

DESIGNING DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN SMALL TOWNS

Glen Pulver
and David Dodson


The Aspen | Institute



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Executive Summary

Rural America is in trouble. Despite its significant population—roughly one-fourth of the U.S. population—rural America is seriously lagging behind urban America in personal income, health, and education. Although remoteness and lack of scale are often tagged as the culprits in rural stagnation, it is not clear how serious these economic disadvantages really are. What is clear is this: If rural people are to have any hope of achieving a level of living approximating that of their urban neighbors, local leaders must become very adept at identifying the most effective strategies for community development. Without some form of public intervention, the rural malaise probably will not go away. The best hope for improvement is a combination of well-informed action by local leaders and supportive state and national policy.

The dynamics of rural economies are neither simple nor uniform. Every region or locality is subject to a unique interplay of critical factors. Location, the quality and character of the economic base, the mix of human and natural resources, and the leadership capacities of institutions and citizens all conspire to determine whether a community is positioned for rise or decline. Community success hinges on the recognition and management of all these factors, and should therefore rest on a careful reading of the strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities that are unique to each community.

Community assessment, the careful analysis by local people of their current and prospective challenges and opportunities, is thus fundamental to effective planning and informed action. When a strong assessment process is tied to sound strategic planning, chances increase that the actions a community chooses will fit its circumstances and abilities. Improved living conditions are more likely to result. Without the careful analysis provided by a thorough assessment process, communities risk making

Community assessment is fundamental to effective planning and informed action

ill-considered choices about the future; failure and frustrations are much more likely to result.

Effective community assessment includes the systematic collection of national, state, and local data, comparison of trends, identification of needs and goals, and determination of realistic opportunities and actions. Thorough analysis requires the use of a wide variety of tools such as surveys, census records, community forums, statistical techniques, economic analyses, and force field analyses. For most community leaders, these are unfamiliar tools. For leaders in small rural towns, the need for them is especially critical. Without help from the outside, most of these tools will remain unavailable; community assessment will be haphazard and ineffective.

State governments can play a pivotal role in improving the quality of rural decision-making

State governments can play a pivotal role in improving the quality of rural decision-making. Small-town leaders, especially those in more remote regions, are at a great disadvantage in accessing and analyzing the latest knowledge necessary to determine their best opportunities. There is ample evidence that education in community assessment, coupled with technical assistance, can make major improvements in rural well-being.

State support for community assessment typically occurs through one of four models, ranging from continuous assistance to occasional, even one-time, help.

The Continuous Local Assistance Model relies upon the placement of community development professionals in local settings. The professional catalyzes action at the local level, helping leaders and volunteers conduct a thorough, technically sophisticated assessment and providing a strong link to information and other resources outside of the community. Perhaps the best example of this model at work in the U.S. occurs in Wisconsin, where the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension program has placed County Community Natural Resource and Economic Development Agents in 85 percent of the state's counties. The greatest advantage to this model is that it provides ongoing, professional assistance to local communities. It is the most expensive of the four models, running between

\$100,000 and \$120,000 per county annually, but it is also the most thorough and potentially the most helpful to small rural localities. Cost-sharing between the state and the counties can soften the bite. States and local communities well-served by this model will attest that it is worth the public investment.

The Regional Resource Model establishes regional centers staffed by community development specialists. These professionals typically serve a multi-county area. Their primary jobs are to create partnerships between resource providers and local leaders, and to provide education and technical assistance directly to communities. Under this model, community assessment is apt to be viewed as a sporadic process to be carried out every few years, not as an ongoing activity intimately tied to overall development strategies. States employing this model can expect annual costs of around \$100,000 per regional specialist. Good examples of this model occur in Iowa and Missouri, where the Cooperative Extension Service employs Community Development Specialists to work in specified regions.

The Parachute Model offers a centralized base from which community development specialists can answer local requests for help. Technical assistance is often provided by a combination of the specialists themselves and a small corps of state employees who work in various agencies of government. Sometimes the model allows for states to make direct grants so that communities can hire their own consultants. Two states that provide direct staff assistance in local planning are Oregon and South Carolina. Kansas provides funding for communities to hire outside consultants. The costs of operating this model are highly variable. Each community is likely to run between \$20,000 and \$30,000 per year, with costs soaring much higher if numerous private consultants are involved.

The Leadership Training Model typically tries to integrate leadership education with community assessment. Local officials and volunteers who have received training in leadership skills are then taught the essentials of community assessment. They either conduct the

process themselves or assist technical consultants who are brought in from the outside. Programs that have successfully tied leadership training to community assessment occur in North Carolina through the Rural Economic Development Center, and in the Midwest through the Search Communities Program sponsored by Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc. The costs involved in this model are the most highly variable of them all, ranging from the substantial support needed to maintain statewide or regional leadership assistance centers, to the relatively minor costs of programs that focus on providing workbooks and other written materials to local leaders.

Each of these models can be very helpful to local communities, depending upon the timing and circumstances. While smaller communities—usually the most lagging—undoubtedly need continuing assistance, nearly all rural communities can benefit from state-supported assessments of some kind. The cost of providing this education and technical assistance is much less than investments in public infrastructure (industrial parks, streets, water systems), direct business loans, or, in the worst case, direct income support. The potential payoff of improved rural decision-making is great.

The cost of providing education and technical assistance is much less than investments in public infrastructure, direct business loans, or direct income support

It is important to understand that many kinds of institutions, both public and private, are involved in successful community assessment. In some states, special programs established through Cooperative Extension have broadened the development strategies of communities once dominated by agriculture. In many other states, line state agencies and new programs created through state government guide community assessment statewide or in particularly depressed regions. The private sector has gotten deeply involved as well, making investments in community assessment in their market or service regions. And the nonprofit sector is often integrally involved, sometimes able to provide the spark of innovation that may be lacking in bureaucratic agencies. Just as there is no single way to perform community assessment, there is no single kind of assistance provider that necessarily works best.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The Rural Condition

Improvements in rural life have not kept pace with those in urban America. Higher poverty rates, more unemployment and underemployment, slower growth in per capita income, poorer health, and lower levels of education are all symptoms of deteriorating conditions in rural America. Although the rate of increase in the number of non-metropolitan jobs does not lag as severely, other indications of rural well-being continue to look grim. Absent meaningful public intervention, rural conditions seem destined to fall farther behind those in urban areas for some time to come.¹

It was once thought that most of the problems of rural areas could be solved by increasing income in natural resource industries such as farming, fishing, forestry, and mining or by attracting manufacturing jobs to the countryside. Today, however, the complex interplay of global markets and regulatory policies make it impossible for nations and states to direct their economies in ways that produce precise benefits for rural areas. The enormous economic, political, and social diversity of rural America further complicates the task of engineering a rural revival from above:²

- Levels of well-being differ. Some rural areas, especially those near urban centers, have high per capita incomes, excellent education systems, plentiful employment opportunities, and access to first-rate health care. A substantial proportion of the rural population is included in this group. Others, generally those at greater distances from cities, are experiencing sharp drops in economic opportunities and deteriorating public infrastructure.
- Rural areas have diverse economic bases. Although once almost totally dependent on

The diversity of rural America further complicates the task of engineering a rural revival from above

natural resource industries, many rural residents today rely on employment in manufacturing and services, and income from social security and other investments. Like their urban neighbors, rural people find that their living is increasingly tied to the growth of high technology, producer services, tourism, and retirement-based industries. Rural areas with higher concentrations of skilled labor and those closer to cities are well-positioned to improve their economies. Remote communities with few natural or human resources face the prospects of stagnant or declining incomes.

