been transferred without adaptation or re-prioritization to the rural environment.[6] Rural areas do not exercise an opportunity to articulate their own policy agenda, and they play only an insignificant role in the determination of that national or state policy approach. Thus, rural America has been unable to initiate its own policy agenda or to formulate appropriate policy responses. It has relied, for the reasons stated above, on the initiative and concerns of urban America.

The third incorrect assumption about rural America is that rural areas are basically homogeneous and similar to one another. This implies that there is relatively little policy-relevant differentiation among rural entities — expressed as "if you have seen one rural government you have seen them all." The fact of the matter, however, is that on virtually every meaningful characteristic, rural areas show dramatic variation.[7] This includes such economic characteristics as growth, income distribution, and occupational patterns. It also includes demographic and social characteristics, such as age, family size or structure, density, social attitudes, racial and ethnic distributions, etc. We cannot really speak of rural as a single entity or as a single composite of policy needs. This differentiation, more than anything else, contributes to the lack of success which rural areas have in gaining control over their policy environments.

> . . . THE NOTION THAT AGRICULTURE DEFINES RURAL LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES TODAY MUST BE REJECTED.

Overall, rural America must recognize and act on several levels of the policy process. First, the notion that agriculture defines rural life in the United States today must be rejected. Second we must develop a theoretical and conceptual base that would differentiate rural America and its concerns from those expressed in the urban sectors. Third, we must acknowledge and act upon the diversity that exists in rural America and move away from a single policy approach to solving the needs of these communities.

A New Emphasis in Rural America

In order to achieve more control over its policy agenda, rural governments

need to approach the problems of policy initiation and formulation wholistically and comprehensively. They must become more involved in the policy process and more forceful in pressing for their due in the policy arenas. A number of tools can be employed to enhance the ability of rural governments to compete more effectively in the policy arena and to enhance their administrative capacities.

Technology, particularly in the communication sciences, has reached the point where the relatively low population densities of rural America no longer represent a significant disadvantage. Modern computing capacity, for example, is now so inexpensive that even a part-time administrative office can collect data and analyze its policy needs without reliance on outside agents. Facsimile machines now permit instantaneous communications across the world or from any point within a rural region. Today, there is no technical reason why rural areas cannot collect, use, and analyze policy-relevant data and make that data available to appropriate decision-makers.

In the past, rural communities have tended to communicate with their immediate neighbors and channel important communications to the regional hub city that serviced them. Over time, this communication process tended to become unidirectional, with communication flowing from the city to the countryside. There has been virtually no communication from rural area to rural area, despite the fact that these rural areas share much in common and could have benefitted enormously from inter-rural communications.[8] Today, rural-rural communication systems are technically and fiscally feasible, but state, regional, and professional organizations have not yet capitalized on the new reality and encouraged this type of communication. Possibly, a series of rural communication data centers or electronic bulletin boards may be established to become a transitory step that would encourage inter-rural information exchanges and inter-rural cooperation.

. . . A DIVIDED AND QUARRELING GROUP OF RURAL GOVERNMENTS WILL CONTINUE TO LOSE OUT IN THE POLITICAL SWEEPSTAKES.

Rural areas, if they are to compete more effectively in the policy arena should emulate the examples of the central cities and cooperate with one another, rather than engage in a self-destructive competition for the crumbs of intergovernmental largess. There is no reason why, for example, rural entities cannot exchange personnel, establish inter-rural task forces, and cooperate on those areas of policy concern that they share. There must also be a recognition that a divided and quarreling group of rural governments will continue to lose out in the political sweepstakes and only when rural areas speak with some solidarity will

they be able to succeed.

This recommendation does not imply that rural governments should surrender their independence or autonomy to others. Rather, the hope is that rural policy groups in various regions will associate voluntarily to achieve a common purpose for the policy priorities that they decide are important.[9] These associations can be based on single issues and the governments involved need not be territorially coterminous. The most important concern is that rural communities exercise their judgement and discretion over the policy initiation and formulation processes.

A fourth innovative approach to encourage rural involvement in the policy process is to enhance the capacity of rural administrative personnel. Generally, rural governmental bodies, in order to achieve some level of efficiency, must sacrifice depth of knowledge among their personnel to achieve program breadth. Rural administrators must often become jacks of all trades and masters of none. They rarely have the opportunity to compete effectively in the policy initiation process and they lack the experience and/or expertise to challenge urban or high level intergovernmental agencies.

Rural governments, like many modern companies today, need not provide in-house all forms of administrative capacity. Governmental consulting pools, inter-governmental organizations, rural cooperative groups, or inter-rural cooperative agreements can provide those resources when needed. They can also provide partial and cooperative assistance for training and development of personnel, certification of personnel, and joint pension, pay and benefit packages. While many states are providing some of these benefits, they are not provided as part of a comprehensive package to enhance rural autonomy and rural articulation of their policy agenda.

Rural governments should also look upon other units of government or urban communities as temporary allies in causes that concern them both. For example, channels of communication must remain open so that all local governments can help resist the tide of state and federal mandates that may burden any local government. Rural governments and their administrators must enter into intergovernmental negotiations and become active participants in the political process. The tendency among rural governments to withdraw from the political process must be abandoned.

THE TENDENCY AMONG RURAL GOVERNMENTS TO WITHDRAW FROM THE POLITICAL PROCESS MUST BE ABANDONED.

In brief, rural governments cannot afford to be ignored and have others determine their priorities. They must act with determination and vision to promote their own interests. CNR

Notes

[1]Anthony Brown, "Technical Assistance to Rural Communities: Stopgap or Capacity Building?" *Public Administration Review*, Jan-Feb, 1980: pp. 3-23.

[2]Norman J. Reid, "Building Capacity in a Rural Place: Local Views on Needs," in Beth Walter Honadle & Arnold Howitt, (Eds.), *Perspectives on Management Capacity Building*, (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1986.

[3]Robert Chambers, "Rapid Rural Appraisal: Rationale and Repertoire," *Public Administration and Development* April-June, 1981: pp. 95-106.

[4]Source: *U.S. Census of Population and Housing* (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census), 1980.

[5]Don E. Albrecht & Steve H. Murdock, *The Sociology of U.S. Agriculture: An Ecological Perspective*, (Ames: Iowa State University Press), 1990.

[6]David Conyers, "Rural Regional Planning: Towards an Operational Theory," *Progress in Planning*, 23 (Oxford: Pergamon Press), 1985.

[7]Charles Perry, "Economic Activity and Social Indicators: A Rural-Urban Discontinuum?" *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* January, 1984: pp. 61-74.

[8]Jim Seroka, "Inter-rural Administrative Cooperation: Issues and Opportunities," NATIONAL CIVIC REVIEW, March-April, 1990: pp. 138-151.

[9]Jim Seroka, "Attitudes of Rural County Leaders in the United States Towards Intergovernmental Cooperation," *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 1986, pp. 55-72.

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