

Reclaiming Rural America; Sustainable Community Developmentⁱ

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I have spent my entire life with rural people. I was raised on a small farm, attended a two-room country grade school and a small-town high school, and spent my entire 30-year academic career working with farmers and other residents of rural farming communities. During the last five years at the University of Missouri, I was the project leader for a three-state, seven-community initiative exploring various means of linking sustainable agriculture and sustainable rural community development. We were successful in helping some individuals and small groups develop sustainable enterprises, but were never able even to initiate significant change in an entire rural community. Virtually everyone in these communities agreed that fundamental change was needed, but we were never able to bring the people together around a common vision for the future of their community.

Based on a life time of experiences, I have come to the conclusion that most people change only when three conditions are met. First, they must become convinced that what they have been doing isn't working and isn't likely to work in the future. Next, they must have a realistic idea or vision of something fundamentally better they could do instead. And finally, they must believe that it's possible for them to make the transition from what they are doing now to what they would rather do – they have to have hope for a better future. Real change is always difficult and often risky. Lacking any one of the three, people just keep on doing what they've been doing.

Change is even more difficult for communities of people. It's not enough for just a few people in a community to conclude that something is wrong; there has to be a community consensus that change is necessary. It's not enough for just a few people to have a new vision for the future; there has to be a common vision of a better future for the community. Finally, the people of a community must have a shared hope that their common vision is possible, that together they can create a new and better future for themselves and for their community.

The process of community change is made even more difficult by the fact that real change is rarely initiated by those in positions of greatest influence. The people with political and economic power have gained their positions of influence because the status quo is working for them. They may be willing to tinker around the edges to appease their critics but they are quite logically defensive against any real change. So, change in rural America will have to come from the common people. The current approach to economic development isn't working for them and isn't going to work for them in the future. They have a strong incentive to change. Change in rural America will take a revolution of the common people, beginning with revolutionary thinking. This revolution must begin by confronting the truth about rural economic development.

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The most common approach to rural economic development today is reminiscent of “imperial colonization.” The only real difference is the nature of the colonizers and the colonized. Large multinational corporations are extending their economic sovereignty over the affairs of rural people under the guise of economic development. These corporations use their economic and political power to dominate local economies and local governments. Irreplaceable and precious rural resources, including rural people and rural cultures, are not being developed but instead exploited to enhance the wealth of corporate investors. These corporations have no commitment to the future of rural areas; they are only interested in extracting the remaining wealth from rural places. This is corporate, economic colonialism.

Rural people everywhere are being told that they must rely on outside investment to bring badly needed jobs, increase local income, and expand the local tax base. Economically depressed rural communities will then be able to afford better schools, better health care, and expanded social services, and will attract a greater variety of retail businesses – so they are told. Rural communities will become more like urban communities and rural people will be able to live more like urban people. Rural people are led to believe they have been left behind by the rest of society – economically and socially –and corporate investments from outside are the only means by which they can hope to catch up. This same basic reasoning has been used by imperialists throughout human history to justify the extraction of wealth from their colonies.

However, after decades of so-called economic development, the colonies of classical imperialists were invariably left in shambles. Traditional ways of life were destroyed, cultures were lost, economic resources were depleted, and natural environments were degraded and polluted with the toxic wastes of colonial economic development. Indigenous social and political structures were destroyed, leaving the people with no means of self-government to address the shameful legacy of colonialism. The only places in which colonization was considered a success are those places where the colonial powers virtually annihilated indigenous populations. The surviving *indigenous* people of virtually every previously colonized country of the world, including the United States, still harbor a deep resentment of their former colonial masters. Imperial colonialism eventually was abolished because it became obvious that colonization was about economic exploitation rather than economic development. Like slavery, political colonization eventually became morally unacceptable in a civilized society.

Regardless, the economic colonization of rural areas continues virtually unchecked all around the world, including in rural America. The Europeans first settled in rural America to exploit the economic wealth of its wildlife, timber, and minerals. Once these resources were used up, rural areas were left with “ghost towns” where river towns, logging towns, and mining towns had once thrived. Corporate colonialism of rural areas began in earnest in the twentieth century when manufacturing plants were attracted to rural areas by a strong work ethic, the absence of labor unions, and low wages. When rural people demanded a living wage and humane working conditions, multinational corporations found people in other countries who would work harder for less. Many rural communities have been left with empty factories, polluted environments, and local residents who no longer remember how to make a living without being told what to do.

