The Elusive Promise of U.S. Rural Policy

DAVID FRESHWATER
Professor Emeritus
University of Kentucky

"While the U.S. has taken a number of actions called 'rural policy,' these have seldom merited the name."

—Rural Economic Development in the 1980s: Preparing for the Future[1]

Introduction

In the last 50 years, there have been periodic efforts to create a coherent and comprehensive national policy to support economic development across rural America. Most of these efforts have been initiated as part of the periodic congressional farm bill process, with rural advocates arguing that rural America needs more than support for farmers, that too many rural Americans lack the opportunities and access to services available in cities, and that rural poverty is a serious issue requiring greater federal attention. This chapter reviews past efforts to create a cohesive federal rural development policy, beginning in the early 20th century. It identifies multiple challenges inherent in the U.S. system of government that make constructing a sustainable and comprehensive rural development policy difficult. It also notes that while a comprehensive federal rural development policy has proved to be an elusive goal, there are many examples of programs across a wide range of federal agencies that provide meaningful support to rural people, firms and communities. With the new impetus for a revised federal role brought about by the recognition of a rural-urban divide, this is a timely moment to assess how the federal government can play a stronger role in supporting development in rural America. While developing a comprehensive rural policy may be seen as the ideal approach, past experience suggests that providing better federal support to rural communities may be a more effective strategy that better fits within the realities of the American political process.

The Evolution of U.S. Rural Policy

Identifying and implementing a national rural policy have been challenges for the United States since closing the frontier, at the end of the

19th century, ended westward expansion. The first significant effort—the 1909 *Report of the Country Life Commission* to President Theodore Roosevelt—recognized that rural America had moved well beyond semi-subsistence agriculture and was in need of major investments in infrastructure and public services.[2] The commission's report subsequently led to the introduction of the rural postal service, investments in rural roads, efforts to improve schools in rural areas and the creation of the Cooperative Extension System. Notably, the commission also recommended the creation of a national agency devoted to rural progress, but this did not happen.

The farm population peaked at 32.5 million in 1916, and the number of farms peaked at about 6.5 million in the mid-1920s. By 1920, America was no longer mostly a nation of farmers, and the flow of immigrants into rural areas was replaced by an outflow of people from farms to cities. Better employment opportunities and a higher quality of life in cities pulled people away from rural areas. At the same time, mechanization and other technological improvements allowed a farm family to operate a larger farm and created pressure for farm consolidations that pushed people off farms, and this continues today. In response, efforts to diversify rural economies began during the 1930s, notably in the South, where rural poverty was exacerbated by the Great Depression. Mississippi introduced the Balance Agriculture with Industry (BAWI) program in 1936 to provide counties and cities with the authority to recruit manufacturing firms from the North. BAWI was soon replicated by other states and is the origin of the various industrial recruitment programs that remain in use across the country today.

The 1930s also saw the introduction of the first major national policy to support agriculture through the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933. While the 1933 act was declared unconstitutional, its successors (the AAA acts of 1937 and 1938) put in place the core system of farm support policies that lasted through the rest of the 20th century.[3] Since the 1930s, high levels of federal support for farmers have been the main form of U.S. *rural policy*, if one defines rural policy as "those policies that are mainly applicable only in rural areas." While the rural population has largely remained constant at around 50 million to 60 million people, it has declined as a share of the total population, from 44% in the 1930s to about 19% in 2020. Over the same period, the number of farmers has declined much faster, as has their share of the rural population. In the 1930s, there were about 30 million farmers, which was

53% of the rural population. By 2020, there were just over 2 million farmers, which was about 4% of the rural population.

The shift in the nature of the rural population is reflected in the underlying economies of rural counties. There are 3,142 counties (or statistical equivalents) in the United States. Of these, 1,180 are part of a metropolitan statistical area (MSA). Many of the counties in an MSA are rural in nature but are strongly connected to an urban county by commuting patterns. The remaining nonmetropolitan counties are considered rural, which means they do not contain a city larger than 50,000 people. The Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has developed a typology of county industry specialization. The most recent typology is described by Timothy Parker[4] and is reproduced as Table 1.

