WHO REPRESENTS RURAL AMERICA?

An Analysis of Rural Development Needs, Policy, and Institutions

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November 1, 1992

PREFACE

During the summer of 1991, the staff of the Rural Economic Policy Program (REPP) of the Aspen Institute conducted an analysis of its own effectiveness—both in strengthening the quality and relevance of the research which policymakers use to develop rural policy and programs, and in helping to fashion a constituency for rural development.[1] The staff also analyzed the evolving political environment and the manner in which federal policy affecting rural areas has been made in recent years.

Staff concluded that while they had quite effectively laid a strong base of research and strengthened the capacity of many academics and community researchers to formulate research questions and conduct policy-driven research, they still needed to work on assisting in the creation of a strong rural constituency or to consistently inform the federal policy debate on rural topics. In order to accomplish this work more successfully, with the long term benefit of improving incomes and quality of life for lower income rural residents, the REPP staff hypothesized that the organization's structure and organization should be changed somewhat, while still retaining much of its expertise, network and strategy.

REPP's 1992 grant request to The Ford Foundation proposed to inform this process of institutional change and adjustment by surveying a range of actors in the rural development field concerning their sense of the need for a "new" rural development organization, its niche, its constituency, and its goals and strategies, along with the pitfalls of earlier attempts to maintain a national presence on rural issues. This report summarizes that survey of over thirty experts, which was conducted by Joshua Stein and Maureen Kennedy during the summer of 1992. Those interviewed included directors of grassroots rural organizations, policy

[1] Susan Sechler et al., What We Have Learned, Rural Economic Policy Program, October 1991.

institutes, rural advocates, state and federal government officials, congressional aides, academics, and general policy experts. (See Appendix III for a complete list.)

Besides the interviews, the document is also informed by the conclusions of a literature search (see bibliography) and some hard thinking. The conclusions will help the REPP staff work through the many choices and decisions before them as they reconsider their goals, strategies and structure and as they integrate the REPP with its fraternal organization, the State Policy Program (SPP).

I. INTRODUCTION

What is Rural America? Imagine a map of the United States and color in the non-metro regions. The resulting collage would be vast, sparsely populated, and very diverse. Washington, Indiana; Washington, North Carolina; and Washington, Alaska would be three of the thousands of dots located in the picture's shaded area. They differ in a number of ways, including economic base, geography, and ethnic composition. Other than their name, however, they have in common their sparse population, dependence on a single predominant economic activity, and remoteness from urban centers.[1] By our definition, therefore, the three Washingtons all fit within the rubric of rural America.

Jack Cornman, former director of the National Rural Center, provides another working definition of rural America. He writes that it includes "communities ranging up to 50,000 which due to their small size tend to have limited resources for development, limited staffs for planning and implementation, and are often geographically isolated."[2] Some agencies of the federal government simply define "rural" as non-metropolitan. By this definition, the residents of rural America total 67 million people, over one quarter of the national population.[3]

The Rural Economic Policy Program (REPP), a project of The Ford Foundation and the Wye Institute, has been serving the interests of rural America since 1985 with a program of grantmaking and technical assistance to policy researchers. As noted in the preface, the staff took time during the summer of 1992 to consider program changes that would increase the effectiveness of the REPP's work to improve the economic and social future of rural Americans. In

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1 Ken Deavers, "What is Rural?", pp. 185-6.

2 John Cornman, Lessons from Rural America, p. 10.

3 U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Residents of Farms and Rural Areas: 1990," p. 3.

particular, we explored the extent to which other policy organizations in the country addressed portions of the rural policy agenda. The bulk of this project was accomplished through interviews with individuals throughout the country.

For two reasons, we assumed that we would continue to rely on policy approaches to bring about change in rural America. We concluded that much greater scale can be achieved by changing public policy through policy research and dissemination than through provision of direct services, for instance. Second, policy research and analysis are where the strengths of the staff and organization lay. Nevertheless, we were sensitive to interview responses that did not incorporate a policy approach.

The rural diversity described earlier made our task particularly difficult. To improve our understanding of the economic and social dynamics affecting rural America, and the institutional responses in place to address them, we spoke with experts to address three major objectives. Our first objective was to evaluate the state of rural places and people. Many rural communities in the United States are in crisis. Their economic base is crumbling, their local institutions degenerating, and their residents leaving.

The second objective was to better understand the role of the national and state governments as they respond to these conditions in rural America. Nearly all respondents agreed that the policy response has been generally inadequate, and that there is need for an expanded and/or improved government involvement. Consequently, we sought to find out why this was so. We learned that there were three reasons for this inadequacy, including: the urban bias of policymakers and the media, the power of the agricultural lobby, and the absence of effective rural development advocates.

The third goal was to identify a possible structure for a rural policy organization and the characteristics that make public policy organizations

particularly effective. The REPP staff is now considering these insights to shape its evolution so that it can better assist policymakers to promote rural economic and community development.

II. RURAL AMERICA: WITHERING ECONOMIES?

Though drawing general conclusions about rural America is problematic because its communities are so diverse, most rural areas share economic hardship. Everyone we interviewed noted that by many measures rural America in a globalizing economy is likely to decline further relative both to its own past and to the contemporary urban and suburban United States. The dramatic economic restructuring that has traumatized much of the U.S. economy has been particularly painful for the manufacturing and resource-based sectors of rural areas, whether in the Corn Belt, Great Plains, Mississippi Delta, Appalachian coal fields, or the mining areas of the West. Michael Dunn of the National Farmers Union estimated that firms representing up to 90 percent of rural manufacturing jobs cannot compete internationally.[4] Yet, dramatic growth has occurred in a minority of rural places, including those adjacent to burgeoning metropolitan areas and those that specialize in amenity-based low-wage service industries, particularly the fields of retirement and recreation.[5]

The implications of this economic transformation are vast. Poverty rates in rural America on aggregate exceed those of the inner city. Nearly ten million Americans who live in rural places live in poverty. Over 70 percent of those rural poor family heads who are not ill, disabled, nor retired, work, yet they still could not raise themselves or their families above the poverty line in 1987.[6]

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[4] Michael Dunn interview, 7-8-92.

[5] Dan Gibb interview, 7-9-92.

[6] Cynthia Duncan, Rural Poverty in America, p. 15.

Furthermore, rural unemployment has risen and is one to two percentage points higher than in urban areas.

An even more dramatic indicator is underemployment. Robert Bergland, the Executive Vice President of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) and former Secretary of Agriculture, estimates that thirty to 40 percent of workers in rural areas punch the clock for only part of each working day.[7]

At the same time, workers with full-time jobs in rural places are much more likely to be employed in jobs that pay lower wages than they were in the past or than workers in urban areas are currently. In 1987, 42 percent of U.S. rural workers earned wages that kept them below the poverty line, a much higher figure than the 32 percent of the 1970s. By comparison, only 29 percent of urban employees in 1987 were "low earners."[8] So while a high percentage of the rural poor work, compared to the rest of the population, their diminished earning capacity means they must work more hours—when available—to afford a still lower standard of living.

Communities confronting a declining economic base are unable to muster sufficient resources to sustain a quality social infrastructure. Local institutions, including schools and health care centers among others, often wither from neglect. Residents, usually the younger and better educated ones, move to urban centers seeking employment, leaving behind the elderly and children, neither of whom are able to form an adequate tax base. The Midwest has experienced depopulation since 1980, while the population of other rural regions has remained relatively stagnant in a period of dramatic national growth. In fact, the

[7] Robert Bergland interview, 7-27-92.
[8] Duncan, p. 24.

population outside metropolitan areas only grew 1.7 percent between the 1980 and 1990 censuses while the growth of the total population was seven percent.[9]

To address many of these challenges, rural citizens and advocates call for the generation of higher-wage jobs so that rural America can be economically viable into the next century. Richard Anderson of Northern Economic Initiatives Corporation argues that to provide sustainable and appropriate development, two fundamental questions must be answered:

> i) How can community wealth be increased?
>
> ii) How can the performance of individual firms, as well as their collective performance through peer relationships, be improved?[10]

Former Secretary of Agriculture Bergland advocates trying to retain companies already in rural areas, but believes that supporting struggling small-scale cottage industries and identifying niche industries that build upon a community's existing strengths are the key strategies for future rural economic development.[11]

Besides higher wage jobs, other rural needs identified in our survey include strengthened local leadership, improved education, safe and affordable housing, more accessible health care, and a healthy environment that can sustain life well into the future.

But how can rural Americans help bring about these improvements in rural life? And how do the resources the REPP brings to the table fit into that puzzle?

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[9] Residents of Farms and Rural Areas, p. 4.
[10] Richard Anderson interview, 7-27-92.
[11] Bergland interview, 7-27-92.

