

WRDC Papers

150 Tom Nels

Extension and Community Growth:

"There is no solution; seek it lovingly"*

There is no desire to appear melodramatic about rural communities or Extension education; but it is time to be concerned with why and how Extension relates to community development, particularly in communities struggling to cope with growth impacts. Rural people are being affected by growth, and these people in these small communities are important nationally as their concerns are multiplied in numerous sites. Few industries, public interest groups or government agencies have the incentive or interest to look at these widely spread impacts with the viewpoint of local people; obviously there are many viewpoints, but these local community interests differ in many ways from urban or even neighboring community interests.

Extension exists throughout rural America, and surely is concerned with quality of rural life. This concern consists of more than securing or increasing resource-oriented jobs and income, as Extension does effectively with forestry, fishing, recreation and agriculture. Indeed, many conditions at issue are related to securing a satisfying life: health, both mental and physical; safety, environmental conditions that permit a satisfying life; and sufficient institutional stability to permit effective community action. The task of enhancing or maintaining these conditions in impacted communities requires broad citizen participation in order to arrive at workable solutions. It is difficult to see any organization other than Cooperative Extension that has the ability to work in the community--possessing the credibility and local viewpoint necessary to assist communities in organizing and gathering resources to react to growth impacts. Educational resources are required to give a broader perspective, suggest new alternatives, and thereby create a forceful local viewpoint. But to be effective, Extension must be willing and able to work with many groups in the community, to build or maintain communications among groups necessary to narrow areas of disagreement so that compromises can be reached which are required for implementing policy.

An excellent paper on public policy at work in the local community has been prepared by Bruce

*Hebrew proverb

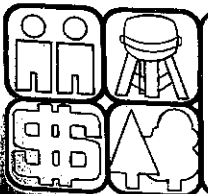
Florea, "The Public Policy Process: Its Role in Community Growth Issues;" it is recommended reading. Introducing the Florea paper, however, is a quotation from Thomas Jefferson which I steal and reproduce here to help establish a basis for discussion about education and community development:

"I know of no safe depository for the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with wholesome discretion; the remedy is not to take it from them, but inform their discretion."

-----an eloquent charge to an educator. Extension should be in a position to hear that challenge and develop the resolve to work toward it. The first line of attack in Cooperative Extension is the field staff in the local community.

Local prerogatives are being taken or given away to regional, state and federal levels of business, manufacturing and government. Here is my alarm, and you have a role in dispelling the basis for my concern. There may be little that citizens can do about the control usurped by nonlocal business and manufacturing, although there is more than has been widely used to date. But one would think that government could be controlled by active citizens working in a democracy--for keeping a democratic community viable, that is my concern.

A political scientist has noted that community depends upon tolerance of its citizens; not acquiescence, but upon informed tolerance among the citizenry. Tolerance is needed, for there can be tyranny by a majority just as assuredly as by a monarch; and too frequently, tyranny by the majority carries a self-righteous fervor. Citizen apathy, then, is a most dangerous item for a community because it reduces participation through which tolerance can be developed. Again, tolerance is not to be characterized as acquiescence on important values. Rather, it is a more broadly informed consideration of different value positions, progressing toward the



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"reasoning together" required to allow individuals and groups to live together. A few individuals and groups may express noble tolerance with little or no participation, perhaps from some moral ideal; it is my assertion that this is seldom a strong enough base when tested by the rough practice it gets from confrontation with the broad spectrum of self-interest that exists in the world. Unfortunately, this country does not have a social structure than can function with uninvolved and uninformed masses--urban or rural. Participation is needed to create tolerance, and tolerance is needed for community and, I assert, for democracy.

It is in mediating strong divergent self-interests that democracy is to be tested--and our American experiment in democracy was specifically designed to deal with these kinds of tests. Given 200 years of change, we may need to work on the nature of the Constitution, but the basic elements seem to remain adequate, among them: an open forum, freedom of expression, distribution of access to the political process, and the separation of powers. Within this framework of genius political theory, the founding fathers established a "compound republic," of several layers of government. This experiment has literally been tested on a battle field, but more to the point it still survives in towns, townships, counties, special districts, state and federal governmental jurisdictions. Though different schools or organization and political thought have argued about the effectiveness of the system, it flourishes in an amazing array, even when the center of public administration theory would hold that bigger government is more effective. At any rate, the people have not acquiesced, and personally I am glad.