TABLE 1:
Number of Counties by Economic Type, 2001 and 2020

	NONMETRO 2001	NONMETRO 2020	METRO 2001	METRO 2020	TOTAL 2001	TOTAL 2020
Farming-Dependent	444	394	67	50	51	444
Mining-Dependent	113	181	17	38	130	219
Manufacturing-Dependent	571	353	311	153	882	506
Federal/State Government-Dependent	218	234	50	171	368	405
Recreation-Dependent	217	228	108	104	325	332
Not Specialized	411	572	513	664	924	1,236
Total	1,974	1,962	1,166	1,180	3,140	3,142

SOURCE: Adapted from Parker, 2015.

NOTES: Data for 2001 are taken directly from Parker, 2015. Results for 2020 are based on the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2020 classification of metropolitan counties. County specializations for 2020 are based on the most recent adjustments by USDA ERS (2017).

In 2020, farming-dependent counties were 16% of all counties and 23% of rural counties. Moreover, some of the counties that produce the greatest amount of agricultural output are not farming-dependent because a larger share of county output comes from some other activity, such as manufacturing. Indeed, the vast majority of American farm households now earn more money from off-farm employment than they do from farming, and the vast majority of farm support program payments go to a small number of very large farms. While farming has become a smaller part of rural America, there has been little success in developing a national rural policy that goes beyond support for agriculture. What's more, increasing agricultural supports have not halted the decline in the number of farms.

Even so, there have been important new programs introduced in the last half-century that have improved conditions in rural areas. Following World War II, major expansions of rural electrification, rural hospital construction and support for rural manufacturing led to better living conditions in many parts of the country. But, poverty rates in parts of rural America were and remain high, in particular in the South and Appalachia, and on Native American reservations. In 1958, there was an effort to create a second Country Life Commission to help identify a new vision for rural America. While there was some support in the House Agriculture Committee, little interest was shown by the executive branch, and the proposal was abandoned.[5]

Starting in the 1960s, USDA outlays for rural development increased as Congress added new programs in housing, water and sewer infrastructure, and business development.[6] A potential opportunity for a national strategy came with the Johnson administration's War on Poverty in the mid-1960s. The rural part of the poverty challenge was identified in a report by the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty titled "The People Left Behind." The report sparked action: it identified ways that conditions in rural America could be improved; it led to the passing of the Rural Development Act of 1972 that authorized the USDA to introduce new nonfarm activities to support rural communities; and it designated the USDA as the federal agency responsible for coordinating all national rural development policies within the executive branch.[7] The last major commitment to developing a comprehensive national rural policy was during the Carter administration, which rolled out a national framework for rural policy in early 1980 that largely shaped the Rural Development Policy Act of 1980.[8]

While not an attempt to develop a comprehensive national rural policy, the 1990 farm bill was the first to include a specific rural development title; that inclusion has continued through all subsequent farm bills. In principle, this means that roughly every five years, Congress reviews the current needs of rural America and has the opportunity to reshape federal policy. However, only the agriculture committees are involved in this review process, and while the USDA has a significant set of authorized policy tools, it has no ability to influence the actions of other key departments, such as the departments of Labor, Transportation, Commerce, Health and Human Services, or Education. Moreover, many of the policies that the USDA is authorized to carry out are often not funded, or only partially funded, by the Appropriations Committee. Finally, while the agriculture committees are relatively unique in their autonomy in setting the content of farm bills, this independence has contributed to the executive branch not fully engaging in formulating a comprehensive national rural policy that cuts across all departments and agencies.[9]

U.S. Regional Policy Has Largely Been for Rural Areas

Regional policy agencies constructed by the federal government are relatively uncommon in the U.S. compared to those constructed in other developed countries. This reflects, to a large extent, the constitutional division of power between states and the federal government, but also the nature of the federal government, whereby the executive branch has limited scope for domestic policy initiatives without congressional authorization. Where regional policy agencies exist, they follow one of two forms: large, multistate agencies with congressional charters that operate as quasi-independent agencies with explicit policy mandates but often too few resources to accomplish those mandates; or multicounty organizations that receive federal funding to perform specific tasks, but which are created under a specific state's enabling legislation. Beyond these specific regional agencies, there are myriad federal programs that just happen to have different effects on a region-by-region basis but are not intentionally regionally focused. While used sporadically, regional policy has been mostly driven by a desire to improve conditions in more-rural areas, whereas urban policy has typically focused on large cities.