- Community resources and capacities differ. Some towns—such as Tupelo, Mississippi, and Columbus, Indiana—have a tradition of vigorous, entrepreneurial leadership and strong community organizations ready to capitalize on economic opportunities and public policy initiatives. Others are mired in a culture of resignation and lack the civic infrastructure to mobilize themselves.
- The residents of various rural communities have radically different goals. Some are anxious for employment growth to provide jobs for their maturing children; others opt for the retention of natural beauty and no growth.³

States cannot confidently offer a single policy prescription for rural success

Moreover, rural areas are often as diverse within each state as they are across the country. Few states have a single rural economy, so they cannot confidently offer a single policy prescription for rural success. One thing is certain, however. No community renewal strategy can succeed, no matter how enlightened the national and state policy environment, unless localities have the understanding and capacity to put their resources to use. The community assessment process is an essential tool for building understanding and capacity, and a precondition for making wise choices about development opportunities.

The Importance of Community Assessment

Long-term success rests on a community's ability to clarify its current situation, describe the future it wants, choose feasible strategies to reach its goals, and implement its plans skillfully. Community assessment—the process that localities use to catalogue their resources, deficits, opportunities, and options—is fundamental to any successful, self-directed effort at community improvement.

Given the complex and often volatile dynamics of rural economies, communities risk a high rate of failure if they launch major initiatives without this kind of analysis. The rural landscape is littered with communities that have made large and unsuccessful investments—in industrial parks, promotional campaigns, airstrips, and tourist facilities—without first mapping where they stand in a competitive environment. Neighboring communities often mimic each other and fail. As the competition for public and private investment dollars grows, the cost of such well-intentioned but ill-informed ventures will soar, and the value of grounding community action in a strategic assessment of strengths, vulnerabilities, and options will be confirmed.

The rural landscape is littered with communities that have made large and unsuccessful investments without first mapping where they stand

Community assessment is an elastic term. Some assessment models integrate leadership education for local citizens. Others employ the traditional features of strategic planning, asking community leaders to envision the future they want, catalogue the obstacles and assets that could impede or expedite that vision, and develop strategies to bring the vision alive. Despite this variety, every strong assessment process should have a core set of basic characteristics. It should:

- **Produce a data-based portrait of the community in its current state.** At a minimum, the assessment should generate a balance sheet of the community's assets and liabilities. The most useful assessments go well beyond this minimum. Instead of a snapshot, they produce a motion picture that shows how the

community has changed over time and how it may evolve given various assumptions about the future.

- **Place the community in its economic or competitive context.** The assessment should enable the community to see where it stands relative to its neighbors, state, region, and the nation on a range of critical indicators—for instance, income growth rates and distribution patterns; educational attainment among key segments of the population; the quality of its natural, capital, and technical resources; the vigor of its business sector and leadership; the quality of its health, education and social service institutions. These indicators allow communities to measure their success not only against their own past but also in terms of changes in their relative position.
- **Assess the community's capacity to exploit its advantages and overcome its deficits.** The assessment should help the community weigh its assets against its liabilities to see the size of the challenge it faces.

Many assessment models go beyond these universal elements to embrace two others. They:

- **Generate a set of priority goals for improving the community's status.** The most useful models help communities select action steps that are both feasible and necessary for subsequent activity to succeed—goals that are “big enough to matter and small enough to win”—a valuable criterion for communities with limited dollars and civic resources.
- **Produce a set of options for reaching the priority goals and detailed action plans for implementing strategies.** The assessment process has maximum value when it helps a community decide how it can achieve its goals.

Since rural communities often have limited access to information on innovative development, the assessment process can help a community base its strategies on what has worked or failed elsewhere. This usually requires an outside institution or consultant to acquaint the community with current programs in rural development.

Since the ultimate purpose of community assessment is to build the community's capacity to improve itself, process matters as much as content. In addition to providing data and facilitating development of goals and strategies, the assessment process should expand the community's capacity to implement its plans. The most effective models therefore pay attention to two important dimensions of process. They:

Since the purpose of community assessment is to build the community's capacity, process matters as much as content

- **Make broad community involvement central to the assessment.** Usually, they use a governance structure that reflects the diversity in the community, and they actively solicit community opinion as they define issues and generate goals. The aspirations of residents should provide the primary direction for public action. Community goals are usually best delineated when they address issues of greatest importance to the residents. Some community assessment specialists suggest visioning as a means of reaching beyond day-to-day concerns. Visioning is nothing more than imagining the kind of community residents desire.
- **Recognize the importance of follow-through: implementation and reassessment.** The assessment process has meaning only if it leads to action. Most effective assessments give explicit recommendations about implementation: how, when, and by whom things should be done. Effective assessments also recognize that community analysis should not be a one-time phenomenon but a sustained diagnostic process. They therefore prescribe

how and when the community should monitor its progress and update information to stay abreast of local conditions.

Geography is important. In most cases, the most effective starting point for community assessment is around the concerns of a village, borough, city, township, county, or unincorporated region. Leaders and community residents must have a strong sense of ownership in the assessment to be willing to invest their time and energy. This is best accomplished at the local level. Strong regional efforts will flow out of a series of community assessments as citizens recognize the importance of joining with others to achieve their goals. Regional analysis and development efforts are critical but seldom successful without a sound base of local effort. Even with the highest motivation, proper assessment is nearly impossible for small communities to do alone.

The Need for State Involvement

Local government officials, community organizations, and private business people in rural areas have much more difficulty gaining access to community assistance than their counterparts in cities. The reasons are often clear:

*Rural areas
tend to possess
a narrower base
of knowledge*

First, because of their smaller population and less diverse industrial base, rural areas tend to possess a narrower base of knowledge. Rural bankers, for example, usually have lending experience with only a few kinds of businesses. If a local entrepreneur wishes to start an unfamiliar business or use a new technology, the banker is less able to assess the probability of success. Local officials bring much less diverse knowledge of the law, finance, technology, administration, sociology, and other important matters to decision-making.

Second, access to knowledge is further reduced by sheer distance: rural areas are generally far from centers of specialized information and technical assistance. In remote regions, leaders of government, nonprofit organi-

zations, and private business cannot easily arrange frequent meetings with those who possess the information they want. Likewise, businesses in larger cities and state and federal governments do not regularly travel great distances to small rural towns. They are more likely to respond to those communities with larger political or economic bases.

Third, rural areas simply have less financial capacity. In urban areas, specialists are hired in public finance, economic development, business development, human resources, and other fields. But rural communities usually lack the local taxing capability to hire permanent community development staff. It is rare when even one person is employed to do community development work. The responsibility falls fully on local volunteers.

If rural areas are to share America's prosperity equally with their urban neighbors, these disadvantages must be overcome.

Chapter 2. The Status of Community Assessment

There are great variations across the United States in resource conditions, development opportunities, state and local programs, and private commitments to rural development. Some communities are led by aggressive local leaders who are skilled in community assessment. They support efforts such as main street improvements, special education programs, business management education, and community development corporations. The most active communities are usually large enough to have a cadre of volunteers with the time to commit to improving local conditions. In addition, most have sufficient resources to hire the technical assistance they need to help them in planning and implementation. Long-term, well-organized community effort pays off.⁴ Unfortunately, most small rural communities are not well-equipped to engage in effective assessment.

Most small rural communities are not well-equipped to engage in effective assessment

County governments likewise vary in their involvement in community assessment. Many larger rural counties hire professional planners who can provide ongoing technical assistance at both the county and community levels. In a few states, most notably Missouri and Wisconsin, county governments have joined with the State and Federal Cooperative Extension Service in hiring county community development agents. It is their responsibility to help local leaders identify community issues, establish goals, acquire necessary resources and take action. Assistance in community assessment and leadership development are central parts of their work. Both mechanisms are highly effective and should be encouraged more widely. However, only a few communities in most states are fortunate enough to have that level of county commitment to community assessment.