One View of How the Process Works

Daniel Ogden, an experienced political observer and participant, sees policy in this democracy, at the federal level, as made within a system of power clusters which, he says, are semi-autonomous. Each cluster operates independently to identify issues, analyze alternatives, write legislation, and generate the support to pass the program. Interestingly, Mr. Ogden says the traditional political parties are not involved in this process to any real extent.

The major power clusters are familiar: defense, environment and natural resources, communications, transportation, health, education, agriculture, commerce, urban affairs, and banking and finance, etc. These clusters are represented throughout the federal system of bureaucracies: Congress and its committees; lobby groups; the executive branch, the major departments; and by very interested citizens' support groups. At the federal level people specialize in one power group or perhaps two in order to be effective and survive. At the state and local levels, specialization may not be so complete but we still see these centerings of attention by volunteer leadership and elected officials around these major power cluster interest areas. Certainly, state and local governments have departments that sound very similar to the federal ones. Mr. Ogden's work in describing these power cluster systems largely centers at the federal level, but it is very interesting to reflect on policy-making in the local community from this particular

view. This is of special interest to Extension agents as they look for opportunities to be effective locally; the issue-oriented power clusters may help to identify people willing to make inputs into public policy activities within the community.

The power-cluster concept also helps explain why some issues are so difficult to handle--locally or nationally. Three issues come immediately to mind: land use, energy, and taxation. These are issues of importance for almost all power groups, yet no group has a broad enough interest to develop the very costly organization to deal with these issues comprehensively, either at the local level or across the nation. So traditional power groups act in their own interest. The result is legislation and regulation representing the hodgepodge of self-interest that exists with programs of very broad impact. Note the current difficulty in taxation and energy legislation at the federal level; and think about the problems of constructing and administering a land-use program locally.

These problems that fall between the clusters are particularly susceptible to making mistakes that create later problems. They are full of "special interest loopholes" and create a major challenge to any leader, local or national. Some aspects of these problems can only be handled at the federal level, perhaps a few at the state and maybe even regional level, but more of them must be of increasing concern to local communities. Only here do I see the scale of operation small enough that people can assemble rational operating rules that consider most of the population and their interests. Yet our governing practice seems to be moving problems to higher and higher aggregations of government. The current concern on taxes--particularly property taxes, I believe--is a special point where we may be giving up local prerogatives when we cannot afford to do so.

If there is hope, it must be at the local level. Here, participation and tolerance can perhaps be achieved if Extension work is practiced with vigor. Leadership, credibility, responsiveness, relevance, and other good things needed for building organization and community can surely be first, strongest and perhaps only be done at the local level. The New England town meeting holds a special place of reverence in American myth and history. Though we need not achieve this level of participation on all community issues, if interests are separated where logical, we can secure participation of many people on an array of issues now confronting communities. The frontline of democracy I assert is the local community or the neighborhood, and participation is necessary by a broad spectrum, although not all of the citizens. It would seem that this is the place where Extension is well-suited to work.

Community Development in Extension

Bruce Florea, looking at Extension and public policy programs, says five steps are involved in this area of work: 1) identify the problem, 2) develop alternative solutions,

3) analyze the consequences of alternatives, 4) choose an alternative, 5) evaluate. Observe a couple of things. One, this list also applies to decisions made by individuals, families or business firms. But in the community or group situation, these steps must be much more explicit as they involve more people with different values and differing positions of wealth and interest, and consequently are going to take more time, especially to develop tolerance. Second, supposedly the individual, the business or the family is organized to make these kinds of decisions, yet in our own education programs we know that they also frequently need assistance. In the situation of a community or group, organizational needs are obvious. Therefore, time and effort are needed to build and maintain organization so the decisions can be made. Hence, the thrust for this type of organizational and leadership work in Extension Community Development efforts. We should anticipate that community decision-making is going to be tough, and that it will take longer. The alternative is not a democracy.

The five steps outlined above must take place within the local community; also, they must be done within an organizational structure within that community to be effective. Hence, people are needed in all of our communities to identify organizations and to help maintain these organizations so the communities can effectively deal with their problems. It is necessary to remember that the alternatives, etc., must come from within the community; but here, the Extension educator can present new information in organizational and technical alternatives and analysis based on local and outside experience.