Multistate Agencies

The first use of formal regional policy was the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in 1933 to address chronic problems of flooding, erosion and low incomes in the Tennessee River watershed. The commission was formed as a quasi-government agency that received congressional appropriations and was subject to limited oversight. The TVA reduced flooding by building a series of dams on the river, which became a source of cheap hydroelectricity that attracted new industries to the region. Over time, the TVA—like most integrated power companies in the U.S.—expanded its economic development activities, in part to meet its government charter requirements but also to build demand for the power it produced. As new dam sites were exhausted, the TVA diversified into coal and nuclear power production, and its initial conservation and rural development mission areas began to receive less focus.

In the Pacific Northwest, the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) was established in 1937 to develop and deliver hydroelectric power from the Columbia River. Like the TVA, the BPA used cheap power to attract industry to a region that was underperforming economically. The BPA, unlike the TVA, however, had only a single mission, and although it received appropriated funds to build dams, its economic development efforts lacked a congressional mandate. While both agencies continue to exist, reforms to the electricity industry that increased wholesale power sales outside their designated regions have greatly reduced their interests in local economic development. Neither the TVA nor BPA now receive appropriated funds, and both operate on a self-sufficient basis, although their congressional charters still make them subject to congressional oversight.

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), created in 1965, is generally considered the first true federal regional development agency. The ARC serves a contiguous block of mainly rural counties in 14 Eastern states, most of which had high levels of persistent poverty in the 1950s and early 1960s. The ARC is a state and federal government partnership, with the 13 state governors and a federal chair directing the commission. Funding mainly comes from federal sources, but states also invest in its projects, which focus on core infrastructure, transportation improvements, workforce development, support for local business and community capacity-building. While support for the ARC at the federal level has varied over time, the program has always been funded and remains largely popular in the region it serves. Efforts to replicate the ARC in other regions have generally not been successful, with the exception of the Delta Regional Authority, which was established in 2000 to provide support for economic development in predominantly high-poverty counties in eight states along the lower Mississippi River.

Multicounty Development Programs

The Economic Development Administration (EDA) in the Commerce Department was established in 1965 to provide grants to multicounty economic development organizations across the country. While a group of adjacent counties could collectively develop a common development strategy that benefits the group without the EDA's support, this is uncommon because there has to be an incentive to collaborate rather than compete. EDA provides that incentive. The EDA largely focuses on capacity-building in the various multicounty development districts it supports, but it also can provide support for innovation and entrepreneurship. While the EDA is a federal program, states have to enact legislation that allows counties to organize cross-jurisdictional economic development districts. While the approach has advantages, it also has challenges. In the states east of the Mississippi River, counties are relatively small and therefore can lack the capacity to carry out effective local development activity individually. While in the states west of the Mississippi, counties are generally much larger in area, which raises the challenge of having too big a geographic area for effective multicounty collaboration.

Other Spatially Influenced Federal Development Programs

Most federal agencies, including the USDA, have programs that impact economic development and are differentiated by type of place, typically using counties as the basic spatial unit. In 2005, Mark Drabenstott identified 180 such programs, most of which tended to have an infrastructure focus.[12] Individual departments may have a mandate to undertake a specific activity for one purpose but may also have an economic development function. For example, the Army Corps of Engineers initially undertook waterway improvements for defense purposes, but these often provided "public good" transportation improvements. In other cases, such as for the USDA Cooperative Extension System, the improvement of farm productivity and income was the key motivation.

Spatial units can be defined in many ways depending on the agency: administrative units, such as counties; topographic units, such as watersheds; or areas impacted by natural disaster, for the Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA), for example. Each agency chooses a spatial unit that corresponds to its specific mandate and objectives. And, while these geographies are individually appropriate, the result is a system of programs that lacks coherence and can challenge the local communities trying to improve their economic conditions.

Future Prospects for a Cohesive U.S. Rural Policy

In principle, one might think that agricultural policy should be part of a larger rural policy, but in the U.S., explicit rural policy exists as a piece of agricultural policy. Path dependency theory (based on the idea that what has occurred in the past will persist because of resistance to change) can provide a partial explanation—agricultural interests entrenched in Congress and the executive branch are well-placed to defend their position. But political science also suggests that part of the problem is that agricultural policy is a relatively compact policy area, whereby participants have shared values and objectives that make it easy to organize and form a policy monopoly.[13] In contrast, where issues, actors and institutions are numerous and only weakly connected, such as for rural policy broadly defined, it is difficult to formulate coherent policy.