Most states in the U.S. have some form of multi-county regional planning structure, usually called regional planning commissions or councils of government. These are staffed by professionals with planning skills. Their general objectives are usually broad enough to include

community assessment, and indeed, some of them have contracted to perform assessments with larger towns and villages. For the most part, however, they have little financial support to do substantial planning with smaller rural communities. They are an important regional planning resource, but without greater financial support, are of limited help to most small communities.

Some universities and colleges provide assistance in community assessment. Their commitment is extremely varied across the United States. Many departments of planning, economics, sociology, and geography will provide some technical assistance, either by contract or as a means of providing practical experience for students. Community colleges and technical schools are frequently willing providers of specific assistance in job training, management education or surveying, but seldom are involved in long-term community assessment. Universities and colleges are almost always a useful source of technical help, especially for the communities in which they are located or those nearby. However, most have no consistent delivery mechanisms, making access difficult.

Nearly all public utilities across the country have made some commitment to the general economic development of cities, towns and villages within their service areas. Community economic expansion, after all, increases the long-term demand for the utilities' product. Historically, the emphasis has been on industrial recruitment, but more recently such efforts have begun to concentrate on business retention and expansion, with only limited attention paid to the broader concern of community assessment. In a few cases, utilities have provided support for community forums aimed at identifying critical local issues. Since energy and communication infrastructures are found everywhere across rural America, public utilities could play a more vital role in community assessment, but only if broader institutional objectives replace those that now prevail.

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Several other actors are involved in some way in rural community assessment. A few national and state nonprofit

organizations have participated in local demonstrations of effective assessment and action. Most have experienced positive results.⁵ A few private corporations with strong interests in rural areas likewise have invested in community assessment. An excellent example is the Rural Initiatives Program of Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc., a seed company. These initiatives, reaching into several farm-dependent communities, have focused on strengthening community development leadership skills. A number of consulting firms are also available to perform assessment with local leaders. Some, such as the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, in Lincoln, Nebraska, emphasize community assessment as their principal priority. Others are part of larger planning or engineering firms in which assessment is ancillary to business. Because of their cost, however, many consulting programs are unavailable to small towns. Private foundations such as Kellogg, Ford, Bush and Northwest Area have provided some funding to support rural leadership development and community assessment.

Some rural communities have received assistance directly from state government agencies. In a large percentage of these cases, local leaders have received only short-term technical assistance. Most rural cities, villages and towns have received no help at all.

Rationale for State Involvement

Community assessment has clear value for localities. Few rural towns or counties have a sufficient combination of institutional capacity, financial resources, leadership depth, and direct access to specialized knowledge to be able to undertake a rigorous, independent assessment. Given the pressing needs faced by most resource-lean rural areas, few are likely to undertake an assessment without some incentive, no matter its inherent value.

Yet it should be clear that states also benefit when localities are able to clarify their most urgent needs, catalogue their resources, and analyze how they can improve their standing. Not only may self-scrutiny lead to

States also benefit when localities are able to clarify their most urgent needs

more intelligent use of state programs, but it invariably unleashes local resources. The net result is often much stronger rural economies, higher living standards, and a healthier state fiscal base.

State governments are in the best position to ensure coordinated assistance. They have strong political and financial connections to most of the assistance providers. They are in the best position to identify the regions in greatest need and to spot weaknesses in the delivery of education and technical assistance. Moreover, states have a broad enough fiscal base to provide necessary support.⁶

States can encourage active use of the community assessment process in two general ways: by **stimulating supply**—making the service broadly available—and by **nurturing demand**—creating incentives for communities to use the service. Whichever approach is taken, states should consider the peculiar disadvantages that constrain rural areas.

In addition to ensuring that the programs they support incorporate the core elements of good assessment, states have two additional responsibilities. First, they should ensure that rural areas have access to and are encouraged to work with capable supporting institutions—partners or consultants who have a proven capacity to develop and analyze data, knowledge of the dynamics of rural development and the track record of development strategies employed elsewhere, and a demonstrated commitment to working with rural communities.

States should employ incentives to ensure that rural communities make the assessment an active planning tool rather than an isolated exercise

Second, states should employ incentives to ensure that rural communities make the assessment an active planning tool rather than an isolated exercise. Providing competitively awarded implementation grants could be excellent motivation to take the assessment process seriously.

States also face another set of options: whether to provide the service directly through a line state agency; fund collateral public institutions—state universities, regional planning and development organizations, community colleges—to provide the service; or make funds

directly available to communities to contract with the vendors of their choice. Each approach has mixed advantages. States can exert greater control over the program by operating it directly. But line government agencies may not have the institutional freedom to encourage communities to be broadly innovative in the strategies they choose. The temptation to sell the politically expedient "program of the day" may inhibit fresh strategic choices.

In states with a pervasive network of public university campuses or planning and development agencies, there is a good chance that the supporting institution will have a firm working knowledge of the economic character of its own section of the state. Yet care must be taken to ensure that supporting institutions are able to render practical assistance that is well-grounded in state-of-the-art development practices.

Direct grants to communities reward local initiative, but by relying on self-selection they may fail to reach areas most in need. This strategy is also heavily dependent on the quality of assistance the locality buys with its money. As with any strategy, the best sources of technical assistance will exhibit an understanding of the dynamics of rural development, skill at managing community-wide processes, and knowledge of innovations in the rural development field.

Chapter 3. The Essential Ingredients of a State Community Assessment Program

States that commit to assist in rural community assessment should be aware of eight essential ingredients.

1. Community assessment is a long-term, ongoing process. Communities' options are in constant flux. State and federal programs change, world economic conditions shift, local resources do not remain the same, and community goals are modified. Thus, assessment must be regularly repeated in order to be most effective. Institutions created to aid in community assessment must possess the capacity for sustained commitment.

2. If community assessment is to be effective, local development organizations must provide leadership in identifying goals and analyzing development options. Ideally, these organizations will be broadly representative of the interests and people within the communities. State assessment programs must be able to tap into these local organizations. Sometimes, state assistance will be necessary to help create and develop them, then follow up by providing education and technical assistance on detailed process skills such as developing citizen participation, running effective meetings, and fundraising.

3. Supportive institutions must be present to provide access to necessary data. These data include a large body of secondary information gathered by federal and state agencies. Examples include employment, income, and population characteristics; educational levels; health, trade, and transportation patterns; and taxes. Although readily available to the public, these data sets are rarely presented in usable form to local decision-makers. Equally important is the acquisition of primary data. Community leaders need to be able to gather information on the concerns and problems of the people in their locality. This is rarely provided in adequate form by

regular data collectors such as the Bureau of the Census. Local leaders also need more detailed information on employment, wage scales and other critical factors than that collected by existing secondary sources.

4. Information on a specific community must be placed in context. Local leaders need to know how the data should be interpreted in light of state, national, and world trends and how to use appropriate analytical tools. For example, if a local industry is experiencing a sharp drop in employment, is it because of an industry-wide decline, a failure in local management, or some other factor? If local consumers would like to see a specific type of retail store on main street—furniture, for example—is the potential volume of business sufficient to support it? An analytical framework is essential to interpret the data properly. There must be a process for studying and evaluating the information.

5. Insight into the range of alternative strategies is crucial. All too often, community leaders merely choose a familiar course of action. They may have observed it in a neighboring town, heard of it at a conference, or read about it in a newspaper. They spend little time unearthing and studying all alternatives. Leaders argue that the people in the community are anxious for a solution to their problems; thus, they must act swiftly. Or, the only familiar alternative is too costly, so they choose to do nothing. Choices made without examining the full spectrum of options are apt to create substantial dissatisfaction. An effective community assessment program must provide local access to a great deal of specialized knowledge, including an array of action alternatives.