III. INADEQUATE GOVERNMENT POLICY AND THE ABSENCE OF A NATIONAL RURAL ORGANIZATION

Our interviews and review of the literature have highlighted a number of explanations for the absence of a national organization with a broad-based rural development agenda. Four reasons were put forward most frequently and compellingly: the urban bias of policymakers, the lack of even a fragmentary rural policy around which a constituency can coalesce, the long-standing dominance of the agricultural lobby, and the prior history of failed rural policy organizations.

A. The Urban Bias

Many observers argue that policy power brokers focus on urban problems and peripheralize rural needs. Many leaders in government, business, and the media either come from or live in urban areas and thus may devote their attention disproportionately to the all-too-apparent distress they see and experience daily. Particularly in the House of Representatives, where suburban districts represent the majority, rural interests are at a distinct disadvantage by virtue of sheer population.

Business leaders generally concentrate their energy in the places where they produce and market their products, which tend to be metropolitan areas. The national media also has a history of indifference towards rural areas with the exceptions of brief and unsustained bursts of attention, such as during the Johnson Administration. When they do cover rural areas, the media, like policymakers, tend to focus briefly on a particular need, such as the plight of the family farmer, at the expense of other more important issues.[12]

[12] William Browne, Form without Substance, Past over Present, p. 59.

Ironically, policymakers' urban bias may be reinforced by the positive, but often incomplete, images of rural America held by the average American. According to a Roper Survey conducted for NRECA, most Americans have positive impressions of the characteristics of both rural people and their communities. They believe that the quality of life is better in rural places and identify the loss of the family farm as the most important threat to this quality of life, even more significant than the lack of jobs, closing of small businesses, increasing crime, or proliferating illegal drugs.[13] Perhaps the widely held belief that life is rosier in many ways in rural areas and the incomplete understanding of the dynamics of rural areas leads voters and policymakers to discount the sense of urgency which rural advocates bring to their cause.

B. The Nature of National Rural Policy

1. The Directionless Executive

Responsibility for rural policy is highly diffused within the executive branch. Though the USDA is the lead department on rural development, different aspects of the issue fall under the jurisdiction of nearly every department. The Small Business Administration's Office of Economic Development and Rural Affairs works on credit issues of concern to local entrepreneurs. Environmental matters are primarily considered in the Environmental Protection Agency. Rural health workers are employed by the Department of Health and Human Services. These disjointed efforts are all essential to the vitality of rural America, yet they are rarely coordinated, with the exception of intermittently-organized working groups on rural development that operate on a sub-cabinet level. In the main, rural politics in Washington has become a truly fragmented, piecemeal, and meandering process without

[13] Public Attitudes Toward Rural America and Rural Electric Cooperatives, NRECA, 1992.

institutional status, concludes William Browne, a political scientist from Central Michigan University who recently conducted an extensive survey of staff and members of Congress about rural policymaking.[14]

Finally, the federal government rightly recognizes the increasing importance of state level activity. As a result, joint federal-state councils have been established in a number of states, and USDA Undersecretary Roland Vautour believes that each of the fifty states will have one operational by the end of the year.[15] Increased coordination among levels of government is desirable as long as one level does not divorce itself of its responsibilities. Former Secretary Bergland argues that current efforts amount to a revisited "Operation Bootstraps," a failed strategy from the 1950s that sought increased state control without federal dollars, because the federal government is not providing adequate resources to support state agency initiatives.[16]

2. The Myopic Congress

The USDA is not the only arm of the federal government characterized by lackluster rural development activities. After all, it is Congress that authorizes programs and appropriates the USDA's budget, and it too suffers from rural myopia. Browne's investigation of congressional activity on rural development found that legislative priorities have largely focused on agriculture and ignored rural development. Only two members of Congress whom he interviewed worried about neglect of the rural poor.[17] He writes, "[e]xcept for support of

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[14] Form without Substance, p. 67.
[15] Roland Vautour interview, 7-14-92.
[16] Bergland interview, 7-27-92.
[17] Form Without Substance, p. 79.

animal rights issues, legislators were less involved on rural matters than for any other aspect of agricultural policy."[18]

There is no single legislative forum in which rural development issues are debated; instead, both houses of Congress segment aspects of rural development into various committees with other more dominant priorities.[19] For example, the House rural development subcommittee, lodged within the House agriculture committee, spends far more time on other items within its jurisdiction, conservation and credit, than on rural development.[20] The Senate agriculture committee has long linked rural development in its subcommittee to a strong defense of rural electrification programs administered by the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), in part due to the strength of NRECA, the association of rural electrical cooperatives. It has only recently emphasized broader development strategies.

In conclusion, the federal government, in both the executive and legislative branches, attempts to advance elements of rural development, but does not do justice to its role in facilitating rural development more broadly. The government fails to respond comprehensively to rural needs, and moreover, devotes a disproportionate share of its "rural" resources to agriculture.

C. Unequal Advocates: The Agricultural and Rural Development Lobbies

Agricultural interests are very powerful at the federal level, and have consistently overwhelmed broader rural interests. Consider the history of national policy towards rural places to understand this phenomenon. President Roosevelt created the Department of Agriculture (USDA) in the 1930s to respond

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18 Ibid., p. 81.

19 What We Have Learned, The Aspen Institute, p. 67.

20 Form Without Substance, p. 67.

to the economic crises facing farmers, who then represented the majority of rural Americans. Over the past fifty years, however, fundamental economic and demographic changes have occurred in the rural U.S. to which the USDA has been sluggish in responding. What was once an agricultural economy is now primarily one of services and manufacturing. In fact, these two sectors combined employ 91 percent of rural workers. Agriculture, fishing, and forestry account for only eight percent of rural employment (1.9 percent of the total United States employment).[21] Even on the relatively few remaining farms in the United States, off-farm household income exceeded on-farm income for seven of the last eight years.[22]

Though the USDA has been charged with the broader responsibilities of non-agricultural rural development since 1971, it continues today to be much more attentive to its farm mission than to its rural development responsibilities.[23] During the 1980s, Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) expenditures on farm programs ranged from four to six times higher than agency expenditures on community development programs.[24] Larry Farmer, Director of Mississippi Association for Community Education, a grassroots organization in Greenville, Mississippi, believes that FmHA performs its rural development efforts only begrudgingly.[25] The Economic Research Service, the research arm of the USDA, has a total staff of 700, yet only 35 staff are devoted to rural development issues other than farm issues.

The laissez-faire philosophy of recent administrations further compounded the lack of attention given to rural concerns. Roland Vautour, the

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21 Duncan, p. 32 and p. 47.

22 Dunn interview, 7-8-92.

23 Ibid.

24 Searching for the Way that Works, Center for Community Change, 1990, p. 78.

25 Larry Farmer interview, 7-1-92.

Undersecretary for Small Community and Rural Development in the USDA, the federal agency responsible for coordination of federal activity in rural areas, believes that the proper role for the federal government is to streamline its own operations and then to "get out of the way" of local initiative. Since there is no sure fire approach to developing rural communities, he argues that the federal government's participation should be marginal and should not consume additional public resources.[26]

The federal government's stagnation in response to rural issues can be partly attributed to the relative strength of the competing agricultural and rural development lobbies, as well as the amount and quality of research and information each brings to bear. Whereas the agricultural lobby, particularly commodity groups, is central to national policymaking, rural development advocates operate on the periphery. As one legislative staffer put it, "I can find more people in town to talk serious stuff about peanuts than I can about rural policy."[27]

The historic institutionalization of agricultural interests at both the grassroots and in Washington explains much of this imbalance. Once a program is created and funded significantly, constituents form around it who will fight tooth and nail for continued appropriations. Commodity price support programs received $9 billion dollars last year.[28] Though less was appropriated for commodity price support in 1991 than in previous years, it was not for lack of effort on the part of agricultural lobbyists.

Interestingly, the farm organizations we interviewed recognized that their significance to rural areas, their membership, and their government subsidy

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[26] Vautour interview, 7-14-92.

[27] Form Without Substance, p. 66.

[28] Paul Drazek interview, 7-7-92.

would likely decline as agriculture fades.[29] Yet they, like the USDA, appear slow to shift their focus as their membership demands continued congressional funding for agricultural price supports.

In contrast, rural development advocates have few programs around which to mobilize. Some programs that exist, such as the REA, have relatively effective lobbies and associations (NRECA), but they are exceptions. "When rural proposals come up you've really got to search to find three or four people to call to request information," said a legislative staffer.[30] While at the national level there are a few narrow issue-based rural organizations, and a slew of agricultural groups, no broad-based national rural organization concerned with economic and community development exists. (See appendix II for a list of rural organizations.)

