

The voluntary and business sectors are the partners of local governance most appreciated in rural areas

A survey of households in the various rural communities of the *Canadian Rural Observatory* of the *New Rural Economy* project (an initiative of the *Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation*) enabled us to measure the appreciation that residents have of the effectiveness of the input of the various partners, public, private and voluntary, involved in local governance, that is to say the mayor, the city councilors, the federal and provincial politicians and public administrators, the local businesspeople and the community or voluntary groups.

The overall results show a very important satisfaction level with the social actors from the voluntary sector, who finish at the top of the list. Indeed, 86% of the people questioned state that the work of these voluntary or associative organizations, representing what is commonly referred to as the local civil society, is deemed effective; only 2% of the respondents judge them as ineffective. This strong, positive representation must be put in relation to the fact that in rural communities, the voluntary sector plays a decisive part in the maintenance of certain socio-cultural services closely related to the quality of social and personal life. These organizations must compensate for the deficiencies in the provision of services by public and private institutions, which operate within the logic of economics of scale and claim to

be unable to justify their presence in order to serve small population bases. Because these community organizations offer services, generally in a non commercial capacity, the residents of rural communities appreciate their usefulness, for they know that otherwise, the same service would undoubtedly not be available locally.



For example, one can think of recreational services for young families; if the skating rink is maintained in the winter or if the playground is operated in summer, it is because a not-for-profit association is handling the job.

In addition, what is astonishing is to see local entrepreneurs receiving

a relatively high satisfaction level. Not less than 67% of respondents consider their actions effective and only 6.5% consider them ineffective. A possible explanation for these results can be that local businesspeople are often owners of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), well woven into the local social fabric by family ties and

the offer of employment to the local population; such geographical proximity which is supplemented by social proximity is certainly the basis of a good appreciation of these participants who, in other sectors, are seen very negatively, as is the case, for example, of the types of businesses which exploit geographically captive labour forces. Such a positive appreciation is certainly one interesting asset of the rural environment, because if the local population holds a very positive image of the actions of businesspeople, a partnership which involves them will be less likely to be judged in a negative way, and the new forms of governance which call for these types of partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors, can thus find in the rural environments a very fertile ground to develop.

This assumption is all the more probable because in this era where politics and politicians are often discredited and made objects of derision, satisfaction levels towards the actions of local politicians appear to be relatively good. Indeed, the total results show that 56%

continued overleaf...

of rural people consider that the mayor's handling of their municipality is effective and 12% consider it ineffective. This measurement was taken using a sample of 2000 people chosen randomly and the statistical inference allows us to affirm that a measurement on such a sample represents a practically similar parameter for all the Canadian rural population. Of course, the provincial and federal political representatives are far from having the same level of appreciation; it slips respectively to 43% and 32%. Because the local visibility of these politicians is much lower, that is hardly astonishing. When we consider certain recent operations designed to heighten the visibility of the federal government, aiming at making its presence and programs better known in rural areas, we can surmise that it has become aware of its low local visibility in these regions. In addition, it is well known that its larger social and economic policies can have a determining effect on the future of several rural communities in the country, but information leading to the appreciation of the impacts of these policies is not always available of the ordinary citizen.

In the leading communities, the level of satisfaction of the mayor goes up to 62% and it drops to 51% in those in the lagging sites. In the case of the local businesspeople, this level rises to 70% and 65% respectively, an interesting result which shows that these community leaders are appreciated everywhere. It is in the youngest group (35 years and less) that satisfaction regarding businesspeople is greatest, at 72%.

From the point of view of the institutionalization of new forms of governance, this data is interesting because it shows that the younger generations are more inclined to appreciate the role of the private sector than the older generations, which were more strongly influenced by the practices of the Welfare State.

As far as satisfaction levels go concerning provincial politicians, men are more easily inclined than women to consider them ineffective; in addition, the satisfaction level varies with age. Considered to be effective by only 32% of respondents aged 35 years or



less, provincial politicians are considered to be effective by 50% of respondents older than 60 years. The respondents of the leading communities are harsher than those of the lagging communities in their appreciation of the actions of provincial politicians. Contrary to people in the lagging communities, the residents of the leading communities generally have closer links with outside political authorities. They thus have more opportunities for developing greater expectations, and are therefore more likely to be disappointed by the provincial and federal

politicians who represent them. Their more critical attitude towards these politicians could be explained by connecting it to a particular characteristic of these leading rural communities, either the quality of their bonds or external networks, or to networks capable of drawing opportunities toward the community.

Two categories of social leaders who might appear far away and indifferent to one another, the business and voluntary sectors, find themselves, in the rural Canadian context, being the two local groups most appreciated by the rural population. Because we know, through other research conducted by the NRE, that the voluntary sector is running out of steam, we should ask ourselves how to work out and implement public policies aiming at better supporting or complementing the vital work of the voluntary sector in rural communities. In addition, as the studies underway within the NRE² project are likely to show, in rural communities, the business sector is already strongly involved and intertwined with the local voluntary sector. This social proximity and mutual understanding between the local economic players and the civil society, is likely to foster the emergence of a new type of local governance more easily than in urban areas, where the social distance between these two sectors is greater. However, we should still wonder how to tailor public policies which could strengthen this asset or this unique capacity of the rural communities in this era of the new economy.

Bruno Jean

Contact the NRE2 project by email at nre@vax2.concordia.ca or on the Web at nre.concordia.ca