

Choices for Institutions

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Some Questions

A number of questions, issues and concerns were delineated prior to the colloquium and are repeated here for background:

1. What is the function or role of local government, schools, churches, farm organizations and other rural institutions?
2. What happens to rural institutions without migration? With development or growth in the area? What happens to community structure when a new industry moves in? What is known about part-time farmers—their community participation, buying habits, etc.?
3. How can rural community residents share community responsibility and control of institutions during development and growth? How can a community develop—how big can it become—without serious increase in the feeling of alienation? What is known about the reaction of people during a change from smaller to larger institutional structure?
4. How can rural institutions modernize, become relevant, and then avoid future obsolescence? How can institutions employ science to develop social innovations and consider the cost of institutional obsolescence? Are there measures of social obsolescence comparable to industry's balance sheets and input-output ratios?
5. What is the function of rural institutions in community development and growth?
6. What priority should be placed on developing human resources of rural communities? What are social and economic costs of educating rural youth for living elsewhere? Of failure to solve the poverty problem?

Some Replies

Here are a few selected quotations resulting from the discussion of the aforementioned questions:

•“It is not what the size of the community should be, it is how you relate communities of different sizes.”

•“Probably the most difficult region to plan for in terms of rural policy or even agricultural policy may be this heartland of the western Corn Belt and the Plains. They are so lacking in alternatives for agriculture that if agriculture declines, nonfarm growth does not help offset the situation. I wonder to what extent can the population of these communities continue to decline without getting the support of local and public services so low that they begin to affect the ability of the area to keep a productive agriculture?”

•“Local leadership is unpredictable and perhaps an unmanageable type of commodity but it does make a difference. Some towns have had success in economic development. I know of no way of explaining their success compared with similar towns in the same region except some sort of spontaneous emergence of leadership.”

•“Is it conceivable that we could construct a set of policies in this country that would be as favorable to the large towns, the small cities, as our farm policies have been to the large farmers? Could we drive out some of the small, dying villages just as we have driven out some of the small, inefficient farmers? Is this something we ought to be concerned about, building communities, places for people to live just as we've been concerned about building large farms?”

•“We still haven’t asked ourselves what kind of society we are trying to build. Where do we want people to live and what is it going to cost us, as a society, and cost them as people, if they live elsewhere? Technology changes. If we have a certain distribution of people in an appropriate state, this is going to be consistent with some state of technology. To change the state of technology you are going to change the distribution of population. You could keep the old distribution if you are willing to pay the costs. Who shall decide which towns are going to grow and which are going to die? Who is to say which farmers are going to grow?”

•“There is always a cost in every program to come along, and I don’t think that we ought to assume that every area ought to have an increase in population. In good planning, it seems to me, we have to make decisions as to what points and what places are the most logical places where, for the least public inputs, the least costs, we can produce the style of life we want, including of course the supporting income to support that style desired. It isn’t always a question of whether a community increases in population. Sometimes a decrease is very good and we have areas that haven’t decreased enough yet. I’d hate to see any kind of action taken in some of these areas to stop this thing. It would seem to me to be a waste of public funds.”

•“I would be inclined to say that if planning is good for the problem areas, it ought to be good for the whole country. If it is good for the whole country, then we ought to ask ourselves how we should approach it in terms of dividing the country up into planning areas that make some sense. You divide them up in such a way as to maximize this economic potential, not to push the problem areas off by themselves. Then you make smaller geographic divisions and you make a public commitment to put a viable center in each multi-county development district through actual public investment in the infrastructure. This is the approach I think we need. But we are not following it. We talk in terms of spreading our money all across the geography and it just isn’t going to work.”

•“I think we better have an urban society. The only thing is, what *kind* of urban society?”

•“The recent rural planning district bill provides retirement districts to be set up in essentially rural and small town areas and provides money for groups of counties, or basically rural and small towns, to plan together for their general development. I believe the budget bureau has issued a list several pages long of federal programs that the federal agencies are to administer or structure in relation to these plans. The machinery is there, there is no question about that. But there has not been a plan to work effectively at the state level and the county and local level.”

•“I am shocked at how little our agriculturalists know about the urban scene, but what urban people know about the rural background is miniscule.”

•“This country of ours—with our long record of population growth, income growth, etc.—we’ve never really faced a problem of population declining in economically declining areas.”

•“I would argue that there are very few people who choose as a life goal to be ignorant and poor. Why do they become this? Ask yourself. Why do they become ignorant and poor?”

•“I’m saying that somehow in the scheme of things, there ought to be institutions that make a difference in the condition of man. How is it that we have allowed our society to develop to the point where the institutional systems are inadequate?”

•“Our educational system hasn’t gone where modern technology went.”

•“I hold the gravest doubt on how some parts of the United States are going to maintain even a minimum government and a minimum lot of social services if we continue to

get thinner and thinner population. In particular, I'm thinking of a rising real standard of living over the whole country. If you think forward, our kids are going to have double or more real income than we have and think of the things they are going to be demanding. How do you get this in a very sparsely settled area? Many of these things are social in nature. These are some of the very serious problems, but we have been giving them the absolute minimum of attention."