The few lobbyists working on rural issues seek incremental program gains, eschewing general policy arguments that "will hopelessly mess up too many issues."[31] The experience of the Rural Economic Policy Program, particularly with the 1989 rural development legislation, confirms that policy issues get shortchanged in favor of appropriations issues. In that legislative debate, $300 million was initially set aside by the Senate budget committee to fund activities to be later authorized by the legislation. Traditional poverty and state advocates could not agree on the contours of the package. Eventually congressional support fell away, leaving all parties empty-handed. Coalitions of rural development groups often dissolve as groups divide along special interest lines.[32]

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29 Ibid.

30 Form Without Substance, p. 66.

31 Ibid., p. 67.

32 What We Have Learned, p. 68.

There are few non-agricultural, national rural organizations for a number of other reasons, as well. Non-farm rural interest groups have few members and few sources of financial support.[33] The few strong non-agricultural local institutions—churches, chambers of commerce, civic organizations—are not inclined towards grassroots advocacy that could lead to a national public policy.[34] And, because of their lack of participation in the political process and lack of significant campaign contributions, the rural poor seldom make ongoing contact with legislators or their staff.[35]

Powerful cohesive alliances are difficult to create because rural America is economically and culturally diverse. Marty Strange of the Center for Rural Affairs in Nebraska commented that because rural is often defined by what it is *not*, organizing rural communities proves difficult.[36] As William Nagle puts it, rural policy is "a policy in search of a constituency."[37]

Even if diverse rural development concerns could be funneled into a single effective organization, maintaining the attention of representatives in Washington would become increasingly difficult if the rural population (and its representation in Congress) continues to shrink. Therefore, many rural advocates conclude that national rural policy efforts are futile and instead concentrate their public policy efforts on states and towns, further weakening the national rural constituency.

Browne declares that "of the more than 200 groups and associations that lobbied regularly in the nation's capital on agriculture and rural issues in the 1980's, fewer than 10 identified themselves as rural or as serving a rural non-farm

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[33] Form Without Substance, p. 57.
[34] Ibid., p. 58.
[35] Ibid., p. 87.
[36] Marty Strange interview, 7-2-92.
[37] James Bonnen, "Why is there no Coherent U.S. Rural Policy?", p. 196.

constituency."[38] The dearth of organizations is sorely felt because general, national public policy organizations (those without a rural focus) seldom represent rural issues comprehensively, diligently and effectively.[39] For example, Eddie Williams of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, which works on national African-American issues, admits that since 1988 the Joint Center has not done any research on rural issues because their sole agricultural economist left for a university post.[40]

Non-resource based sectors dominate rural economies; agriculture only represents a fraction of rural economic activity. Yet rural farm lobbies dominate the federal rural agenda to the nearly total exclusion of rural development proponents. In contrast to agricultural groups, which have developed many powerful analytical and lobbying organizations around government price support programs, rural development advocates can point to few organizations that research and promote their views.

D. The History Of Broad-based National Rural Organizations: Repeated Failure

The conclusions above, though unfortunate, are not original. Others have long recognized that rural concerns are slighted in Washington. Some rural activists have tried to create broad-based rural organizations to address their policy needs. Three significant efforts in the past two decades include Rural America, the National Rural Center, and the Rural Coalition. None of these organizations continues to exist as an effective public policy organization, which only further enervates an already weak rural development lobby. Because they provide significant insight into the rural public policymaking process and

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38 Form Without Substance, p. 65.

39 Ibid., p. 57.

40 Eddie Williams interview, 7-24-92.

instructive lessons for any future organization, we examine each briefly below. In each case we relied on few sources, so these profiles are by no means complete.

1. Rural America

a. Description

Though its name seems to encompass the broad sweep of rural issues, Rural America, a non-member organization created by the late Clay Cochran, began in the early 1970s as a rural low-income housing organization. Once the Carter administration came into office, it was able to expand its mission by securing significant federal funding for issues including migrant workers, family farms, and rural housing. At its apex, the organization employed seventy-five people.

When federal funding dried up in the 1980s, Rural America sought to shift to foundation sources, but according to Marty Strange, its populist vision was unfashionable among private funders at the time.[41] Foundations were more likely to support other organizations such as the National Rural Center and the Rural Coalition, both of which had broader agendas. Rural America increasingly had to rely on contract work in community planning and services. The organization provided technical assistance and other services rather than advocacy or research.[42]

By the late 1980s, the office had withered to a handful of staff members. Since its contract work was then nearly exclusively related to transportation matters, it changed its name accordingly, and Rural America became the

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[41] Strange interview, 7-2-92.

[42] Form Without Substance, p. 61.

Community Transportation Association of America, which today continues to work on transportation issues.

b. Analysis

Finances caused two major problems for Rural America—one related to mission and the other to organizational expansion. Rural America allowed its agenda to be set not internally but by its sources of income. An organization will be more effective if it creates its own strategic plan and then fundraises to support that agenda, and not vice versa. Rural America's experience underscores the need for non-profits to fundraise effectively in support of well defined goals.

Rural America originally hoped to influence national public policy on a variety of rural issues. Rather than produce and disseminate analysis that could shape the opinion of policymakers, it shifted to technical assistance. Providing services to local communities is important work, even for a national policy organization, but if services become an organization's sole product, that entity will likely experience difficulties attempting to influence public policy.

Money was also the source of organizational problems for Rural America. Its staff mushroomed during the supportive Carter administration only to be slashed in the 1980s. Reasonable and steady growth, rather than unmanageable expansion, is more conducive to a productive, long-lived and stable organization.

2. The Rural Coalition

a. Description

Activists at the Center for Community Change first envisioned the Rural Coalition as a vehicle for unifying the diverse issue-oriented, progressive, national rural organizations in Washington, D.C. Organized in 1978, members included Rural America, the Farmer's Union, and the Catholic Rural Life

Conference. The mobilizers believed that by marshaling progressive forces, the Coalition could have a national policy impact.

The organizers spent two frustrating years simply getting the respective organizations around the table. Once there, the groups were unable to fashion an agenda on which they could agree. The organization stalled and produced little work during this period, according to Pablo Eisenberg of the CCC.[43]

In 1983, CCC organized a well-attended annual meeting at which it was decided to switch the Rural Coalition's membership from national to local organizations. Leaders from local and regional organizations controlled the new board of directors to reflect this change. Eisenberg argues that the board focused on their own local action agendas because they disdained Washington-style network politics, steering the organization away from national rural development policy. The Rural Coalition did not lobby, nor did it produce policy analysis, he says.[44] It provided neither technical assistance nor funding to its members—possible alternative products to research and advocacy according to Browne.[45] In addition, according to Bob Van Hook, former director of the National Rural Health Association, and Mike Clark, former director of the Highlander Center, the Coalition was ideological when it should have been issue-oriented, rendering its efforts ineffective.[46]

Larry Parachini, who then directed the organization, had grand visions which exceeded his budget, according to Eisenberg and Marty Strange.[47] After the CCC ceased to support the Coalition financially, Parachini devoted his energy to fundraising, and avoided management. As a result, his unsupervised

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[43] Pablo Eisenberg interview, 7-24-92.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Form Without Substance, p. 69.

[46] Bob Van Hook interview, 7-13-92, and Mike Clark interview, 7-13-92.

[47] Eisenberg interview, 7-24-92, and Strange interview, 7-2-92.

staff failed to produce quality work.[48] This phase of the Coalition ended when Larry Parachini resigned in 1986.

Judy Coats, the new director, tried to right the wayward organization, but according to Eisenberg, her efforts were thwarted by the organization's shoestring budget. Others indicate that the board refused to unite around a limited number issues with broad appeal. The Rural Coalition expired in 1990, only to be revived in a fashion earlier this year by its board. Lorette Picciano-Hanson, the new executive director, has re-established the newsletter and has organized an annual meeting in El Paso for remaining members.[49] Nevertheless, with one person on staff, the same locally-oriented, controlling board, no office, and negligible funds, the Rural Coalition's presence in Washington on policy matters proves practically inconsequential and its potential in the future appears poor.

b. Analysis

The experience of the Rural Coalition illustrates a number of lessons. Having a national agenda is crucial for a policy organization to be effective on the national level. This is not to say that it cannot, or should not, be informed by local organizations: ties to local organizations and practitioners may help to ensure that the organization promotes pertinent issues.

Operating as a formal coalition organization is inherently complex. Fashioning an agenda and responding nimbly to crises is difficult when members with diverse interests must agree. Eisenberg states that the organization emphasized process to the exclusion of product, in part because of its structure.[50]

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[48] Ibid.

[49] Lorette Picciano-Hanson interview, 7-15-92.

[50] Eisenberg interview, 7-24-92.

The board of directors had too much control, and the director did not exercise enough management. Many of these faults can be attributed to personalities, but they also highlight an important point: Even the best-laid plans can falter if staff and board selections go awry.