Peter May and two colleagues conclude that the following are key elements in explaining success in national policy formation in the U.S.: a high degree of issue concentration, a high degree of interest concentration, strong targeting of policies, concentration of policy responsibility in a small number of committees, and the existence of an engaged executive agency.[14] Agriculture scores strongly on all counts, because it is focused solely on issues affecting farmers, and those issues are of importance mainly to farmers. Further, agricultural programs are largely the responsibility of a single congressional committee, and the USDA is primarily focused on serving farmers. By contrast, rural policy involves many issues that appeal to a wide range of interests, its programs are often difficult to target, and multiple committees are involved in rural policy creation. Further, while the USDA is nominally in charge of coordination of all federal rural programs, it has had neither a strong interest in broad rural policy nor the ability to influence other agencies.

To date, the usual set of rural interests has been unable to form an effective coalition that can put forth a unified position on its priorities for rural policy.[15] Adding more supporters for rural policy who introduce a new objective of healing political divides is unlikely to help the process. Without clear priorities, it is difficult to see how congressional committees could work across their intersecting jurisdictions to craft multiple pieces of legislation to create a coherent package. Agricultural policy works because within Congress the agriculture committees have the ability to deal with most of the needs of farmers, and few other committees have any interest in engaging in farming issues. In comparison, a comprehensive rural policy would have to engage most congressional committees and, to be effective, would require that the various committees coordinate their actions to ensure their efforts align. In the process, the various rural interest groups would have to agree on budget and resource allocations for every aspect.

A final reason for the lack of progress on rural policy is that it has too often been oriented to trying to restore a lost past. In part, this reflects a belief among some that rural areas are guardians of a society's cultural heritage, while cities are dynamic agents of change.[16] More likely, it is a recognition that past times were more prosperous and, for many small places, few new and better alternatives are evident. These efforts to restore the rural past have been largely ineffective, and for rural regions to prosper, they must adapt to a changing world.

To conclude this section, it is clear that over time the federal government has expanded the number and scope of programs that are either specifically focused on rural areas or have a larger geographic focus that includes rural areas. But even in the Carter era, there was little evidence that programs fit within some larger rural policy objective.[17] The situation today is little changed from half a century ago, except the number of programs has increased. Lynn Daft goes on to argue that the absence of a policy means that the various parts of the social system are treated in isolation from the other parts, which leads to resource misallocation, conflicting actions and missed opportunities. "The characteristic that sets the rural development issue apart from others is its concern with the economic and social activity of a specific part of the national landscape—*the rural part*." [18] While in principal the solution to this problem may appear to be trying to create a more compact policy area to simplify coordination, Daft, as well as Norman Reid and Richard Long, concludes this is impossible, because the policy problems of rural areas do not neatly fit into a rural-specific framework, which may make creating a coherent rural policy difficult conceptually, and virtually impossible within the U.S. political system.

A Refocused Federal Role

Despite the limited gains from past struggles to put in place effective federal rural policy, there is broad ongoing support for helping rural America.[19] One strand of local development theory and practice, endorsed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), holds that successful local economic development takes place when communities are able to mobilize their residents to jointly construct their own vision of where they want to be, and accept responsibility for actions that can achieve their vision.[20] Local coordination offers the opportunity to assemble specific sets of programs tailored to meet local needs, and can offer the agency providing the program a high probability of success without having to either reshape its internal objectives or engage in complex interagency coordination. In this framework, it may be sufficient that the federal government provides and fully funds a broad array of programs that can address the wide variety of local development strategies appropriate to the diversity of rural America. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge and improve the current bottom-up rural development approach. If rural places had better capacity to undertake the planning and actions needed for their local areas, they could undertake the coordination necessary to access existing federal programs, and a true bottom-up development process could occur.

Since every rural place is different and only that place can know its opportunities and challenges, this may be appropriate. Moreover, the people in any particular rural place have the greatest incentive to get their development strategy right because they are the main beneficiaries of its success. Adopting a bottom-up approach changes the responsibility of the federal government from managing a comprehensive set of programs in an integrated way, to supporting local governments as they identify the best set of programs to implement their development strategy. Two crucial issues remain: the first is to identify the appropriate spatial and administrative units for locally based development; the second is to suggest some structural changes to the way the federal government supports these initiatives. While this is by far a less comprehensive approach to rural development, it builds upon past program successes and avoids embarking on an approach that has a long history of failure. If it were possible to ensure that the needs and capabilities of rural areas were included in broad national issues—such as adapting to climate change, mitigating the effects of demographic decline or making better use of digital technologies—it may even be possible to reduce the sense of disadvantage that underpins the current political divide.