•"Nothing is substituted for until there is a suitable, readily available substitute. You don't change pencils or you don't change shoes, or you don't change a machine or a social system until there is a readily available substitute. That's the point at which the substitution takes place. We know this, we know the kinds of changes that are taking place with regard to structure, but we'll not change these institutions if we have not invented, developed, and innovated readily acceptable substitutes. If you look on the technological side, the only way that anybody ever got a new model was to invest in its production. It seems to me to be quite a mystery why we feel we can get innovation in our institutional systems somehow without investing in their creation. Why is it we have not thought of social inventions as a very serious need of our society in order to get equity in the distribution of the gains of progress?"

•"To me there is just something wrong with this society where we can give a person who is a farmer a million dollars for doing nothing, if we were honest about it, but we can't give a poor person enough food stamps to buy food to create a market. To me that is not quite equity. I don't see much being written or said about these things that would bring them to the fore and get any number of people to really see what is going on so we can get some of these things changed."

•"I would condemn the economic profession for thinking it could be objective in just looking at resource allocation problems, ignoring income distribution problems. But I don't believe our society is going to tolerate it much longer."

•"I have been wondering what we could do as farm magazines. We talk to the commercial farmer about his day-to-day problems as a farm manager. We concentrate on this type of thing and we do almost nothing sociological. Probably the main reason we don't is that we don't have much to work with. We don't have the information or the facts."

•"If we could effectively use the knowledge that is available, get it peddled from the minds of the people who know into the brains of the people who need to know, we would be a lot further along than we are."

•"I would contend this group around this table, by asking some good hard questions, putting them in the minds of the farm leadership you serve, could have quite an impact upon what goes on in the way of research in the Land-Grant institutions over the next 15 or 20 years. I think you can focus the questions so that you can get the kinds of answers you want."

The Times and the People

Following are the observations of this editor as he took part in the discussion about social and political rural institutions.

1. The fund of knowledge available in regard to the present status of rural institutions and rural people would seem to be woefully inadequate and on some phases nonexistent. Much of the research data on which we must rely today is out of date with the times and the people.

2. The social scientists too often seem to live in an isolated world of theory, while the practical facts of life of the rural resident and his institutions of today are ignored.

There appears to be little actual on-the-spot testing of these sociological and economic theories.

3. Rural communities and institutions cannot expect to receive a great deal of social or political help with their problems from the Land-Grant institutions. No coherent workable planning appears to have been done or contemplated. And necessary background work is not in process.

4. In fact, the Land-Grant institutions would seem to be neglecting or ignoring the social and political needs of today's rural institution. Funds apparently are hard to come by for this type of research. As a consequence, it is conceivable that many potential thought leaders who should be engaged in this type of research drift into other fields where the funds—and the salaries—are more attractive.

5. Because of the lack of organization on the part of rural and small town people, there apparently has been little if any call by these people for the Land-Grant institutions to lend a helping hand with research, counsel, and advice.

6. The people actually involved in the social and political makeup of rural institutions have a right to expect more help with their problems than they have received in the past. It would appear that the rural wheel has not squeaked as loudly as it should.

7. It would appear that such solutions as are offered are arrived at before the problem itself has been fully identified and researched.

8. Often, money is the simple solution offered without a clear-cut idea as to side effects and total organization. Or new industry is often sought immediately by communities in trouble, almost as a reflex reaction. A new industry may not fit at all, or may create even greater problems for the rural resident and institutions. The cure may be worse than the disease. A great deal of work needs to be done to identify and isolate the relevant problems of rural institutions before practical solutions to those problems can be determined. This work apparently is not being done to any great extent at the present time.

9. Leadership training—assuming leaders can be trained—is practically nonexistent in the rural community.

10. Little work has been done to determine what factors will keep young people in a community after high school, or return to a community after college. It would appear that employment opportunity is only one of many factors causing the exodus by the young. But we apparently do not know a great deal about what the other factors are.

11. Everyone—including those people in rural areas—wants the "good life." We apparently know little about what the good life means to people living on farms and in rural communities today. The definition in a rural community may be different than in Scarsdale. Theoretical solutions based on erroneous evaluation of what constitutes the good life will be less than totally effective. Real solutions must take into account what the people really consider essential for the type of life *they* want. What life style do these people want? What life style should they have for their own good and for the good of the country? We don't seem to know nor are many attempts being made to find out.

12. The agricultural press, as a group, lacks the crusading spirit often found in editors of yesteryear. Or, if the crusading spirit is present, it is production oriented rather than social or political.

13. The agricultural press has not done a very good job of helping solve the problems of today's rural institutions. It has not done the job for several reasons: (a) Production information is the first order of business. (b) The problems of the rural institutions have not been identified by research institutions. (c) The sources of research information in this subject matter area are not readily known to the agricultural press. (d) Much of the research information which is made available to the agricultural press is history and has

little relevance to today's social and political problems of rural institutions. (e) Readership of social and political information is often discouraging to editors. (f) The agricultural press, as well as most other forms of mass communication, has become more and more a hard-nosed, dollar and cents business proposition where those subjects which produce revenue for the reader, and an effective selling tool for the advertiser, receive priority for the editorial space available. Social and political information is not the top contender for this space.