3. The National Rural Center

a. Description

The National Rural Center was formed in 1976 by former Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall. It sought to be "a catalyst that links advocates, policymakers, and the general public by providing sound and timely information and recommendations."[51] Organized by policy areas, the staff produced research, convened meetings, and testified on the Hill. According to Allan Mandel, formerly associated with the Center and now at the Small Business Administration, it sought to be both a grassroots mobilizing organization and a think tank.[52] The National Rural Center also maintained an extensive library on rural issues that was later given to the Tuskegee Institute. It was not a membership organization.

At its inception, the Center successfully raised significant multi-year funds from foundations. However, the early 1980s was not a favorable time for rural advocates in Washington, and the foundation world has generally focused more on urban issues. As funds began to run out in the early 1980s, Jack Cornman, the director, was unable to replace them. His strengths, evidently, did not include aggressive fundraising. Attributing the demise of the Rural Center to failure on the part of its leadership, Bob Van Hook mourns its departure because he believes that it came closest to producing research relevant to policymakers.[53]

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[51] Cornman, p. 17.
[52] Allan Mandel interview, 7-9-92.
[53] Van Hook interview, 7-13-92.

b. Analysis

The National Rural Center did a lot right. Its organizational structure as an activist think tank allowed analysts to develop expertise and knowledge on specific topics and to interact regularly with the government. Alice Hersch headed the Center's rural health policy area for several years and now directs the Association of Health Services Research, an organization which does grantmaking, research, and advocacy. She believes that the organization conducted useful policy-targeted work that is no longer provided by anyone. For example, in 1977 the regulations for a health care bill failed to consider the unique characteristics of rural health care providers. The National Rural Center organized a series of three meetings for the writers of the regulations, at which experts and providers outlined the serious drawbacks of the regulations. On the basis of these meetings, the regulations were amended to better take into account rural conditions.

The Center could have managed aspects of this work better, according to some observers. Bob Rapoza believes that its research was too academic to be very useful to policymakers.[54] David Raphael, former director of Rural America, asserts that the Center had neither a constituency nor an ideology.[55] As in the case of the Rural Coalition, the Center suffered the effects of inadequate fundraising. The organization operated successfully for six years, but after the initial grants expired, no funding had been lined up to replace them.

The experiences of these three organizations confirm that running a non-profit, and particularly one focusing on rural communities can be difficult. Yet their failures do not necessarily doom future efforts, if the staff of a new

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[54] Bob Rapoza interview, 6-26-92.

[55] David Raphael interview, 7-1-92.

organization can distill and internalize basic lessons from the histories of these rural organizations about leadership, management, mission, structure, operation, and fundraising. Building on past experiences, a new institute may be able to accomplish what others sought to do and failed: to provide an intelligent perspective and effective voice on policy questions that relate to the development of rural communities.

IV. INTERVIEW RESULTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR A NATIONAL RURAL ORGANIZATION

In addition to researching rural needs, the rural policy process, and the history of previous organizations, we interviewed more than thirty people about the need for a rural organization and the possible roles it could play. For the most part, as the saying goes, where the person interviewed sat determined where he or she stood. Local organizations argued for technical assistance for the grassroots. Advocacy organizations made the case for national lobbying. Think tanks, not surprisingly, believed that quality analysis is needed to inform the debate. Though the organizational wish list was long, a rough conception of a national rural policy organization did emerge from the interviews. This section of the paper aims to articulate a possible vision for such an organization and to discuss important factors that the staff of the organization should consider.

A. The Case for a National Rural Policy Organization

There was widespread agreement that rural communities were in dire need and that the federal and state governments have both a development and a redistributive role to play in rural America. While a number of non-profits work on programs and policy locally and regionally in many rural areas of the country,

an organizational vacuum exists on the national level, which Alice Hersch calls "a gaping hole."[56]

Interestingly, two grassroots practitioners, Richard Anderson and Larry Farmer, from Michigan and Mississippi respectively, look beyond their immediate local concerns and note the need for national policy work. Farmer argues that grassroots organizations lack a national policy focus because they struggle simply to survive, a view supported by Eisenberg.[57] He proposes a national organization that represents local organizations by sensitizing state and federal governments to the general needs of rural communities.[58]

Anderson's vision is similar. He believes that an organization operating at the national level must see the big picture and think about the relationships between fundamental issues, various levels of government, and non-profit organizations.[59] Moreover, he points to the potentially large payoffs which may result from concentrating on public policy. For example, the SBA microloan program, which will assist new, small businesses in rural areas by creating a $15 million capital pool for microenterprise loans resulted from the labor of perhaps a dozen people.[60] Allan Mandel of the SBA agrees that a rural organization is needed. Such an organization could, he believes, better inform SBA's recent efforts to construct a rural development strategy.[61]

Neal Barber, Director of Virginia's Department of Housing and Community Development, says that certain rural areas will always have an inadequate resource base and will depend on the government to redistribute

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[56] Alice Hersch interview, 7-17-92.
[57] Farmer interview, 7-1-92, and Eisenberg interview, 7-24-92.
[58] Farmer interview, 7-1-92.
[59] Anderson interview, 7-9-92.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Mandel interview, 7-9-92.

wealth.[62] Public resources must, therefore, be used more efficiently by increasing coordination among levels of government. He believes that a national policy organization can help government work through this and other implementation problems.

While most of those interviewed agreed that work on national rural policy is needed, a proposition as general as "a national rural public policy organization" leaves significant wiggle room. In addition to the specific recommendations above, others—including Secretary Bergland, Mike Clark, Pablo Eisenberg, Alice Hersch, Dr. Vicki Luther, Bob Rapoza, and Bob Van Hook—also identify the need for an public policy organization that intelligently concentrates on national rural issues.[63] Taken together, the interviews suggested a wide range of potential purposes and roles for such an organization.

B. Possible Characteristics of a National Rural Organization

National public policy organizations come in a variety of guises with a similarly diverse set of objectives, and may have little in common except for the fact that most are located in Washington, D.C. To name just two organizations, the range travels the alphabet from the Advocacy Institute, a small, foundation-supported lobbying and technical assistance organization, to the Urban Institute, a large government-funded think tank.

The interviews helped to focus more sharply what is meant by the phrase "a national rural public policy organization" by highlighting some important characteristics of effective public policy organizations, specifically: leadership; mission; organizational strategy; constituency; and funding. Recommendations flowing out of these discussions, which may inform the evolution of REPP and

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62 Neal Barber interview, 7-28-92.

63 Interviews with each.

SPP, are presented at the end of each section. Specific noteworthy strategies employed by various organizations are outlined in Appendix I.

1. Leadership

Leadership was both the most telling weakness of the failed rural organizations and the most salient characteristic of the successful organizations. Any organization, be it rural or other, must have dedicated, resourceful, and dynamic leadership. Effective leadership provides the vision and flexibility to chart the organization's course, motivation to maximize staff output, and sound financial management to guarantee its longevity. Leadership as a concept will be implicit in the discussion of each of the following sections.

2. Mission

Even the critics of the Rural Center, the Rural Coalition and Rural America agree that these organizations had the right idea. Each had a mission statement that recognized the need for a national rural policy organization that produces, collects, translates, and disseminates sound information to policymakers and the general public on rural development policy matters.

During our interviews, we queried whether it was productive to create an organization based on "rural" issues. Although some argued that "rural" is not a very helpful concept, others maintained that it was a useful and appropriate notion around which to organize. Both Jim Weil, counsel of the Children's Defense Fund, and Eddie Williams, Director of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, work for organizations that do not have a rural focus and agree, nevertheless, that rural issues are given short shrift in national policy debates and that rural communities often suffer problems unique to them.[64] In

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[64] Jim Weil interview, 7-23-92, and Williams interview, 7-24-92.

addition, David Raphael argues that putting a rural face on issues of economic and community development can help to sell those issues nationally because the public and policymakers strongly link the notions of rural and community.[65]

Putting a rural face on an issue does not necessarily imply competition with urban areas. Weil contends that an urban/rural dichotomy need not arise and that an organization could advocate on behalf of rural communities without arguing that they deserve more than urban communities.[66] For strategic reasons, an organization that advocates on behalf of rural communities might opt to concentrate on addressing rural concerns within general legislation rather than to seek rural development initiatives exclusively. In fact, former Secretary Bergland, among others, argues that it is more effective to link rural legislative efforts with urban ones because of the more widespread support for urban communities.[67] The experience of the REPP confirms that it is easier to get legislation passed that benefits rural areas by concentrating on national legislation with a rural component, such as a child care bill, rather than trying to pass a rural development initiative on its own.[68] Rural policy is made as frequently at the non-rural committees in Congress as in the agricultural committees.