A County-Based Approach

Counties are likely the appropriate entry point for local development in rural areas because they are already well-connected to existing federal programs, are integrated into state policymaking and contain elements of a potential mechanism to bring about a locally led approach.

A primary support for rural counties is the USDA Cooperative Extension System (CES), which is already an example of multilevel governance, because it involves federal, state and local resources. In many counties, county agents are already acting as de facto local development officers. In addition, the USDA is the oversight and funding agency for the extension system, will remain the main federal agency involved in rural development, and has numerous rural development programs—all of which can create potential synergies.

A second existing support is the Commerce Department's EDA program, which already funds multicounty development organizations tasked with joint planning and obtaining federal support for multicounty projects. Other federal agencies have programs that are already operating in rural areas and that, with modest local coordination efforts, could be more effective.

Providing encouragement to county leaders to better utilize these resources in a more coordinated way and using existing executive branch authority to enable cooperative behavior in agencies could go a long way to facilitating more of a bottom-up approach. Of course, not all counties will take on the challenge, especially at first. But one of the core strategies of Cooperative Extension is the demonstration model, whereby one farmer agrees to participate in an experiment, and neighbors come to assess the outcomes; they see the benefits and, in turn, commit to the new approach. Similarly, if at first only a few rural counties in a state improve their outcomes by becoming proactive, this could lead to broader adoption of a new development model supported by federal programs.

Improving Federal Support

Within this broad framework, the federal government should focus on three key areas to support the needs of rural communities as effectively as possible within the current policy context.

The first is recognizing that rural development is different, and that strategies, policies and programs appropriate for urban development cannot be simply scaled down to fit rural conditions. Long distances, low population density, limited possibilities for scale economies, a small labor market and truncated local economies combine to make economic growth prospects and service delivery mechanisms different from those in urban America. It would help rural areas if federal regulations and programs focused on outcomes rather than on specific technologies or practices. For example, wastewater treatment rules that specify the use of best available technology are not as effective in rural areas as simpler approaches that deliver the same results. Similarly, COVID 19 has shown that rural areas are more exposed because of their containing a higher share of essential workers, and having less opportunity for working from home, more limited access to e-commerce and fewer local hospitals capable of providing intensive care. Advances in telemedicine and better coordination among rural and urban hospitals could address these issues.

A second issue is the problem of inconsistent support for rural programs within the executive branch. Farm programs and nutrition programs continue to dominate USDA activity, both for political and budgetary reasons. While rural development is a dedicated mission area of the USDA, few presidential administrations place much emphasis on the topic. This lack of commitment carries across to other departments and agencies, most of which have programs that have a direct impact on rural America. Sporadic efforts by administrations to create rural development councils led by the USDA to coordinate federal programs are short-lived and receive little more than lip service from most other parts of the government. This lack of consistent, vocal and coordinated support means that rural communities often do not have a dedicated federal partner to help them identify, access and coordinate useful resources across multiple departments, and that they frequently face programmatic requirements that are impractical or unworkable in a rural context.

A third issue is a lack of strategic planning and implementation capacity at the local level, and the almost impossible task for a rural community to understand and access the myriad potential sources of federal support. Cities can afford to retain a professional planning staff and develop the expertise to obtain federal funds, because they have the financial resources to make these investments. Rural areas lack this internal capacity, and while there are many rural governments—so that, in principle, consultants should be able to provide this service—the reality is that profit margins are too small to sustain the activity. This argues for strong federal support for community capacity-building that takes advantage of the extension system and existing EDA programs.

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Endnotes

1. See Reid and Long, p. 9-1.
2. See Peters and Morgan.
3. See Novak et al.
4. See Parker.
5. See Long.
6. See Cowan.
7. Ibid.
8. See Long, p. 28.
9. See Daft, and Ulrich-Schad and Duncan.
10. See Hewings et al.
11. Ibid.
12. See Drabenstott, p. 6.
13. See Cairney, pp. 178-82.
14. See May et al., pp. 389-95.
15. See Browne.
16. See Castle, and Long.
17. See Daft, Long, and Reid and Long.
18. See Daft, p. 3.
19. See Junod et al., Pipa and Geismar, and Vilsack.
20. See OECD, 2006, 2016, and 2020.