6. Because community assessment must be a sustained diagnostic process, local leaders, most of whom will be volunteers, will carry the heavy burden of both the assessment process and the resulting program for action. It is critical, therefore, that any state program rely on relatively simple techniques and that the results of analysis are easily understood. State programs should be locally driven; there should be clear recognition that external technical assistance, specialized knowledge, and

catalytic support will be necessary from time to time. This does not discount the possibility that communities may wish to engage external partners, either public or private, to work through the formal assessment process. An outside perspective will often be quite valuable, perhaps helping to ensure that old paradigms do not completely control community thought processes and decisions.

7. Not all rural communities are aware of the importance of their own decisions. While the wisdom of performing community assessment may seem self-evident, some rural communities, long accustomed to feelings of impotence, will have to be convinced that their own work will make a difference. If states are to encourage commitment to the process, some incentives may be necessary. Financial inducements may include support of the assessment itself or partial funding of the resulting action plans. It is probably less productive to require some form of assessment as a prerequisite to state assistance.

8. Program accessibility is a problem in many rural settings. Any state community assessment effort must consider this matter seriously. Keeping program costs to a minimum may be important, but there will be little value in a program that is rarely accessible to most rural communities. Information and technical support must be delivered in or close to the community, frequently, and when needed. Continuity in contacts among small town leaders and the groups and individuals who can link communities and sources of knowledge is very important.

Alternative Program Models

In choosing appropriate assessment programs, states have several alternatives. The full range of programs can be represented by four models identified generally by their level of intensity: 1) the Continuous Local Assistance Model; 2) the Regional Resource Model; 3) the Parachute Model; and 4) the Leadership Training Model. Central to all is the need for the state to ensure that localities recognize the value of community assessment and that credible, informed, and trustworthy assistance providers are in place.

Continuous access to a community development professional maximizes the probability that community assessment will be viewed as an ongoing process

The Continuous Local Assistance Model involves continuous access to a community development professional who helps local leaders identify and organize options through the assessment process. The professional serves as a link to external data and programs, and helps catalyze action. This approach maximizes the probability that community assessment will be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a one-time or occasional event.

The Wisconsin Cooperative Extension program is an example of the continuous local approach. Central to this program is the County Community Natural Resource and Economic Development Agent who works with several communities in each county on economic development, natural resources, and other aspects of community development. The Agents are hired jointly by county governments and the University of Wisconsin. Their primary roles involve educating and providing technical assistance to local government officials, business and economic development organizations, environmentalists, bankers, and other concerned individuals. They also serve as community development catalysts at the local level. The Agents readily recruit external help. They are quick to involve other state agencies and organizations when needed, and they are supported by university-based specialists in economic development, water quality, health care, public finance and other areas of study.

If the state covers the full cost of a continuous assistance program, it can expect to spend between \$100,000 and \$120,000 per county per year. A state with 50 rural counties could fund a strong program for five to six million dollars per year. This would support one professional in each county, local support staff, and expenses, in addition to some assistance from state specialists and statewide administrative costs. One local staff person should be able to maintain a close ongoing relationship with as many as 10 to 12 communities. In less densely populated rural areas, the local professional should be able to cover several counties.

In Wisconsin, the state shares the cost of the program with county governments. Counties pay approximately

one-half the total cost of maintaining the Agents' operations, and about one-third of the total cost of the statewide program. Total program costs amount to less than \$2.00 per year per person in Wisconsin.

The local professional may be placed with a statewide agency other than Cooperative Extension. If so, it is critical that the agency be seen as playing an educational, rather than a controlling or political role. Otherwise, the emphasis on local decision-making and responsibility may be lost. Direct access to statewide specialists is also essential. At its best, the Continuous Local Assistance Model provides ready community access to the knowledge that will maximize the opportunity for rural regions to be competitive with urban areas.

The pros and cons of the Continuous Local Assistance Model

Pros: Continuous assistance is provided locally.

Higher quality community assessment.

Easy access to assistance.

Increased understanding of local conditions.

Catalytic help provided on an ongoing basis.

Opportunities for local cost-sharing.

Emphasis on continuing education.

Cons: More costly per community.

More costly for the state if many communities are served.

Political fallout from deciding who gets local professional assistance first.

The Regional Resource Model establishes regional institutions to provide limited response to local communities. Such an approach provides no ongoing help and little catalytic support. Community assessment is more apt to be viewed as a process to be carried out every few years, and not as the continuous basis for decision-making.

Under this model, the primary source of local assistance is a professional community development staff housed in a regional center. Its functions are to build strong partnerships with other regional and state resources, and, within the limits of its capabilities, to provide education and technical assistance directly to communities. This model can provide a great deal of help to a few localities or a little to all.

In Iowa, Missouri, and a few other states, the Cooperative Extension Service employs Community Development Specialists who work in specific geographic areas. They in turn seek help from State Extension Specialists and other public and private agencies. In most states, regional planning commissions or councils of government are potential administrators of a regional access program. Regional professionals may also be located in community colleges or in the state development department.

If the state covers the full cost of a regional program, it can expect to spend a minimum of \$100,000 per regional office annually. This would support one regional community development professional, plus staff and expenses, with a minimum of statewide administrative involvement. A region including many more than fifty communities would be unserviceable through this approach. A statewide program covering five hundred communities with ten regional offices would cost at least one million dollars per year. States with a thousand or more rural communities could expect a cost of at least twice as much.

Once again, the cost may be shared by entities such as the Cooperation Extension Service, community colleges or vocational schools with regional taxing capacity, or private institutions willing to make a long-term commit-

ment. Cost-sharing could substantially reduce the cost of the program to state government and provide greater access to existing regional resources.

The Regional Resource Model is about one-fourth as expensive as the Continuous Local Assistance Model. It is capable of providing technical assistance at critical times. Communities that avail themselves of this help are apt to show spurts of development during the periods when they are receiving assistance. Volunteer community leaders will have the major responsibility for making things happen, but with limited or sporadic encouragement from development professionals, their commitment is likely to diminish over time.

The Regional Resource Model is about one-fourth as expensive as the Continuous Local Assistance Model

An additional benefit of the Regional Resource Model is that it builds the expertise of regional institutions as

The pros and cons of the Regional Resource Model

Pros: Professional assistance is available at nearby regional office.

Understanding of the regional context of local issues.

Knowledge of regional technical assistance providers.

Less expensive than the local access model.

Coverage of the state provided sooner, with less political fallout.

Builds expertise of regional institutions.

Cons: Less continuous help available locally.

Greater dependence on limited volunteer time.

Will take longer to provide in-depth assistance to all communities.

well as local communities. As planning agencies or community colleges work with more communities, they become increasingly familiar with the issues and trends affecting the areas they serve. As their knowledge and understanding grow, they will gradually expand the region's capacity for indigenous problem-solving.

The Parachute Model is the least continuous approach. It offers little more than a centralized base from which community development specialists can operate in occasional response to requests for help. The technical assistance may be provided by a small corps of state employees or through grants that allow communities to hire private or public consultants. Oregon and South Carolina are examples of states providing direct assistance in planning. Kansas, in contrast, provides competitive funding for communities to hire consulting firms and other agencies. Consultants are invited for a specified period of time to help local leaders with community assessment. The locals are left to act on any plans that result.

In some cases, a single consultant may be invited to work with community leaders. In others, assistance is provided by a number of agencies including power companies, universities, or state development departments. In any case, the emphasis is on completing a community assessment within a specific time period. In most situations, the consultants play a major role in data-gathering and the identification of options.