Specialists and researchers can be of assistance. I'm reminded of a senior Extension worker who said he was not interested in the results a researcher had already obtained; what he found useful to communities was the way a researcher approaches problems. A specialist or a researcher listening to a local committee may help identify issues in a way that permits new alternatives for analysis. This is important, for if there are ways in which the values deeply held in the community can be isolated--to find out what is important and to whom--it may then be possible to educate, to inform, and to frame tolerance around various alternatives that might be accepted within the community. The most important input is the local perspective, but it may require enrichment:

"Learning to perceive a problem in a different way may be a major step toward its resolution. Historically, the scientific approach has been essentially an adversary process of competing perspectives, one of which is eventually adjudged to be the correct one. What seems to be required now is an inclusive process that recognizes that a complete picture is formed only by integrating multiple perspectives into what is, in effect, a new and larger perspective. What seems to be required in the early stages of problem assessment is a tolerance for multiple interpretations and the attendant ambiguity." (Schwartz, Peter, et al, "In Search of Tomorrow's Crises," The Futurist, October 1977. pp. 269-278).

Community Development is a huge subject matter field, though we frequently hear people speak of the Extension Community Development program. We seldom hear Extension speak, with the same sort of reference, of the Extension agricultural program, though Home Ec or Family Life are frequently held up as programs. We know that agriculture programs consist of largely independent work by soil scientists, agronomists, horticulturists, geneticists, ag engineers, agricultural economists and many other disciplines largely in the biological fields. Any of these can be useful to a farm or ranch operator, but their major assistance comes when they are integrated into a decision-making unit.

So it is the blending of resources, issues and capabilities in the decision unit that makes community development unique, and fits the pieces into a program. The community requires a unique blend of inputs that can be integrated into a consistent program for the community. This blend could entail all that civilization knows about itself; hence the number of fields of study is tremendous. Most frequently, however, communities seem to start with a blend that relates to public services, leadership development, economics and other behavioral sciences, law, and other fields directly related to immediate concerns. The community may need to utilize several disciplines at a time; as a result, Extension will need to work with political science, sociology, economics, social psychology, public finance, geography, law, some humanities, and perhaps engineering in order to address community problems. It is in blending these with the characteristics of the community that we finally see an integrated grouping of disciplines with a local flavor--something called a Community Development program. The challenge for Extension is to bring this integration of discipline into the community in such a way that it can be incorporated into the local decision-making structure.

Agents will need several things to be successful in this attempt. They must have support, obviously, from Extension Directors, area supervisory and local people, but they also need support from Extension specialists, from researchers and from the university itself, particularly in terms of subject matter. To acquire support from your Director and area supervisors, it may be necessary to have your clientele write letters of support to the Director and even the university President. In order to gain support from specialists, I suggest that you flatter them by ringing their telephone--attempting to get them involved with you in your county program. The most personally satisfying work in Extension I have done has been with agents in counties. Here I, as a specialist, could see something happen as a direct result of my effort. Too frequently the rewards on campus are very intangible, indeed.

You will also need to evaluate what to do and how, for yourself and your Director. Defining the program in the community and your role in that program is exceedingly important as you attempt to evaluate what you do. As an example, you may be involved in a situation where a new industry is considering moving into town. Obviously, as an educator you are not advised to take a growth or no-growth stance. Rather, it

is picking up the problem at this point, and seeking clarification of issues that go beyond simply having more or less industry in the community or more or less people in the community, that determines your program and its evaluation. In this example, the community needs to consider under what conditions more people or more industry would be acceptable. A discussion and a decision-making process is needed that considers the impacts from the plan, the impacts of more people--and identifies the impacts that are intolerable for the people who currently live in the community. In some instances, a community may find that it may be permissible for more people to come into the community--even more industry--if the taxes do not rise for those who live in the community at the present time. There are alternative ways in which this can be accommodated through systems development charges, hookup fees, etc. At any rate, those conditions can be established by the community; the plant then may (or may not) decide to locate there, and people may or may not move into the community. But if they do, they meet the conditions that the community has established. I feel relatively comfortable with the above issue because it is essentially an economic one. But the issues of importance to the community might also relate to family stability, school truancy, child abuse, jobs for minorities, pollution loads, access to medical services, or the number of potholes in the road; any or all of these could be used as criteria by a community evaluating whether or not more people or more industry would be appropriate.

If you as an educator can achieve this level of issue identification within a community, you can then begin to conduct programs that go beyond surface confrontations. I would submit that at this point you can see your output and the impact of your program can pass through evaluation as well as through your own evaluation system. Indeed, the community should be in better condition to address impact.

