

Impediments to Research and Education in Rural Canada

The Special Problems of Rural Research

In addition to the usual research problems several difficulties are intensified in the rural context.

- Distance: The distance to rural sites and within those sites increases the costs of the research and makes collaboration between sites more difficult.
- Social Cohesion: The higher levels of social cohesion in small communities makes it more difficult to develop the level of trust which is necessary for getting beyond superficial data collection and analysis.
- Sectoral perspectives: Much of the traditional approach to rural issues has been sectorally based. This makes it difficult to find support for interdepartmental and interdisciplinary approaches to rural research and education

The CRRF Approach

For over 10 years, CRRF has been developing its approach to overcome these obstacles in its research and education. The NRE Project and our program of workshops and conferences provide strong evidence for the success of this approach. Its basic elements are the following:

- Collaboration with all people and groups concerned with rural issues. This is best represented by our policy of *always holding our workshops and conferences in rural areas with the participation of local people and groups*. This policy proactively overcomes the problems of distance and sectoral divisions while building trust with rural people.
- Comparative Analysis at both systematic and informal levels. This is best represented by our *design of a national sampling frame and the selection of field sites using this frame*. This approach allows us to separate the idiosyncratic characteristics of rural sites from those which are common and overcomes sectoral and single interest-driven analysis.
- Long Term Commitment to the research objectives and to rural people. This is best reflected in our selection of field sites and inclusion of local people in the research activities. This approach allows us to overcome the imposition of simplistic approaches, builds trust, and develops a learning culture within and between communities.

“Simply sitting down for a cup of coffee or lunch with people gives them the opportunity to talk out their feelings and opinions about what has happened in town. This more casual or informal approach has allowed us to show people within the community that we have time to listen to them, we want to hear their story, and we care about what they think. Sometimes not having an “agenda” while doing research makes a big difference in the types of information you can collect.”
(Field Notes, 1999)

“People within the community now often initiate communication or contact with us about significant events happening in the community. As a result, we have become privy to emerging issues before the media reports the event. These emerging issues are often key to local change and local development.”

(Field Notes, 1999)

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Impediments Created by the Current Organization of Support

We have encountered significant problems with the implementation of this approach to rural research and education. Many of them are related to the current ways in which support for rural research and education is organized. Some examples of the obstacles are the following. The first three of these problems are explicitly identified by the “Perspectives Paper on Community Capacity Building” as prepared for Natural Resources Canada (March 19, 1999).

- **Petroleum and mining exploration, agricultural research, and forestry management** all support long periods of time without specific products. Why is it difficult to get the same recognition for social research and education? **Short-term Contracts:** Contract arrangements that are limited to 6, 12, or even 18 months create significant problems for establishing the level of commitment necessary to move beyond superficial representations of rural communities.

- **Product-driven Contracts:** Product-driven contracts typically have a narrow definition of “products”. They usually exclude, for example, meetings to resolve local conflicts, focus groups, or local workshops: all activities which help to build capacity, but do not produce immediate products to mark that growth. Most valuable products take a long time and considerable attention to develop.

- **No Core Funding:** Quality rural research requires sustained support to maintain regular contact with the field sites, to provide a consistent presence as a communication centre, and to be able to coordinate events in diverse parts of the country. This requires funding for field researchers, integrative analysis, and project management. Overhead on multiple small contracts cannot support this need. Small research contracts (under \$25,000) have been inadequate to provide core funding. With projects this size, all of the funds are typically required for research related to the contract products. Regionally funded contracts do not support this need since they are limited to regional interests.

- **Inconsistent Policy on Workshop and Conference Funding:** In spite of the rhetoric regarding the value of Partnership, we have been penalized in our collaboration with others. For example, CRRF and the Université Rurale, responded to the call for Partnership by combining their conference activities, yet CRRF was denied funding on the grounds that money was allocated to the Université Rurale. Such a policy discourages collaboration.

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