The costs of this kind of program are difficult to estimate. If the program responds to only a limited number of cases in a single year—perhaps fifteen to twenty communities—the cost per community is likely to be in the \$20,000 to \$30,000 range. If, on the other hand, the program tries to reach a larger number with heavy dependence on private consulting firms, the costs could be much higher.

The results in communities receiving the limited assistance provided by this model may be substantial in the short run, but the long-term consequences will be small and the spillover to other rural communities minimal.

Results of the Parachute Model may be substantial in the short run, but the long-term consequences will be small

The pros and cons of the Parachute Model

Pros: Technical assistance available to some highly motivated communities.

Total cost to state may be smaller

Some assistance available throughout the state.

Greater flexibility in using existing providers.

Cons: Less long-run impact in assisted communities.

Reduced recognition of unique local or regional conditions.

Assistance available to small number of communities.

Nearly total dependence on local volunteers for ongoing activity.

The Leadership Training Model. Several effective programs have recognized that isolated rural areas may not have access to technical assistance and may need enhanced capacity to implement their development strategies. These programs integrate leadership education with the community assessment process, preparing local citizens to assume a substantive role in making the process work. Local officials and volunteers are taught the essential elements of community assessment and either conduct the process themselves or play a strong supporting role with outside sources of technical assistance. At its best, this model builds a permanent capacity to make informed decisions.

The model is most useful if, in addition to receiving training in methods of community diagnosis and goal-setting, citizens are also introduced to a conceptual

Incentive funding and follow-up technical assistance ensure that teams follow through with implementation

framework for understanding how the rural economy functions and how a community must manage its assets in order to prosper. The North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center in collaboration with regional campuses of the University of North Carolina and MDC, Inc., a North Carolina-based research firm, has developed a program that trains teams of leaders from contiguous counties in the poorest regions of the state. After training, these leaders are able to assess the economic prospects of their regions and to develop a vision for the future. The program first presents a simple paradigm for understanding the dynamics of rural development, titled "The Building Blocks of Rural Development," then cultivates an understanding of regional similarities and the need for cooperation, while enabling the county-level teams to address their immediate needs. Incentive funding from the Rural Center and follow-up technical assistance from MDC and university staff ensure that teams follow through with the implementation of their plans.

The Search Communities Program of Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc. is another example of the Leadership Training Model. A nucleus of about 10 to 12 people from each community goes through three weeks of formal training. All aspects of assessment are included in the training: community organization, strategic planning processes, data-gathering (both local and external), community economic analysis, identifying local needs through community forums, survey techniques and data analysis, goal setting and visioning, choosing action strategies, mobilizing resources, and evaluation. Workbooks are provided for participants when they return home. As a follow-up, participants can request community consulting in assessment and strategic planning.

There are a number of other rural leadership training programs across the United States, most notably those sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Few focus on community assessment. Most are oriented toward general leadership training and community organization skills.

The Rocky Mountain Institute, a private, nonprofit organization, also uses the workbook approach at the local level. The workbook is intended as a guide to community assessment which local leaders can use with little external assistance. Workbooks of this kind generally emphasize the knowledge already possessed by community citizens as the basis for planning. Little guidance is given in the acquisition of vital external data, useful economic analysis, or organizational development skills—tools that are usually least available in smaller rural communities. Workbooks can be useful adjuncts to technical assistance, but are of limited effectiveness by themselves.

Costs of the Leadership Training Model are difficult to estimate. If the simplest workbook approach is chosen, the costs will be little more than the production of a few copies per community. If additional technical assistance or substantial formal leadership training is made available, then the short-term costs could match or exceed those of the Regional Resource Model. The ultimate results should reflect the difference in investment.

The pros and cons of the Leadership Training Model

- Pros:**
- Builds local leadership and decision-making capacity.
 - Citizen leadership increases local ownership of outcomes.
 - Leadership strategy works well for regions or localities.
- Cons:**
- High cost per community first time through.
 - Volunteers must provide most ongoing activity.
 - Technical assistance still required.

All four models of state support will provide substantial benefit to rural communities

All four models of state support will provide substantial benefit to rural communities. The costs of all four are very small when spread throughout the state population—in each case, less than \$2.00 per person per year. Only a handful of successes would more than compensate. In most cases a community, county, or regional taxing authority could be expected to participate as a funding partner in the venture.

Funds for education and technical assistance in community assessment should be placed in agencies with the willingness and capacity to deliver effective programs. In most cases, several agencies will be involved. Care must be taken not to scatter limited state resources too widely. "Everyone's job becomes no one's."

Chapter 4. Establishing a State Community Assessment Program

The need for state involvement in coordinating rural community assessment is pervasive across the United States, but the specific roles state government can play are not necessarily evident in all cases. To achieve the goal of excellent assessment, one must chart a careful course through unique state and community situations, development opportunities, and resource conditions.

- **Need Analysis.** The first step in establishing a state community assessment initiative is to begin building a base of political support by documenting the need for state involvement. An analysis of state rural-urban trends will usually be effective. Data on employment, unemployment, housing stock, income, wealth, population, transportation infrastructure, water quality, health, education and crime should be collected on a county basis. The analysis should pay attention to shifts in rural and urban conditions, emphasizing comparisons over time, along with the identification of weakening regions. In counties evidencing significant internal disparity—for example, pockets of severe poverty in relatively wealthy counties—it may be useful to gather data on a community level.

Analysis of these data will show the extent of the need for more effective community assessment. Statistics on severe problems in some regions of the state will garner the attention and support of citizens, interest groups, and politicians. Comparisons with other states may also be useful in generating statewide support. Most of the necessary data are readily available from State Data Centers that exist in all states. Helpful analysis can be provided at low cost by university researchers at agricultural experiment stations or other demographic centers or policy institutes.

Since most states are already engaged in some aspects of community assessment, it will be necessary to inven-

Most states are already engaged in some aspects of community assessment

When building the coalition, one must remember the importance of non-farm business, retirees and tourism

tory ongoing efforts and interests. A new state task force or legislative commission may be the best way to study the current level of response. Indeed, some states already have committees of this kind. These can serve as the nucleus of a broader coalition necessary to carry the burden of securing political support for any statewide initiative. Possible coalition members include community development organizations, representatives of small business and tourism organizations, bankers, Chambers of Commerce, local government officials, state legislators, educators, health care providers, academic leaders and staff from technical colleges, Cooperative Extension agents, private consultants, industrial developers, farm organizations, retiree groups, state agencies, consumer groups, churches and other interested individuals. When building the coalition, one must remember the importance of non-farm business, retirees and tourism in the economic future of rural America.

With full knowledge of the extent and location of need for community assessment, and the degree of current response, the task force can design an appropriate state response. The support of the broader coalition will be necessary to gain public commitment to any resulting initiative. This will require coalition leadership with skills in consensus building and conflict resolution.

- **Targeting the Program.** The next step is to outline program objectives—undoubtedly the responsibility of the core task force. Detailed program definition is very difficult to accomplish with a large, disparate group. The broader coalition can serve as a mechanism for validating, legitimating, and securing support for the ultimate objectives. Several targeting issues must be resolved in developing a program: What kinds of communities will be served? How will the program be structured? Who will control it? How will it be financed and evaluated?

- **Communities to be Served.** The analysis of data on the general well-being of specific rural regions should indicate the number of communities in need. If economic and other problems are so widespread that they provide

evidence of a severe longstanding condition, it may be necessary to mount a sizeable program with as much continuous local assistance as possible. On the other hand, if only a few rural regions are suffering, it may be an indication of unique local problems or cyclical concerns that can be addressed with either continuous local assistance in a few communities or the less intensive parachute approach on a statewide basis. Program architects will have to decide.