To do this, use your specialists. Call on them; ask for problem identification and alternative analysis assistance. They can be of help, if only as brokers, to translate your observation about community problems into channels where the capabilities of other people in the state, the university or the region can begin to assist you and your community.

Whether to Jump In

Rural development can swamp us with demands for time, and be a major drain on our emotional energy if we choose to become involved. These efforts will require more attention and more sustained work to move along than do our traditional activities, because rural development works in a group decision setting. Community leaders and active citizens lack the surplus energy to pursue us for what we can provide. Perhaps they have considerable experience that do-gooders from governmental agencies have no staying power, that we aren't likely to be around when the going gets tough.

It is very important to conserve the energy of volunteer leadership, especially where it is limited. To divert volunteers with unproductive programs and dead ends is irresponsible on our part. These people don't need the highs of an

emotional roller coaster provided by enthusiastic offers to help them solve the problem, followed by the lows of program performance, regardless of how well-intentioned. There is precious little leadership energy to waste, so if we can't stay and deliver--don't dabble in the first place.

Extension must advocate deep involvement in rural communities and recognize the costs to all of us as individuals and to our own organization for this involvement. Our ratio of success to failure may be low; this has been the case with programs directed from government to the poor and to community improvement in the past. A little success may be a pleasant surprise, but Extension does have the opportunity to reflect the interest of the local level, which has not been well done in government programs across the nation, hence, giving Extension a greater likelihood for success.

Watch out, though, for the needs of rural communities go beyond the limits of an educational program; they need advocacy and direct action. Our isolation, protected by academic freedom or objective distance, will be tested as the Extension Service is asked to place its reputation and support behind action programs. How will this be handled? We had better get to know the action-advocacy groups in the communities--public and private--who can be effective, and work with them. We have done it before in traditional Extension areas, but this requires contacts with a broader range of actors in rural communities.

It is important to retain our educational role, and to acknowledge that Extension is not going to be the coordinator of all rural development programs. But we can identify opportunities for rural assistance because we reach into the field; we need to develop the confidence and maturity, however, to take other agencies into the field with us, to make them partners in this process, and to be wise enough to give them credit when they get the job done. A real test for our success would be the extent to which other agencies refer opportunities to us, and take us into the field with them. Given our tie to the university we have access to a broader spectrum of knowledge relevant to human needs than most agencies; therefore, we should be the first to restrain from suggesting quick, simple, solutions implied by a single organization working alone.

Furthermore, this program is going to take some time. Extension must develop a better capability to assist in diagnosing the nature of constraints that a community faces. The problems of a community are complex and frequently long-standing. Several experienced people, especially local ones, will be needed to diagnose community issues. This diagnosis is very important, because the first attempts at community involvement must have a chance at high payoff (after acknowledgement that the prospects for success are slim). The programs then must be more than generally excellent programs; they need to be "right on," tailor-made. Extension cannot provide all the programs needed--we need to know who can be most effective with this audience and with this problem, and get them into the community.

I am not qualified to say what is needed by rural communities, but an Extension effort had best be flexible, recognized as high risk and high energy, but most importantly, it must be realistic and truthful.

You, personally, will be more exposed and tested in rural development programs than in other program areas. Community leadership has difficulty extending trust to a do-gooder whose motivations are not clear. Individuals with strong, clear incentives are much more dependable than those driven by the whims of personal motives. If administrators say that you are to be rewarded as you stay and take risks in your community program, and hence, you are there because of personal gain, you are to be trusted more than if you are there simply because you want to help. But your home institution has to share the risk of failure; then communities can predict your behavior, and you gain credibility. They know that they do not get something for nothing--and we need not lead them down the primrose path of attempting to persuade them that we are going to provide something for nothing.

In summary, I have tried to say the following:

- Rural people, including agricultural people, have much more invested in rural life than jobs in resource-based industries.
- Democracy depends upon tolerance and tolerance upon participation in the community.
- For participation to be sustained, there must be incentives supported by some rewards of success. Extension community development work can increase rewards by making organizations more effective and problem solving a more thoroughly informed activity.
- Extension workers also need love, respect and rewards. Getting at root issues in the communities will get more of the above three for Extension personnel from local people and from administration than will fast talk and PR slide-tape shows.
- Extension must allow time to develop good agent/specialist relationships, agent/community relationships and subsequently, specialist/community relationships.
- Specialists should at least be considered brokers for ideas and problems between agents and the larger university or the state/regional pools of assistance.
- Finally, don't dabble. The program is for community fulfillment and not our collective egos.

Literature Cited

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