More recently, corporations have begun using contract agriculture as a means of colonizing rural areas. Comprehensive production contracts turn thinking, caring farmers into little more than contract tractor drivers, cow milkers, or hog house janitors. The industrial practices of corporate agriculture invariably erode the fertility of the soil through intensive cultivation, poison the air and water with chemical and biological wastes. Once the remnant resources of rural America have been depleted by corporate agriculture, the corporations will simply move their operations to other areas of the world where land and labor costs are cheaper. Rural farming communities will be left with nothing but polluted and depleted streams and aquifers, mountains of livestock manure, and farmers who no longer know how to farm.

If this imperialist approach to economic development is allowed to continue, rural America eventually will be seen as nothing more than big empty spaces where the rest of society can dump its wastes. Even today, many rural communities compete for prisons, urban landfills, toxic waste incinerators, nuclear waste sites, and even giant confinement animal feeding operations or CAFOs. All of these so-called economic development opportunities are nothing more than providing places to dump the human, chemical, and biological wastes created by an extractive, exploitative industrial economy. This approach to economic development isn't working and isn't going to work in the future. Change is not just an option in rural America, it is a necessity.

But where is the new vision for better future needed to motivate change? What's happening to rural America is also happening throughout the American economy and society. The industrial paradigm of economic development has dominated thinking in the Western World for the past two-hundred years because it has proven to be a very efficient and effective means of extracting wealth from nature and society. Those in positions of economic and political power certainly are not going to abandon it without a fight. How can we bring about sustainable change in rural communities without change in the larger economy and society?

Fortunately, fundamental change is taking place in the larger economy and society? A growing number of people are coming to realize that industrial development is not sustainable because it is rapidly running out of natural and human resources to extract and exploit. The trends of the past simply cannot continue into the future. Everything of economic value comes from either nature or society, both of which are finite and fragile. Once the productivity of nature and society has been depleted, there will be nothing left to support economic development. Furthermore, those who are rebelling against its continued extraction and exploitation are creating a new vision of a better future, including a new vision for the future of rural America.

Change is inevitable. Everything on earth tends to operate in cycles – physical, biological, social, and economic.¹ This is one of the most fundamental principles of science. All long term trends eventually reverse themselves and move in opposite directions during times of fundamental ecological or societal change. We are living through such a time of change, within agriculture, within rural communities, and in the larger human society. The current transition is being driven by questions of sustainability. We simply cannot continue to extract and exploit. We must find ways to meet the needs of the present without compromising the future.

The dominant public issues of today – economic recovery, global climate change, depletion of fossil energy, growing economic disparity – are all symptoms of the same basic cause. We are

rapidly depleting the natural and human resources of the earth. Consequently, we must shift from an economy of reliance on nonrenewable fossil energy – oil, natural gas, coal – to reliance on renewable solar energy – wind, water, photovoltaics. We must shift from a wasting, discarding, disposing society to a conserving, reusing, and recycling society. We must abandon the pursuit of narrow economic self-interest and individual wealth for the pursuit of economic opportunity with equity and justice for the common wealth. We must accept our God given responsibility to care for others, including those of future generations, as we care for ourselves. Meeting these challenges of sustainability will create new opportunities for people in rural communities. In the vision of sustainable economic development there is a new vision of a fundamentally better future for rural America.

Sustainable economic development must be ecologically sound, socially responsible, and economically viable. It must respect the basic principles of nature and nature is inherently diverse and *dispersed*. Thus, in the new sustainable future, the population will be more geographically dispersed. The big cities are relics of industrialization; masses of workers had to be gathered in central locations to work in the factories and offices of large industrial organizations. Cities were built near sources of raw materials, including fertile farmland, or on rivers or seashores for cheap transportation. Cheap fossil energy allowed the cities to survive long after their initial economic advantages were lost. Raw materials could be shipped to cities from anywhere and products could be shipped from cities to people everywhere. But the days of cheap fuel for transportation are over.

Contrary to popular belief, it would not be more energy efficient to concentrate population in a few large metropolitan areas in the future. Too much of anything in one place – solid wastes, chemicals, gasses, animals, people, – inevitably creates environmental and social problems. Such problems cannot be avoided and their mitigation invariably requires large amounts of increasingly costly energy. “The solution to pollution is dilution.” The logical response will be population dispersion – not the urban sprawl of today but instead dispersion of densely populated rural communities integrated into the new energy-efficient transportation network.