If problems are widespread and state finances extremely limited, state leaders in assessment will have to establish priorities among communities to be assisted. They will need to consider factors such as income, unemployment, shifts in employment, educational levels, local fiscal effort and the commitment of local leadership. Arguments can be made for assisting the worst cases first, or those with the best prospects, or even the most aggressive politically. In any case, primary consideration should be given to those that have shown a willingness to build a strong local leadership group. Without this, all state efforts to help will fail. Establishing priorities will require careful political deliberation by the broader coalition before the program proposal goes into the legislative arena. No matter which communities make the priority list, there is apt to be political fallout.

Primary consideration should be given to those that have shown a willingness to build a strong local leadership group

- **Program Delivery.** The structure and control of each state initiative must be tailor-made. There is great variation in sources, commitment and quality of assistance presently offered by both public and private providers. In states with a diversity of program offerings—by foundations, state agencies, Cooperative Extension, community colleges, utilities and other private firms—the major functions of state government may be deliberately limited. Rather than establishing a new administrative and program delivery structure, the state may instead work to ensure the quality of existing assistance, to encourage coordination and communication, and to direct assistance to the poorest communities. One option is for the state to make grants so that needy communities can hire appropriate assistance providers.

The opposite extreme may be those states in which there is little or no effort in community assessment. In these cases, a new organizational structure may be needed. The responsibility and financial support for executing the program might be placed in a state agency or assigned to existing public institutions such as community colleges or Cooperative Extension. Several important criteria should guide the choice of the program provider. Continuity in delivery, acceptability to community leaders, the degree of local confidence in the provider, access to the necessary knowledge, and historic evidence of the provider's capacity to deliver strong programs at the local level should guide the choice. The last may be the most important factor. If an institution has a history of interest, its program delivery is likely to be more effective.

The most effective new state effort may be to provide the financial support to complete or strengthen the existing network

Between the states with many assistance providers and those with none, there are many other cases. In states where a substantial network of public providers exists, the most effective new state effort may be to provide the financial support to complete or strengthen the existing network. In other cases two or three institutions may have initiated efforts, but much more needs to be done. Funding and regional responsibility might be distributed or shared in some fashion.

Faced with the choice of creating new units of state government or working through existing ones, leaders should consider which will ensure a more supportive coalition and create the fewest turf problems and opposition. It may be wisest to use existing organizations, modifying or extending their objectives to meet state community assessment objectives. A public-private partnership may also maximize continuing effort. Whether it is possible to use existing public or private organizations depends largely on the degree of their commitment, the extent of their flexibility and their willingness to cooperate in meeting state objectives.

• **Financing the Program.** Two important financial questions must be considered: What will the program cost and how will it be paid for? From the standpoint of state government, these are not separable questions. In most

cases, state funding can be leveraged by monies from local and federal government sources and with private funding from foundations, business associations, banks, and local development organizations. For example, community assessment efforts administered by Cooperative Extension generally receive only one-third of their funding from the state, with the remainder coming from federal and county governments. Some local contribution may go a long way to ensure greater community commitment. The more funding that can be acquired through leveraging, the larger the state program or the lower the state cost.

After studying the problem and reviewing the existing commitment of agencies and organizations, the committee formulating the program should have a reasonably clear idea of the need for state involvement. The ultimate model chosen to provide education and technical assistance will be the result of a political decision combining the analysis of need, the fiscal condition of the state, and the level of anticipated public support. The ultimate cost may range from a few hundred thousand dollars for an effort focused on state coordination, public awareness and occasional assistance, to several million dollars for continuous local assistance.

• **Program Evaluation.** A state-supported community assessment program should provide for some form of evaluation. Reports on effectiveness should be made regularly to an appropriate state legislative or administrative body. Since part of the original justification for the effort hinges on existing secondary data—for example, income, unemployment, and population—these same parameters might be used in measuring community and statewide change through time.

The ultimate measure of success is the extent to which communities articulate and achieve their own development goals

The ultimate measure of success of a state-supported assessment program is the extent to which communities articulate and achieve their own development goals. Because of the diversity of goals and opportunities, not all communities will be striving for more jobs or income. Some may be more interested in managing the growth they already have. Some will wish to limit growth. Still others may be more interested in issues such as improved

health care or better housing. One way to evaluate success is to compare community achievements with goals on a case-by-case basis.

*Communities
and providers
should report
both their
successes and
failures*

It will also be useful to evaluate the process itself. How much citizen participation was involved in identifying community needs and problems? How was the public involved in goal setting? Who decided what would be done? How much external technical assistance was sought and used? Were diverse groups—the elderly, youth, minorities—involved in leadership positions?

Communities that have received state assistance and providers who have been funded should both be expected to report their successes and failures. Simply reporting the number of communities served is of little ultimate value. More formal evaluations of the overall program should be the responsibility of a coordinating state agency or public institution. Evaluation should be a part of the original financing scheme.

Chapter 5. How Community Assessment Works

Some rural communities are working hard to change their conditions. They are demonstrating their ability to assess their positions, to consider all realistic development alternatives, and to implement effective plans of action. In most cases these successes have occurred with external assistance.

Florence County, Wisconsin

Florence County, in the far northeastern corner of Wisconsin, is home to just 4,000 permanent residents. The only county in the state without a single incorporated city or village, it has a long history of low income aggravated by a heavy dependency on mining, timber, and farming.

The area was hard hit by the recession of the early 1980s. Per capita income was 67 percent of the state average. More than 50 percent of the employed residents worked outside the county. Young people fled after high school. More than one in every five houses was rated "inadequate." But now, Florence County bustles with new economic activity.

In 1985 the county board Extension Committee and the County Cooperative Extension Community Natural Resource and Economic Development Agent invited a University of Wisconsin-Extension Community Economic Development Specialist to work with a group of local leaders on a community economic analysis. The analysis examined changes in the local, state, and national economies, reviewed local and external resources, and outlined realistic development prospects. Based on the analysis and with the involvement of the wider community, the county leaders set a development agenda. The County Extension Agent continued working with the community, helping gather information, organizing educational meetings, assisting with analyses, and serving as a catalyst for action.

Using its own resources and a grant from the Economic Development Administration, Florence County developed an industrial park. To date, nearly \$8 million of private investment has created over 100 new jobs, an annual payroll of \$1.5 million, and \$150,000 in annual property taxes. Industries in the park manufacture marine docks, molding patterns, hunting bows, and golf tees.

In 1988 the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension helped the community update its analysis. This action led to new community goals emphasizing housing, downtown improvement, and an increase in tourism marketing. The county received a first-time \$267,000 low-moderate income housing grant to rehabilitate 37 houses, remodel 18 rental units, and help three first-time buyers purchase homes. In 1989 and 1990 several dilapidated buildings on main street in the village of Florence were razed to make room for a new post office. A new mini-mart opened, and several other businesses are fixing up store fronts. Downtown Florence has a new face. Two new community festivals now add to community spirit while a \$1.4 million resource and visitor center has been constructed on the edge of downtown. The County now has a full-time economic development coordinator.

*Downtown
Florence has a
new face*

Old negative attitudes are disappearing in Florence County. More people are attending county and town board meetings. Active committees are working on tourism marketing, housing for the elderly, and more small business and industry. Local leaders are quick to recognize the important technical assistance and financial support they have received from outside the community.⁷

Hamilton, Missouri

Hamilton, Missouri, a small rural community of about 1,600 people, 65 miles north of Kansas City, was fading away. A combination of depressed agriculture, a changing production economy, a shift of retail business to larger centers, and the gradual migration of young people to other areas had eroded both local employment and retail

sales. Many buildings downtown were empty, and those still occupied were showing signs of age and neglect. The railroad that had been part of the first line across Missouri announced that it was closing down.