Another important component to understand in the above mission statement is "information." Power and ideas influence policy. An organization should bring to bear on policymakers all of the power it can muster; in this regard a rural organization will be disadvantaged as compared to suburban and urban groups, as well as the agricultural lobby, for the reasons discussed earlier in the paper. Therefore, the soundness and accuracy of a rural organization's

[65] Raphael interview, 7-1-92.
[66] Weil interview, 7-23-92.
[67] Bergland interview, 7-27-92.
[68] What We Have Learned.

ideas takes on greater weight. Whenever possible or necessary, the organization should generate ideas through its own research and analysis, but, in many cases, a significant amount of information already exists that simply needs to be directed to the right places and people.

The third significant element of the mission statement, "rural development," covers a lot of ground; economics, health care, education, environmental protection, transportation, communication, housing, leadership development, and governance are all critical ingredients of any vibrant community. An overeager rural development policy organization could quickly find itself overextended if it tried to cultivate expertise in too many topics. In fact, both the National Rural Center and the Rural Coalition ran into problems when they tried to expand their staff and their issue areas too quickly. An organization should build from a base of "subjects that are doable, timely and important."[69] Over time, it can tackle other issues as long as they are consistent with the broad mission. Hersch and Rapoza advise that an organization should start modestly, grow sustainably and commit itself for the long haul.[70] Eisenberg counseled, "there is no organization by fiat."[71]

A number of respondents to our survey commended the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) and the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) as effective organizations. Jeff Faux of the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) and Professor William Galston praised the CBPP's clarity of focus on issue and audience, excellent relationships on the Hill, the many dimensions of its work, and its credibility.[72] Jim Weil identified three critical factors to the success of the

69 Hersch interview, 7-17-92.

70 Hersch interview, 7-17-92, and Rapoza interview, 6-26-92.

71 Eisenberg interview, 7-24-92.

72 Jeff Faux interview, 7-9-92, and William Galston interview, 7-10-92.

CDF: Marion Wright Edelman's leadership, CDF's just and narrow mission, and sufficient time to develop and grow.[73]

These lessons of leadership, clarity of focus, credibility, and commitment prove instructive to an organization concerned with the very broad scope of rural America. If the REPP and State Policy Program (SPP) are to evolve together into something slightly different, the new program could concentrate on investigating rural America's relationship with the international and domestic economy and potential avenues of economic development given those relationships. Other rural issues are currently being addressed by other organizations. For instance, NRHA concentrates on health questions; CTAA covers transportation; and HAC works on rural housing. No national policy organization concentrates on rural economic issues specifically, however. Moreover, REPP and SPP have a comparative advantage in this field. By retaining visionary leadership, the program could expand over time from its base of high quality work on economic issues into other important aspects of rural community development as it sees fit.

3. Constituency

The potential constituency of a national policy organization that works on rural economic development issues is vast. Rural organizations and citizens, even those whose interests seemingly are opposed to each other, such as the powerful and the disenfranchised, manufacturers and farmers, environmental and economic, increasingly see their fates linked to ensure their common future, Professor Galston asserts.[74] This sense of a common destiny provides a unique opportunity to a national rural organization that can learn from the mistakes of the Rural Coalition and Rural America by representing all communities and

[73] Weil interview, 7-23-92.
[74] Galston interview, 7-10-92.

groups within rural America including town leaders, members of the chambers of commerce, and business people, as well as grassroots progressives.[75] But, to be acceptable to traditional rural communities, which are generally quite conservative, the work of the organization should not appear to be leftist.

While we would argue that the constituency of the organization should remain centered on rural residents, particularly the disadvantaged, its audience would include government officials (national, state, and local), the media (national and local), rural organizations (national, regional, and local), rural researchers and advocates. Through these audiences, the policy organization could inform the debate leading to policy change on behalf of the constituency.

The Rural Coalition and Rural America both were grassroots organizations, and thus were easily able to absorb constituency priorities and concerns. Yet the grassroots nature of these organizations were partly responsible for their lack of organizational cohesion and ultimate failure. How can an organization better manage its governance process, or remain independent of, but accountable to its constituency? Several particularly successful national policy organizations, including the Children's Defense Fund and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, are not based on a coalition model, yet nevertheless manage to remain true to grassroots interests. They have developed other mechanisms, such as annual conferences and advisory panels, to ensure accountability to the constituency.

4. Organizational Strategy

Developing a mission and creating a constituency are critical steps for any organization, but they mean little if the organization is unable to push its agenda effectively. To accomplish the goals of creating a political milieu receptive to

[75] Vicki Luther interview, 7-2-92, and Van Hook interview, 7-13-92.

rural development policies and encouraging the design and implementation of development policies,[76] an organization could utilize a number of possible operational strategies, including: research, dissemination and advocacy, brokering information, networking, coalition-building, technical assistance, convening meetings, and operating programs.

a. Research

Clear and credible analysis is essential to policymaking. Think tanks have sought to improve understanding of policy matters since the inception of the Brookings Institution at the beginning of the century. From Robert Brookings' experience on the War Industries Board, he observed how little economic data governmental administrators had at hand when making decisions and how much waste and inefficiency was present in government. He set up an institute to apply knowledge of economics to questions of policy, ascertaining the facts and making them clear to both decision makers and the public.[77]

His evaluation of the widespread need for policy research in the 1920s remains true today in the field of rural development, especially since the decline in staff of the ERS leaves major gaps in knowledge about rural development. Allan Mandel, who comes from an urban policy background, feels that his work in the Office of Economic Development and Rural Affairs at the SBA could be enhanced if the quality and amount of rural research were more impressive.[78] On the legislative side, Carolyn Brickey, former policy advisor to the Senate agriculture committee, indicated that the Senate's consideration of the rural

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[76] Cornman, Lessons from Rural America, p. 16.
[77] James Smith, The Idea Brokers, p. 58.
[78] Mandel interview, 7-9-92.

development legislation in the late '80s would have been hindered greatly if Bob Rapoza's research and analysis were not available.[79]

Numbers exert magical power on policymakers, but they must be correct, asserts Faux.[80] Credibility is important for any policy research institute, but for an organization operating slightly out of the mainstream, as any rural institute would, it is essential. Rapoza insists that the organization's research both be methodologically legitimate and politically relevant.[81] Acquiring a reputation for high-quality analytical work can assist in other aspects of the organization's operations, such as public relations and media work, as well. For instance, the press often considers the CBPP's Bob Greenstein a one-stop information shop. They know he will be honest, he can articulate many sides of an issue, and his analysis is sound.

Besides being methodologically correct, the product must be understandable to the audience. Policymakers and the general public require products to be written in plain language and digestible doses. Readability is a critical aspect of both research and dissemination.

Policy research can emphasize either "policy" or "research." If the objective is to inform decisions on policy and legislative initiatives, the organization is said to be "retailing." The product should be short and timely, requiring no more than three months from the origination of the idea to the publication of the final product. The Heritage Foundation is a prototype policy retailer think tank. In contrast, the work can be extensively researched, time consuming, and produced in book form with the objective of enhancing the general thinking about an issue. This approach is known as "wholesaling." An

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79 Carolyn Brickey interview, 7-15-92.

80 Faux interview, 7-9-92.

81 Rapoza interview, 6-26-92.

example of a heavily research-oriented wholesaler think tank is the Brookings Institution.

Our recommendation is that a rural policy organization embrace both philosophies, but emphasize the retail. Policymakers suffer from the paucity of useful information on rural economic development concerns, although much exists in a wholesale form (largely attributable to The Ford Foundation's investment in the REPP). The organization can provide or repackage relevant information in a convincing manner in order to persuade policymakers on specific issues, potentially leading to an increase in appropriations or to specific program changes. Given the fundamental transition occurring in rural communities, however, it is also important to retain some focus on the implications of the ongoing economic transformation.

b. Dissemination and Advocacy

"[A]nalysis, no matter how persuasive, does not determine policy," writes James Smith in his book *The Ideabrokers*. "Much depends on how a study is communicated, the timing of its presentation, and whether it agrees or conflicts with the agendas of the political executives and bureaucrats who eventually determine its impact."[82] Throughout our interviews, it became clear that all organizations, even the traditional think tanks, are devoting increasing resources and effort to the dissemination of their products. The Heritage Foundation, which spends nearly 40 percent of its budget on marketing their materials through briefing sessions, breakfasts, media work, etc., is in the vanguard of this trend, and others are following with great speed.[83] The experience of the REPP confirms that solely conducting research is insufficient; it must both be translated

[82] James Smith, p. 120.
[83] Faux interview, 7-9-92.

into language understandable to policymakers and the general public, and be widely promulgated. The next section discusses repackaging information for dissemination to a variety of audiences.