Things of nature also are interdependent; relationships are mutually beneficial. Mutually beneficial relationships among people are relationships of choice, not necessity. Sustainable communities of the future, urban and rural, will have their own local economies. These communities will not be self-sufficient but locally owned and operated businesses will be capable of meeting most basic day-to-day needs of the community. Large corporate manufacturers and retailers will be supplemental or secondary providers of goods and services, if they survive. Local farmers will provide sustainably-grown foods. Local builders will provide affordable, energy-efficient housing. Manufacturers of consumer durable goods – washers, dryers, refrigerators – will provide additional local employment, but will supply regional, rather than national, markets. Energy-generating residences and locally-owned utilities will meet most of the energy needs of the community with wind, water, and solar generated electricity.

Sustainable communities of the future will be neither independent nor dependent; they will be *interdependent*. They will form mutually beneficial relationships of choice with other communities and with outside investors, rather than relationships of economic necessity. People will deal with people in other communities that they personally know and trust. Communities

will not be forced to submit to economic exploitation but will engage in relationships that are mutually beneficial. The new communities will be economically sovereign.

Perhaps most important, the social relationships among people in communities respect the principles of human nature. Positive human relationships must be built upon core human values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, respect, and compassion. People within sustainable communities must have the moral courage to be trusting and kind rather than cunning and ruthless. In the process of building positive relationships, people will come to share a sense of common purpose for their community, not just an individual purpose to be fulfilled within the community. They also will come to appreciate the fact that their lives are made better by relating to each other in ways that serve their common good, not benefiting one at the expense of another.

Sustainable community development is a dynamic, living process. Community members of the future will devote time and energy to the community, as well as to their own endeavors. They will nurture the children of the community, as well as their own, for the long run benefit of the community. Each generation of leaders will nurture the next generation of leaders, each generation committed to the long run sustainability of the community. Community members will understand that it is in their own enlightened self-interest to help sustain a desirable quality of life for the community as a whole, both now and in the future. They will not focus solely on their own success, but will help each other succeed, so the community can meet the needs of the present without compromising opportunities for those of the future.

People of the future will come to respect the hierarchy of nature. They will form communities that are first ecologically sound, then socially responsible, and then will find ways to make them economically viable. They will understand that a sustainable local economy must be built upon a sustainable local ecosystem and society. Communities of the future will be “intentional communities,” in that people will choose places where they want to live and work and then find a way to make a living there. Many of the communities considered the most desirable places to live in the future will be in rural areas.

Most businesses in the new economy will be individual proprietorships, partnerships, or small family-owned or locally-owned corporations. Even today, small businesses provide more than half of the new jobs and the proportion will likely be far higher before the current economic recession is over. The people who own and operate small businesses will be real people, not faceless corporations, and most will be responsible members of their local communities. Their business decisions will reflect not only their individual self-interests but also their interests in the well-being of their communities and the future of humanity. They will be enlightened thinkers who understand their well-being is inseparable from the interests of society and humanity. Many of the owners and operators of these new businesses will choose to locate in rural areas.

Government policies of the future will give priority to sustainable local communities over interstate commerce and international trade. People in communities will be able to implement public policies that show preferences for local businesses whenever such policies are in the long-run best interest of the community. Inter-community and interstate commerce will take place only when it's *mutually* beneficial. Inner city communities will not remain “prisons without walls” for those who are rejected by the rest of society. Rural communities will not remain the

dumping grounds for the animal waste, solid wastes, toxic substances, or criminals created and then rejected by the rest of society. Communities, like nations, will be granted both the right and responsibility to protect their resources and their people from extraction and exploitation.

This is not some idealistic dream. The only logical, reasonable reality for the future will be something at least similar in nature. Current approaches to rural economic development quite simply are not sustainable. If rural communities are not sustainable, agriculture is not sustainable, and without adequate food, humanity is not sustainable. A number of rural communities have already made the decision to localize their economies using the concepts of sustainability and thereby regain control over their future.

A growing number of *eco-municipalities* in Sweden, Canada, and the United States are working to develop “ecologically, economically, and socially healthy communities for the long term” by using the Natural Step process of planning. The Natural Step is a nonprofit organization founded in 1989 by Swedish scientist, Karl-Henrik Robèrt.² It seeks to minimize the accumulation of wastes from both naturally occurring and manufactured substances while maintaining the productivity of natural ecosystems and sustaining a healthy, productive local society. More than 70 communities in Sweden, ranging in size from 300 to 700,000 and representing about 25% of all Swedish municipalities, have adopted the Natural Step process. At least three eco-municipalities in Canada and twelve in the United States, mostly in Wisconsin, have adopted sustainability planning objectives based on the Natural Step principles. As in Sweden, many of the eco-municipalities in Canada and the U.S. are small rural communities.