In 1983 Hamilton appeared to have lost its spark. The changes that had impacted the town had crept up on Hamilton's residents, and they felt that there just was not much they could do. They had tried sporadic revitalization efforts prior to 1983. An industrial development corporation had existed for several years, but its sole success had been attracting a bowling alley to improve recreation services.

The closing of the railroad seemed to be the catalyst that prompted action. Local leaders requested help from a Missouri Cooperation Extension Service Community Development Specialist. He helped the community do an economic base study, which revealed some surprises. Contrary to local belief, income from farming was a small and declining percentage of total income; bad years in agriculture only marginally affected the local economy. Transfer payments to senior citizens proved to be the largest source of local income. Local retailers changed their merchandise lines and marketing strategies, and business picked up.

The closing of the railroad seemed to be the catalyst

The economic study group along with the local Junior Chamber of Commerce and Cooperative Extension worked together to survey community attitudes and needs. Residents expressed a strong desire for young adult recreation and entertainment, as well as more employment opportunities. During 1984 and 1985, several public meetings were held with people from the university, state agencies, and national nonprofit organizations. Many attended other regional and state conferences. By mid 1988, over 20 task forces were in action.

The results have been positive. Eight new businesses filled vacant downtown stores. A private nursing home expanded, opening 40 new jobs. J.C. Penny's birthplace was acquired and moved to a downtown park; Hamilton made J. C. Penny Days an annual event. Railroad land was purchased for a park and tourist center. Financial

assistance created a new light industry and six new jobs. Numerous educational events have been organized for farmers and youth, and a demonstration grant created an emergency assistance center to aid rural families. A new independent organization now promotes the participation of people who were not involved in local government.

The Hamilton experience is a good example of a community that studied itself, drew on outside information and technical assistance, defined gaps between what it was and what it hoped to become, and took action. Today it is a proud community on the way back to economic and social viability.⁸

Whitman County, Washington

Whitman County sits in the wheat producing Palouse Region of eastern Washington. While much of Washington state boomed during the 1980s, Whitman County's population fell by nearly 3 percent between 1980 and 1988. Over one-third of the county's population lives in unincorporated areas and in the fourteen municipalities that have fewer than 1,000 people. In 1988, four communities—Endicott (pop. 290), LaCrosse (pop. 373), St. John (pop. 550), and Takoa (pop. 854)—took part in an effort called the Palouse Rural Development Project. All are within 50 miles of the city of Pullman, home of Washington State University.

The Whitman Regional Planning and Resource Council sponsored the project. Funding came from cash and in-kind contributions from local businesses and citizens, and a grant from the Washington State Department of Community Development. Technical expertise and education were provided by the Inland Power and Light Company, Community College of Spokane, Eastern Washington University, and the Washington State University Cooperative Extension.

The project featured a series of eight regional workshops that trained local leaders in the community develop-

ment planning process. Follow-up assistance was provided as the communities organized and carried out the process. The workshops helped participants develop skills in team-building, meeting management, leadership and mission. They learned how to assess trends affecting their futures, and how to set goals and build and evaluate action plans. Early in the workshop series, participants were encouraged to form local community development teams. All four communities used their teams to guide and integrate their activities.

As a result of their participation in the Palouse Rural Development Project, all four communities now have economic development plans and have carried out many related projects. Team members' abilities to plan and execute development grew visibly during the course of the project. Most teams initially depended on one or two leaders, but eventually developed "shared" leadership involving more team members.

All four communities now have economic development plans

Each team drafted a plan addressing its strategies for development. Most sought to integrate their efforts more fully with local government and the private sector. Some of the main projects: holding fund raisers, publishing newsletters, sponsoring town clean-up days and downtown beautification, and developing handyman-repair services.

Participants frequently commented on the value of the contact with peers from other communities, an important outcome of the workshops. As a result, some communities initiated collaborative ventures.⁹

Atalla County, Mississippi

Atalla County is a community of about 20,000 people in central Mississippi. Its largest city, Kosciusko (pop. 7,000), is located about 60 miles north of Jackson. Atalla County suffered a severe economic decline in the late 1970s and early 1980s due to the closure of several local firms.

Since then, the community has regained most of the jobs it lost, but many of the new jobs are low-paying. As a result, real wages and per capita income remain below 1977 levels. The community seems caught in the bind of low wages and low skills. Many of the county's college-educated youth have been forced to move elsewhere to find jobs. Some are concerned that skill levels of the community's work force are below those needed to support higher-paying jobs.

In 1989 and 1990, community representatives from Atalla participated in a program designed by the Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED) and supported by The Aspen Institute, The Ford Foundation, and the State of Mississippi. The goal of the effort was to structure and test a state program of services to local communities.

This was a five-step process. First came an initial visit by CFED staff to introduce the program and develop a steering committee. The second step, data-gathering, included a CFED interview of 50 to 60 leaders who broadly represented the community. Next came a day-and-a-half retreat in which community leaders identified their goals, visions, and key issues. The retreats were a mixture of education, analysis, team-building, and visioning. Fourth, task forces were set up to identify realistic action steps. Finally, the retreat focused on turning the task force reports into a final action plan and organizing for implementation.

A day-and-a-half retreat . . . was a mixture of education, analysis, team-building, and visioning

The task forces concentrated on human needs (with an emphasis on high school graduation rates), entrepreneurship, and cooperation. Specific initiatives included the following:

- A small business network to assist existing firms and potential entrepreneurs.
- A new Human Needs Division of the Chamber of Commerce to address skills and other needs that must be met to prepare an adequate work force.
- Assistance in implementing physical and health education programs in schools to decrease the incidences of teen pregnancy and substance abuse.

- A bank of community volunteers, emphasizing a tutorial and mentor program for high school students.
- Increased training for local workers.
- A new business retention effort and a targeted tourism strategy.

Time will measure Atalla's ultimate success.¹⁰

Chapter 6. How States Support Community Assessment

State support for community assessment can be channeled through many different institutions. Wisconsin supports a large number of county extension agents who work on community and economic development. South Carolina draws on state agencies, universities and private businesses. Oregon recently created a non-profit organization to link with sources of assistance.

The Wisconsin Extension Service

Wisconsin has made a significant investment in rural development through the University of Wisconsin-Extension. Indeed, Wisconsin's investment in rural development education is much larger than that of any other state.

County extension agents, identified as CNRED agents, educate local leaders and citizens on issues pertinent to community, natural resource and economic development. CNRED agents hold positions parallel to those of agricultural agents, home economists and 4-H agents found in most other states. Through individual consultation, workshops, seminars, public meetings and mass communications, they provide public education in numerous areas of concern to local citizens—water quality, economic growth, health care, public infrastructure, land use, and other issues. Community assessment lies at the heart of their work. Using the techniques of assessment, CNRED agents help local leaders identify problems and plan new programs. The agents are at work in 85 percent of Wisconsin's counties, ranging from the highly urbanized, such as Milwaukee in the south, to the very rural, such as Florence in the north.

The program dates back to the early 1960s

The program dates back to the early 1960s when local leaders began asking the University of Wisconsin Coop-

erative Extension Service for assistance in development issues much broader than agriculture. Specifically, they requested county agents to work with them on economic development, tourism, forestry, land use planning, and water quality. The first CNRED agents were placed in the economically depressed north. Similar requests from other parts of the state soon followed. Two to three new positions have been added each year since the mid-1960s. Counties are expected to contribute approximately 40 percent of the agents' salaries and to fully support all local offices and expenses. The state and the U.S. Department of Agriculture provide the rest.

