

Summary

Assessing a century of rural development policy and programs is not an easy task. As we view the changes and the Federal policy role over time, it can be difficult to sort through the strategies, program impacts, and unintended consequences of the policies and programs of 17 Presidential administrations and 50 Congresses. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that some of the main theoretical concepts and the underlying structural conditions of rural America—including definitions of rurality, the structure of rural economies, population characteristics, and the reality of rural isolation and distances—have been altered repeatedly throughout the 20th century.

Tracing the long-term effects of a single policy or program or even a set of policies and programs is immensely complicated by all of the factors that can come into play over a span of many decades. Some efforts that may have seemed to be failures at the time may in the longer view be seen as successful. A review of past policies may offer insights about the circumstances under which programs were developed and the reasons why they evolved into their present forms. Those insights may lead to a better understanding of how current policies embody the slowly distilled experiences of generations confronting the same problems time and time again.

Over the years, rural development approaches have been modified to meet changing economic, political, and demographic contexts. The rural economy has faced recurring expansions and recessions that haven't always followed national and urban patterns. At the same time, the nonfarm economy has come to figure more prominently in rural development planning and programs. Population migrations have altered over time from a consistent rural-to-urban movement to a variable pattern of movement between rural and urban areas, depending upon the economy and on such factors as natural amenities. In response to shifts in party control and the public political consensus, leadership, initiative, and funding for federally supported rural development have moved from a primarily Federal orientation to a partnership among public and private enterprises and multiple levels of government. All this has been further complicated by competing visions of Federal rural development policy championed by the many agencies, Congressional oversight committees, interest groups, and regions that create and support rural development initiatives.

Many of the challenges that faced leaders early in the century remain challenges today. Rural poverty and chronically distressed regions continue to present policymakers with unsolved problems. The structure of the farm economy continues to change in ways similar to earlier periods--fewer and larger farms produce most of our commercial food and fiber--although the number of small farms which depend upon off-farm income continues to increase and present new employment challenges to the rural economy. rural areas also face challenges that have only recently become part of the rural development policy portfolio. For example, increasingly open global trade will require economic adjustment in a number of industries--including textiles and clothing manufacture--that are concentrated in rural places, but may also offer increased employment in other new or expanded industries. Similarly, increased movement of recent immigrants to rural communities for work in restructured industries may pose problems for local services like education, but may also offer opportunities for renewed business in the housing and retail trade.

Still, there have been fundamental changes in the ideological context of Federal rural development policy. The urban American public seems to have moved from a view of rural America as primarily the source of agrarian values and the foundation of the nation's character to one that emphasizes the value of rural areas for providing an enhanced quality of life and access to natural beauty. For policymakers, although equity between urban and rural areas continues to be a driving force for rural economic development, the purpose has moved from one of assuring basic, minimum standards of living in the countryside to one of trying to create new, higher-paying jobs for rural residents while sustaining rural communities and amenities that can be appreciated by all Americans.

Finally, the Federal government's role has shifted as the goals of rural development have become more local and regional in nature. Many national-level goals--electrification, access to telecommunications, good roads, general educational reform, poverty and malnutrition relief, and farm income variability--have been addressed and are well-established components of Federal policy and programs. As local and State capacity to address the problems of job creation and community development has increased, leadership has devolved to local and State governments, regional organizations, and the private sector to develop and implement programs to solve new problems. However, Federal financial assistance remains a constant and critical input into the rural development process.

During this century of change, however, there have been important continuities. Across the entire period there seems to have been agreement, built upon successes of the late 19th century, that the Federal government has a clear role in providing what we now call technical assistance--information, education and training, and infrastructure development. From USDA's early Office of Public Roads to the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), for example, Federal involvement in developing rural transportation systems has been well accepted. Likewise, since the electrification programs of the New Deal, Federal support for telecommunications infrastructure development--from telephones to the Internet--has been fairly quickly accepted.

There has also been general agreement that local initiative is a key ingredient in successful rural development. Respect for the Federal system of local, State, and national government prerogatives has influenced the design of rural development programs from the earliest years of the century.

Some areas of disagreement have also been continuous over the course of the century. The degree of Federal leadership, coordination, and control of programs has been among the most contentious of these. Disagreement on this aspect of rural development programs has led to repeated policy and funding swings that have often brought about abrupt changes in program administration. Lack of consensus has also persisted regarding the centrality of the farm economy and farm policy to rural well-being, as well as the level of assistance and focus that should be placed on economically distressed communities.