Dissemination can take a number of forms and functions, targeted at a range of audiences. For example, many organizations employ a public relations director to interact with reporters, hold breakfast meetings for administrators and congressional staff, or coordinate fly-ins by constituents so that they can visit their representatives and voice organizational positions. (See Appendix I for greater detail.)

Another common form of dissemination is to lobby members of Congress on Capitol Hill directly and influence voters through the media regarding a specific bill. A non-profit organization legally can devote up to 20 percent of its budget for both direct and grassroots lobbying on specific legislation.[84]

Advocacy, of course, is much broader than simply interacting with the legislative branch; the executive branch is an important and appropriate target of any public policy organization. Enacting a law means little if it is not properly implemented. Secretary Bergland says that you cannot separate working on the legislative branch and the executive.[85] Michael Dunn believes that the returns to monitoring the regulations and implementation of a law can be significant because he has found that the administration is fairly responsive to recommendations on regulations.[86] Michael Bean agrees that the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) gets results through working with the executive branch, but he attributes these results to the respect bureaucrats give the EDF out of fear of EDF-originated lawsuits.[87] The legal definition of lobbying does not include

84 John Eddie, "Foundations and Lobbying: Safe Ways to Affect Public Policy," pp. 29-30.

85 Bergland interview, 7-27-92.

86 Dunn interview, 7-8-92.

87 Michael Bean interview, 7-21-92.

communication with legislators about general issues (i.e. when the communication does not relate to a specific law), with executive officials about implementation, or with the public on general issues, usually through the popular media.[88]

Because the power to bring a lawsuit demands the attention of administrators, the REPP might want to ponder the merits of either having a lawyer available to the staff or making alliances with a public interest law firm.

Several interviewees asserted that media work and coalition building are more important than lobbying to raise the salience of the issue, disseminate perspectives on that issue, and frame the policy debate. In terms of affecting the legislative agenda, Mike Pertschuk feels that strict and narrow lobbying only has a modest role to play.[89] Bob Rapoza, a well-known lobbyist in Washington on rural development issues, agrees. He argues that the need is greater for an organization to voice rural concerns and build the issue, rather than spend time lobbying on the Hill.[90]

Purposes likewise can vary greatly. While most lobbying and advocacy work centers on a specific issue or debate, dissemination efforts can be targeted to broader purposes as well. The Corporation for Enterprise Development seeks to change the way government and others think about wealth creation, and appropriate mechanisms for doing so. Neal Barber and Jim Weil also suggest using the media to raise the national consciousness about the plight of rural America in general.[91]

Dissemination efforts take on very different contours, depending on the audience one is attempting to reach. Grassroots education is complex and can be

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[88] Eddie, p. 11.
[89] Mike Pertschuk interview, 6-25-92.
[90] Rapoza interview, 6-26-92.
[91] Barber interview, 7-28-92.

expensive. As Christopher Makins, Vice President for Policy Programs of the Aspen Institute, says, trying to change the thinking of the "average" citizen is quite a different thing than trying to change the thinking of governors and mayors.[92] One has to ascertain, not only how typical Americans get their information, but what shapes their thinking.

Makins' point leads quickly to another issue, however. While a national rural policy organization would likely be located in Washington, D.C., it should understand the important role non-federal institutional actors in distant locales play in shaping and legitimizing national debates, and in producing development outcomes. Bean commends EDF's philosophy of being less Potomac-centered than many policy organizations, and working with state governments, regional organizations, and corporations as well.[93] The EDF exerts more energy on the implementation of laws at the state and local levels than on the creation of new laws.[94]

The style of dissemination, like the method of research, will depend on objectives and the time-frame in which the organization operates. If the goal is to influence short-term legislative negotiations, like a retailer, it might be effective to place an opinion-editorial piece in The Washington Post. Publication of a seminal book, on the other hand, might better frame the long-term debate on the vision for rural communities. This is the objective of a wholesaler. We believe that an organization can more effectively serve rural communities by concentrating on its retail work, but not to the exclusion of wholesaling.

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92 Christopher Makins interview, 7-1-92.

93 Ibid.

94 Weil interview, 7-23-92.

c. Brokering Information

A public policy organization can promote its agenda not only by disseminating its own work, but also by brokering rural information produced elsewhere. Michael Bean says that the EDF synthesizes, interprets, and utilizes the information and research done by others.[95] Mike Clark suggests translating existing literature into language which is understandable and useful to rural advocates, the media, and politicians.[96] To perform the function of an information translator and broker, an organization should be well known and promote contact with its researchers or practitioners. Facilitating the flow of information is helpful not only in developing research, but also in the creation of networks and coalitions. As individuals and groups familiarize themselves with each other and each other's work, the relationships that form will strengthen the rural constituency.

If the REPP took on the role of an "honest broker," it could also become involved in issues other than economic questions. Even if it does not conduct the research itself or specialize in the topic, the new entity would stay abreast of general rural development activity. Staff would be able to refer an interested legislative staffer or reporter to a researcher or organization which is more familiar with the topic at hand. By providing that kind of assistance, the organization could enhance its reputation as an important and useful player, in much the same way as the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities now does in the poverty field.

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[95] Bean interview, 7-21-92.

[96] Clark interview, 7-13-92.

d. Networking

Brokering information is an essential component of an organization's external relationships, but this is only one way that an organization can relate to its constituents. An organization can interact with its constituency in a variety of ways ranging from formal memberships to informal networks.

An organization might consider a formal membership when the mission entails being the voice of a single, identifiable constituency or when the organization lobbies extensively and would benefit from having a significant membership to help influence legislators. Richard Larochelle, a senior lobbyist at NRECA, states that having a membership gives him political clout which proves invaluable when advocating on positions in Congress.[97] Members also demand accountability from the organization and keep it focused on the issues they find important. In addition, formal membership can be a source of funds to the organization.

Before members will join, however, it must be clear to them that they will receive both policy and non-policy rewards. If the organization does not have a strong technical assistance component, it must offer potential members compelling services, such as maintaining a database or a daily on-line bulletin or producing a brochure of federal resources for rural development and of foundations that fund rural grassroots organizations.[98]

Nevertheless, there are advantages to institutional independence. Having a voting membership binds an organization to the needs and special interests of its members, whether or not the policy position is what the staff of the organization thinks is best, and even if those interests narrow considerably over time. For instance, several rural development organizations historically worked

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[97] Richard Larochelle interview, 7-27-92.

[98] This point was emphasized by Richard Anderson, Larry Farmer, William Galston, and Bob Van Hook, among others.

on broad policy issues related to their work. Over time, their policy efforts have come to center primarily on refunding and appropriations issues, to the exclusion of other substantive issues which arguably might be more important to their constituency. Furthermore, in Congress, urgent issues arise without any notice; if an organization had to wait some months for a board meeting to approve of a course of action, the opportunity might have already passed.

Finally, the diversity of rural America and rural organizations makes creating and running a formal national rural membership organization problematic, as the experience of the Rural Coalition testifies. Grassroots rural organizations operate under a plethora of conditions and have a wide variety of goals. Participatory, democratic processes may hinder the national organization's ability to deliver its product. Furthermore, it would be difficult to provide enough fee generating services to a diverse rural constituency to make reasonable returns on the amount of time it takes to manage an umbrella group.

Independence need not hurt an organization's lobbying efforts and might even help because policymakers cannot dismiss the organization as representing some vested interest. Both the EPI and the CDF have successfully advanced their programs without formal memberships. Hersch believes that an organization might derive more political clout from a powerful board than from a sizable constituency-based membership.[99]

Secretary Bergland adds that NRECA's lobbying efforts are sometimes slighted because, despite the organization's strong grassroots nature, members of Congress presume that its policy suggestions primarily serve the organization's narrow constituency rather than cooperatives' general membership. [100] His concern seems well-founded because when we asked Carolyn Brickey about her

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99 Hersch interview, 7-17-92.
100 Bergland interview, 7-27-92.

perception of NRECA, she dismissed them as "representing the telephone companies and the electric cooperatives."[101]

Not having a membership is quite different from not having a constituency. An organization can benefit from some of the advantages of membership without shouldering many of the corresponding burdens. Developing active networks of constituents is an alternative strategy to creating a formal membership organization.

The organization could create a different network for each of the different groups of constituents mentioned in the "constituents and audience" section (above), such as state government officials, local media, regional rural organizations or academics, to name just a few. Depending on the particular issue or product, the organization could access different networks. For matters of national policy, the primary constituents would be federal policymakers and implementors, the national media, and a database of interested parties. On state economic policy questions, the emphasis would be on state and local governments, local media, and regional and grassroots organizations.