Incoming agents must have educational backgrounds in community development or natural resource policy, and business or economic development

The first CNRED agents were converted agricultural agents. Today, incoming agents must have educational backgrounds in community development or natural resource policy, and business or economic development. All have masters degrees and are joint employees of county government and the University of Wisconsin (U.W.).

The agents receive technical and educational support from Extension Specialists located on several University of Wisconsin campuses. Experts are available to assist with community assessment, solid waste management, recreation and tourism, business management, and other areas of local concern. The campus specialists provide in-service training to extension agents, serve as conduits for new knowledge generated by campus researchers, and consult with state and national policymakers on issues that transcend local interests.

While CNRED agents provide the primary education and technical assistance in community assessment and strategic planning, a variety of state and federal actors are also hard at work on Wisconsin's rural development. The Wisconsin Small Business Development Centers, a joint effort of the Small Business Administration, U.W.-Extension, and the business schools of several U.W. campuses, assess existing and prospective businesses throughout the state. CNRED agents aid this effort by providing some business counseling and by making a large number of referrals to the Centers. The Wisconsin Department of Development, Forward Wisconsin, and

the state Economic Development Association (an organization of local developers) are aggressively involved in business recruitment and other economic activities throughout the state. Again, CNRED agents provide educational and organizational assistance to local development organizations but are not business recruiters per se. The Wisconsin Department of Development, in addition to its recruitment efforts, administers block grant programs, a main street initiative, tourist promotion, and other community development funds. CNRED agents assist by making local leaders aware of these initiatives. When specific problems arise, CNRED agents also inform local leaders of the resources available from federal agencies such as HUD, FmHA, and the EDA. The agents also cooperate with power and telecommunications firms involved in economic development.

Through these efforts, the University of Wisconsin-Extension provides assistance that is comprehensible, continuous, accessible, appropriate to community concerns and acceptable to local leaders, and affordable. One result is that strong local and state support for the program persists.

South Carolina's Local Economic Action Planning Program

South Carolina's 34 non-metropolitan counties reflect the economic diversity of the rural South. Some have strong manufacturing or tourism-based economies. Others have lagged their neighbors in keeping pace with economic change, despite the state's impressive strides in overall development in the past two decades. Closing the prosperity gap between well-off urban and rural counties and their less fortunate counterparts has become a focus for the South Carolina Development Board, the state agency charged with directing South Carolina's economic and industrial development strategies.

A key tool in the Development Board's rural revival strategy is LEAP, the Local Economic Action Planning program, a comprehensive, state-coordinated effort that

***LEAP draws
on line state
agencies, private
business, and
higher education***

provides cost-effective community assessment services to counties at their request. LEAP is a lesson in the power of leverage. Rather than having the state provide community assessment service directly, LEAP draws on the expertise and resources of line state agencies, private business, and the state's key institutions of higher education to help communities address their needs.

To participate, an interested county first contacts the Development Board's Rural Office, which then helps organize a community-based steering committee to coordinate the LEAP process locally. The county is then assigned to staff from one of LEAP's Primary Partners: staff from Carolina Power and Light, Southern Bell, South Carolina Gas and Electric, or the Palmetto Economic Development Corporation, who help task forces organized by the steering committee perform Step One—the Situation Assessment. Here, local citizens are assisted in assembling information and interpreting data and trends on major factors that influence the county's development.

A key feature of the Situation Assessment is a comparative analysis of the county with neighboring counties, the state, and the nation for each critical input that is analyzed. The thoroughness of this comparative analysis is a strong point in the LEAP process, often enabling leaders to gain their first-ever comprehensive look at the competitive standing of their county. In addition, unlike many traditional consultant-client relationships where the outside agent does all the work, LEAP builds local capacity and knowledge by having the external organizations work as partners with community leaders during the situation analysis phase.

Four steps follow the Situation Assessment: Priority Issue Selection and Analysis, Goal Development, Action Planning (including a process to delegate group and institutional responsibility for implementation), and the Implementation stage. During the Assessment and Priority Issue Selection phases, the county can receive additional support from a Resource Team composed of staff drawn from such diverse institutions as Clemson University (the

state's land-grant university), state Departments of Agriculture, Health and Environmental Control, and state Commissions on the Arts, Forestry, and Aeronautics, among others. Their substantial institutional network gives rural counties streamlined access to the state resources that can help them most, and greatly extends the capacity of the Development Board's small rural staff.

Oregon's Rural Development Initiatives, Inc.

Long dependent on timber, range and water resources for their prosperity, Oregon's rural communities now confront a tenuous future. To prosper, Oregon's rural communities must reinvent their economies—but how, and along what lines?

The state of Oregon has created an independent institution to probe for answers. Created in 1991 by the state legislature, Rural Development Initiatives, Inc. (RDII) is a private, nonprofit intermediary organization focused on helping Oregon's rural communities generate realistic options for their economic future by building their capacity to plan and act strategically.

A commitment to community assessment is the centerpiece of RDII's program strategy. Working with and through partner organizations—community colleges, utilities, certified development corporations and others—RDII builds on the Oregon Economic Development Department's current community assessment program, focusing on more than 100 rural communities that the state deems most vulnerable to economic change. Citizens in these communities are coached in identifying their economic assets and aspirations and then guided through a process to produce a strategic economic plan. RDII acts as an information clearinghouse throughout the assessment process, referring participating communities to public and private sources of technical assistance. To insure that the communities get maximum benefit from existing state development programs, the Oregon Economic Development Department will establish a permanent liaison position to work with RDII.

RDII acts as an information clearinghouse, referring participating communities to public and private sources of technical assistance

Leadership education will buttress the assessment process and further build community capacity. Each year, RDII will train 25–30 citizens from the communities where it works in a comprehensive program to build their knowledge of rural development concepts and strategies and their planning and implementation skills. RDII plans to devote \$250,000 annually to the leadership program. This commitment to training visionary leaders reflects the core beliefs that drive the whole RDII program:

- People, not money, create solutions
- Citizens should develop and lead community agencies
- Creativity and vision drive change

RDII has a small core staff and a base budget of approximately \$1.4 million for the 1991–1993 biennium. Nearly 50 percent of the funding will be provided by the state with the balance coming from the private sector and foundations.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Without more competent assessment of community resources and opportunities and more effective local planning and action, rural America seems destined to lag behind. The resulting costs to national productivity and competitiveness, to say nothing of the costs of social welfare programs and lost individual opportunity, are incalculable.

State governments can play a major role in solving this problem. They can educate the public in the importance of thoughtful community assessment. They can bring order to the provision of community assessment by coordinating disparate public and private efforts. They can directly fund community assessment through existing or new public agencies, and they can make grants that allow local leaders to hire qualified consultants.

State governments can educate the public . . . by coordinating, directly funding, and making grants

Those states that commit to community assessment will see direct benefits in economic and other gains. Better local development planning would provide a much clearer understanding of the real opportunities in rural regions. The relevance of the wide spectrum of existing rural development programs could be more properly assessed. With effective state assistance, rural community leaders will be more successful in achieving their development goals and less frustrated by the failures of poorly informed decision-making.

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Endnotes

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The State Policy Program (SPP) of The Aspen Institute, created in 1990, seeks to build knowledge about how states can address economic problems, especially in rural areas and among the rural poor, and to contribute ideas to the policymaking process in states. The program provides grants to nonprofit organizations and universities, works closely with grantees, convenes meetings of policymakers and experts, and conducts a limited amount of research on state development and environmental policy. SPP is funded by grants from The Ford Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

SPP staff work closely with the Rural Economic Policy Program of The Aspen Institute, which encourages greater attention to rural policy issues through research grants, seminars, and public education. The Aspen Institute is an international nonprofit organization whose broad purpose is to seek consideration of human values in areas of leadership development and public policy.

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