The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies is an international alliance of more than 50 independently operated local business networks dedicated to building local living economies.³ A *living economy* is defined as one in which economic power resides locally, for the purpose of sustaining healthy community life and natural life as well as long-term economic viability. There is no shortage of programs to guide development of sustainable local economies. The challenge is to convince people of the advantage and necessity of investing their time, energy, and money locally, rather than continuing to support the unsustainable paradigm of industrial development.

In the American Midwest, organizations such as the Center for Rural Affairs⁴ in Nebraska and the North Central Rural Development Center⁵ have a wide range of rural development assistance programs, ranging from business ideas, to information on grants, to direct personal assistance for rural communities seeking sustainable approaches to development. Again, the primary obstacles to sustainable rural development are not opportunities or resources but rural people who are willing to break with the failed industrial development strategies of the past and to confront the difficulties and risks associated with fundamental, philosophical change.

Rural communities today are at a critical point in their history. Many are still places with clean air, clean water, open spaces, scenic landscapes, and opportunities for peace, quiet, and privacy. Many are still places where people have a sense of belonging, friendly places where people know and care about each other, where crime rates are low and a strong sense of safety and security still exists. These are characteristics most people value in seeking places to work and to live. These things provide the foundation for sustainable community development.

The tasks ahead will not be easy but today there is real hope for rural communities that are willing and able to confront the realities of today, to create a shared vision for the future, and can find the courage to pursue their hopes and dreams of a better tomorrow. There is no certainty of their success but there most certainly is reason for hope.

There is hope in the fact that even today many rural people are refusing to turn their communities into dumping grounds for the rest of society. They are fighting against CAFOs, landfills, toxic waste incinerators, and prisons. They are not getting much help from state and federal governments because most politicians are simply not willing to defy the powerful economic interests that profit from exploiting rural resources. Lacking an alternative, rural people are beginning to stand up for themselves.

They are claiming their basic democratic rights of self-defense and self-determination. They are rejecting economic colonization disguised as economic development. The future leadership of rural American is emerging from the opponents of prisons, landfills, toxic waste incinerators and CAFOs. These new rural activists are learning to organize and to work together to make a difference in the future of their communities. They are learning how to make government work again for the good of people. They aren't winning all the battles but they are slowly winning the war against economic colonialism. In this, there is hope.

Once the people of rural communities have reclaimed their basic right to a clean and healthy natural environment, they can begin the task of rebuilding a solid ecological, social, and economic foundation for *sustainable* community development. Again, the opportunities of ecologically and socially responsible rural communities will be virtually unlimited as the industrial era draws to a close. The future of rural communities is in the natural resources, the land, and the imagination, creativity, ethics, and honesty of rural people. These are the classical characteristics of rural American culture. In this, there is hope.

In the words of Vaclav Havel – philosopher, reformer, and former president of the Czech Republic. *Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love and, finally, without hope.*⁶

Sustainable rural community development will not be quick or easy, but many rural people are already working to make it happen, and it certainly makes sense; in this, there is hope. The defenders of the status quo are powerful and there may be no cause for optimism, but still there is cause for hope – in even the possibility of a fundamentally better future for rural America. Regardless of the odds, life is simply too precious to permit it to be devalued by living pointlessly, without purpose or meaning, without love, and finally, without hope.

End Notes

¹ Elizabeth Culotta,. "Science's 20 greatest hits take their lumps," *Science*, American Academy of Science, March 15, 1991, 251:4999, p.1308.

² Sarah James and Torbjorn Lahti. *The Natural Step for Communities: How Cities and Towns Can Change to Sustainable Practices* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, Inc., 2004).

³ BALLE, *Business Alliance for Local Living Economies*, "Mission and Principles Statement," <<http://www.livingeconomies.org/aboutus/mission-and-principles-1>>.

⁴ *The Center for Rural Affairs*, <<http://www.cfra.org/>>

⁵ *North Central Regional Rural Development Center*, <<http://ncrcrd.org/>>

⁶ Vaclav Havel.1990. *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Random House inc.), Chapter 5.