Therefore, though the organization does not receive the benefit of member input, it could, nonetheless, respond and be accountable to its constituent networks. Vicki Luther believes it is possible and critical that the work of the organization remain relevant to the needs of rural communities through regular contact with grassroots practitioners, thinkers, and decision makers.[102]

Perhaps in the future, the organization can follow a middle ground approach along the lines of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies' "Associates Program." In exchange for dues, the members receive the JCPES magazine, access to its 1-800 telephone number, discounts on publications, and

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101 Brickey interview, 7-15-92.
102 Luther interview, 7-2-92.

invitations to events.[103] Particularly at this time for REPP, undertaking an expansive membership drive does not seem appropriate. Instead of devoting inordinate time to managing a diverse rural membership, it might choose to consolidate its efforts and concentrate on producing quality documents and disseminating them effectively.

e. Coalition-Building

Formal coalitions are created when a discrete and recognizable group of organizations is coordinated for a clearly defined purpose. The focus of a formal coalition is practical. Christopher Makins calls it "the Lord's work, but it's a grisly business."[104]

Formal coalitions encounter many of the same problems as a formal membership organization. Managing the members is time-consuming, burdensome, and option-limiting. A number of organizations mentioned that they find formal memberships in coalitions restricting, even for relatively short term purposes, and that they prefer to operate on those same issues independently. Operating in loose association with the networks described above may be more amenable to an independent research/advocacy organization.

f. Technical Assistance

Our conversations with grassroots organizations clearly identified the need for entities that coordinate or enhance local rural development efforts by providing both theoretical and practical assistance—in the areas of management

103 Williams interview, 7-24-92.
104 Makins interview 7-1-92.

assistance, operating funds, technical assistance on complex projects, and insight on and access to national policy debates.

Staff operating at the local level also appealed for increased interaction with their peers both to improve their capacity and to overcome their sense of isolation. Dr. Luther likened community development work to playing the outfield.[105] One can see what others are doing, but only from afar. When writing his book, Professor Galston met with a number of local organizations and communities and was struck by their apparent need for technical assistance.[106]

Although these local players need convening and technical assistance, perhaps regional organizations would be better suited for this task than a national organization, for a couple of reasons. First, a model exists in the four regional development centers which already perform some of these functions. Second, a regional organization is more likely to be sensitive to the needs of local organizations because it is more familiar with the economic, political, and social terrain of the area.

The REPP already has a comparative advantage on national and state rural economic policy issues. By creating, translating, and disseminating rural economic information well, it could consolidate that advantage . Over time, if others do not fill the regional technical assistance function, it could consider developing or operating regional offices to perform that function. Regional offices, however, add another level of complexity to the operation of an organization. Jack Cornman writes of his experience with the National Rural Center that regional offices can be difficult and expensive to administer effectively.[107]

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[105] Luther interview, 7-2-92.

[106] Galston interview, 7-10-92.

[107] Cornman, p. 65.

g. Convening Meetings

Convening meetings and conferences enables the organization to accomplish a number of its goals, including building consensus on policy options, analysis, and research agendas; strengthening networking and informal coalitions; and providing technical assistance. Mike Clark comments that no one convenes broad conferences on rural policy any longer: Where there was once fierce debate, there is now silence.[108] REPP's experience in staging meetings that shed light on important topics provides an exciting possibility that might satisfy Clark's yearning.

The meetings can also serve to disseminate important information to policymakers. The creation of networks is furthered by bringing together players from different constituent groups. If the organization chooses not to create a formal coalition, convening meetings might facilitate strong but not controlling relationships with other national policy organizations concerned with rural issues. Finally, by conducting meetings with grassroots organizations as central participants, the organization can accomplish some of the technical assistance objectives it might set for itself. Richard Anderson comments that first analyzing the experience and accomplishments of local development organizations and then convening a meeting for them to discuss and lay out future activities might prove invaluable.[109]

h. Programs

By programs, we refer to specific, internally developed and implemented projects. The organization might identify a crucial programmatic need, such as the rural telecommunications network effort implemented by REPP, and find

108 Clark interview, 7-13-92.

109 Anderson interview, 7-9-92.

that no other organization is willing nor able to do it. The organization could fill the gap, do the development work itself, and eventually spin the effort off. Bob Van Hook praises program-related work not only for the benefits that accrue to the constituency in return for participation in the organization, but for the revenue they can raise from the sponsors or consumers.[110] An organization should take care, however, not to be overwhelmed by its project-related work because it can so easily overwhelm and detract from its policy-related work.

5. Structure

"Form should follow function," Makins comments.[111] After the organization does the hard thinking and decides what type of work it will do to fulfill its mission, it needs to organize its resources to perform that work most effectively.

The initial discussion on leadership highlighted the importance of the director to the organization. Our research also found that policy organizations tended to rely on similar kinds of staff slots to perform their work, including in-house researchers, outside researchers on contract, young scholars (e.g., in a fellows program), a public relations/media director, a lobbyist, and the necessary support staff. (See appendix I for additional discussion.)

Nearly as important as the staff is the board. A productive board works with management to guide the organization's agenda. Moreover, if the board members are well-connected with the foundation, corporate, and government worlds, they can help the organization stabilize its finances and move its agenda forward. As mentioned earlier, Hersch believes that a powerful board can be more important than a membership of thousands in influencing both

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[110] Van Hook interview, 7-13-92.
[111] Makins interview, 7-1-92.

policymakers and funding sources.[112] Nearly all of the more successful policy organizations we interviewed followed this approach to constructing the board rather than relying on a group strictly representative of the constituency.

6. Funding

Fundraising presents an important challenge for any organization. Nearly all non-profits must devote vast resources and energy simply to acquiring additional resources. For example, the Heritage Foundation spent almost one-fifth of its 1985 budget on fund-raising.[113] Our analysis identified five possible funding sources for a non-profit policy organization: fee-generating services, foundations, corporations, government and an endowment.

Although most non-profit organizations desire self-sufficiency through fee generation, this ideal is not practical for many, including policy research/advocacy institutes. Some, like the Brookings Institution, are able to generate up to a third of their budget from seminar fees and sales of publications.[114] As a rural policy organization becomes more established, such fundraising strategies can and should be employed. Yet they will be always be limited, because it is unlikely that a broad-based rural development policy research center could generate adequate revenue from either members, the sale of publications, or from fee-based services.

Realistically, the organization will have to depend on external sources for funds. The best hope lies with foundation and corporate grants. The Ford Foundation has supported REPP and SPP in the past. Clearly, however, a more diversified funding base would strengthen REPP/SPP, and give it flexibility to

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112 Hersch interview, 7-17-92.
113 Robert Landers, "Think Tanks: The New Partisans," p. 469.
114 Stanley Wellborn interview, 7-6-92.

work on issues that have not previously been consistent with the Foundation's interests. Other foundations should be pursued.

Given the emphasis on business and economics in the mission of the organization and the connections the Aspen Institute has with the corporate world, it would be wise for the REPP also to pursue rural corporations for contributions, such as Walmart and Pioneer Hi-Bred. Alice Hersch recommended that corporate requests relate to very tangible and high profile projects, such as awards programs, fellowship programs, and publications.

The Urban Institute relies heavily on government contracting for its budget. At this point, over 80 percent of its budget comes from government project funding.[115] Government contracts, though lucrative, usually require a laborious application process. Contracts frequently lack a dissemination component to the grant, and can be so narrowly focused that they take the organization in an unproductive direction. Several organizations complained that government-funded projects were never released to the public, for political reasons. Eddie Williams of the Joint Center says that the trick is knowing when not to pursue government money. Williams also notes that over-dependence on government money can leave an organization "out to dry" when administrations change, a thought Rural America's experience confirms.[116]

An endowment is another funding source. To create an endowment, an organization requires a very substantial gift from an individual, a foundation, or a corporation—a very time-consuming process if conducted from scratch. Not surprisingly these are rare, but when they exist, they provide a desirable way to pay for a certain percentage of operating support. An endowment permits an organization the flexibility to embark on timely projects and a cushion in times of

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115 Laura Wilcox interview, 7-7-92.
116 Williams interview, 7-24-92.

transition; however, too much of an endowment can insulate the organization from the realities of the marketplace and desensitize the organization to the need to control its operating costs. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is the best example of a think tank that benefits from an endowment.[117]

V. CONCLUSION: An Opening Window of Opportunity?

Through the current economic crisis in rural America, advocates from a variety of stripes have begun to see their futures as connected. Whereas in the past the plethora of organizations addressing concerns found in rural areas failed to agree on a course of action, they now see their destinies linked to the fundamental question of their shared economic viability. The reality is so stark that even farm groups recognize and acknowledge the transformation occurring in rural areas. Paul Drazek of the Farm Bureau admitted that his organization's significance to rural areas and its membership would likely drop off as farming continues to decline and as families increasingly depend on wage jobs.[118] After all, over half of all income for farm families is derived from non-farm occupations.[119] Although the agriculture groups do not yet advocate for broad-based rural development, at least they are beginning to consider that there is more to rural policy than agriculture.

In addition, rural, non-agricultural, issues are getting a closer hearing in Washington. The Congressional Rural Health Forum, a recent and quite effective initiative of the NRHA, is the largest caucus in the House of Representatives, giving hope for a similar caucus on rural economic development if there were an

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[117] Wellborn interview, 7-6-92.
[118] Drazek interview, 7-7-92.
[119] "Residents of Farms and Rural Areas," p. 7.

organization to organize it.[120] Though the Bush administration is not actively pursuing a rural development agenda, it, like the agricultural groups, has acknowledged the importance of the concept with its Presidential Initiative on Rural Development and the creation of a Rural Development Administration within the USDA. More hope exists, however, in Governor Clinton's presidential bid. Because of his belief in the role of the government in fostering economic growth, the largely non-farm nature of his home state, and his long-time commitment to rural places, his administration would likely take rural development issues more seriously.

Awareness of the plight of rural communities is even beginning to spread to non-rural advocates. Their concern with international economic competitiveness is not reserved only for the metropolitan areas of the United States, but extends to the economies of rural communities. If rural economies continue to lose their economic viability, policymakers will begin to see a new influx of rural residents into America's already strained cities. Rural issues, evoking images of apple pie, families, and safe communities, have always had "heart string" appeal. Now urban policymakers have a self-interest in addition to their desire to preserve their pastoral visions.

The time is ripe and the need is critical for an organization to step forward and represent rural America. The organization best able to take advantage of this opportunity would be an action-oriented policy research institute that enhances public policy by affirmatively bringing high quality research and informed opinions to bear on rural economic issues. It could identify and scope out cutting edge issues, collect and analyze data, create networks to influence the debate of the formal and informal policymaking process, broker rural development information, and disseminate its own and others' rural policy

120 Van Hook interview, 7-13-92.

research findings widely to policymakers and the general public. No organization is currently positioned to undertake these activities except for the REPP. With a dedicated staff, a supportive board, and consistent funders, it could emerge as an important national policy player on rural economic issues in the twenty-first century.

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APPENDIX I
EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Through the course of the investigation, we came across a number of innovative organizational and operational strategies. Those most appropriate to the REPP's effort are listed below.

1. Research

a. Setting the research agenda

- By keeping the agenda somewhat narrow and by building on past work, opportunities to develop a substantive library exist.
- Top-down decision making or bottom-up decision making?—In setting the research framework, top-down makes sense, but in choosing individual projects, bottom-up allows for greater latitude and increased researcher innovation.
- Many other organizations rely on an advisory board, together with the director and other key staff, to identify research priorities. The group should define the agenda with three goals in mind: to keep it manageable, expanding the scope gradually over time as the organization finds its legs; to try not to repeat the efforts of existing organizations (NRHA, CAT, HAC); and to work on issues that are common to rural areas nationwide (such as health care and insurance, child care, job creation, environmental management).

b. Structuring the research staff

- Hire several in-house researchers who can relate to a much larger number of outside researchers, helping to guide, and later translate, their work for wider dissemination. The Economic Policy Institute employs this model quite effectively.
- Research that is timely is frequently not optimally rigorous, while work that is rigorous can lack timeliness. Those research centers that hope to affect policy attempt to strike a good balance between the two.

2. Dissemination/Advocacy

- In the policy world, there is a trend away from relying on written products to face-to-face meetings in order to convey policy positions and research findings. This means a greater reliance on briefing sessions, working conferences, seminars, brown bag lunches, etc., rather than dissemination of research and reports.
- Policy centers tend to rely on a range of written communication pieces—the Policy Bite (a short piece on recent policy research findings),

newsletters (including a half-page bulleted very straight-to-the-point version), an annual or biannual fact book (such as the State of Working America, or the State of the Environment) that becomes a standard for the field and "places" the organization as an authority, "backgrounders," fax fliers on breaking issues.

- Policy centers increasingly recognize the need for quick turnaround, brevity, and readability to increase impact.
- Several larger rural trade associations produce radio and TV actualities, which can be picked up by rural stations.
- Formatted op-eds can be sent out to rural and national papers for publication; rural papers are particularly in need of thoughtful, well-written copy.

The Heritage Foundation spends more than 40 percent of its budget on marketing its materials, slightly more than it spends researching them. Most policy centers have at least one full-time media/PR/editor position.

Clearinghouse/Networking

- Organize a complex database of lists, sortable by substantive area of interest, including a list of executive branch contacts at the federal and state levels, Hill contacts, key state legislature contacts, a media list (and arrange for access to segmented media lists), a researcher list, a grassroots organization list, a "concerned individual" list.
- To strengthen the network, organize a "distinguished rural service award" within the policy community. Corporate donors may be interested.
- Rely heavily on advisory groups for individual projects.
- Understand fully what resources the USDA library in Beltsville, MD offers.

APPENDIX II
NATIONAL RURAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Organizations:

Rural Coalition—coalition of local rural organizations.

Issue- or Regionally-Based Organizations:

Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)
Corporation for Economic Development (CfED)
Housing Assistance Council (HAC)—works on low-income housing issues in rural areas by providing technical assistance and lobbying for their legislative program.
National Rural Health Association (NRHA)—based in Kansas City, it is a coalition of rural health care providers.
Rural Economic Policy Program of the Aspen Institute (REPP)
Robert Rapoza and Associates—lobbyist for rural organizations

Membership Organizations:

Council of State (COSCA)
NACO
National Association of Development Organizations (NADO)
National Association of Regional Councils (NARC)
National Association of State Development Authorities (NASDA)
National Association of Towns and Townships (NATaT)
National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL)
National Governor's Association (NGA)
National League of Cities (NLC)
National Rural Electrification Cooperatives Association (NRECA)
Rural Community Assistance Programs (RCAPs)

Farm Organizations:

American Agricultural Movement—the most leftist agricultural group
American Farm Bureau Federation—a general purpose conservative farm organization that is the largest.
Center for Rural Affairs—based in Walthill, NB, a multi-purpose farm organization concerned with sustainable rural agricultural communities.
National Farmers Organization—primarily concerned with marketing
National Farmers Union—a general purpose Democratic farm organization.
National Grange—a general purpose farm organization

Other national organizations sometimes address rural issues, but their focus is on national problems. Most began to focus on rural issues as a result of grants from The Ford Foundation through the REPP. Examples include:

Center for Budget and Policy Priorities—works on safety net issues and legislation. It is beginning a state program.

Center for Community Change—provides technical assistance to grassroots organizations.

Children's Defense Fund—advocacy organization that seeks to represent the interests of children, particularly poor, minority, and disabled children.

Economic Policy Institute—does research on economic issues that affect working America and disseminates it to policymakers.

Urban Institute—does a wide variety of research which it disseminates.

APPENDIX III
LIST OF INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED

Richard Anderson
Northern Michigan University

Neal Barber
Virginia Housing
and Community Development

Robert Barrow
National Grange

Michael Bean
Environmental Defense Fund

Bob Bergland
National Rural
Electric Co-operative Association

Carolyn Brickey
Former Aide
Senate Agriculture Committee

Bob Cashdollar
Cashdollar, Jones and Company

Mike Clark
Management Assistance Group

Norm DeWeaver
Center for Community Change

Paul Drazek
American Farm Bureau Federation

Michael Dunn
National Farmers Union

Pablo Eisenberg
Center for Community Change

Larry Farmer
Mississippi Association
for Community Education

Geoffrey Faux
Economic Policy Institute

William Galston
University of Maryland

Dan Gibb
Office of Economic Development
and Rural Affairs, Small Business
Administration

Robert Greenstein
Center on Budget
and Policy Priorities

Alice Hersch
Association
for Health Services Research

Sarah Ingram
Urban Institute

Jeff Kirsh
Families U.S.A.

Richard Larochelle
National Rural
Electric Co-operative Association

Vicki Luther
Heartland Center
for Leadership Development

Christopher Makins
The Aspen Institute

Allan Mandel
Office of Economic Development
and Rural Affairs, Small
Business Administration

Michael Pertschuk
Advocacy Institute

Lorette Picciano-Hanson
Rural Coalition

David Raphael
Community Transportation
Association

George Rucker
Community Transportation
Association

Robert Rapoza
Robert A. Rapoza Associates

Arloc Sherman
Children's Defense Fund

Marty Strange
Center for Rural Affairs

Bob Van Hook
Former Director, National Rural
Health Association

Roland Vautour
Small Community
and Rural Development

Jim Weill
Children's Defense Fund

Stanley Wellborn
Brookings Institution

Laura Wilcox
Urban Institute

Eddie Williams
Joint Center for Political Studies