

Morphing Rural Community Development Models

The Nexus between the Past and the Future

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Rural community development has a long and diverse history in the United States and encompasses a wide range of objectives ranging from solving local problems, addressing inequalities of wealth and power, and promoting democratic values and practices to improving the potential of individual residents and building a sense of community.¹ Given these diverse goals, community development has been defined as economic development, political empowerment, integrated service provision, comprehensive planning, as well as job training and housing programs.² These diverse objectives and definitions have often left rural places questioning what is in their best interest when it comes to local and regional development.

Traditional rural economies were successful when they effectively captured the income generated from local farms, ranches, mills, fishing, and industries and provided products and services that met the needs of local residents.³ As rural economies began to undergo economic, social and demographic changes—such as industrial relocation, migration from urban areas, increased competition for development monies, and an increase in social pathologies such as rural crime⁴—communities struggled to respond.

Rural community and economic development strategies that were established to address these changes typically focused on enhancing the profitability of agriculture and industrial recruitment.⁵ But these approaches have in many cases been unsuccessful, and found to be short-term solutions to long-term problems. Industrial recruitment, for

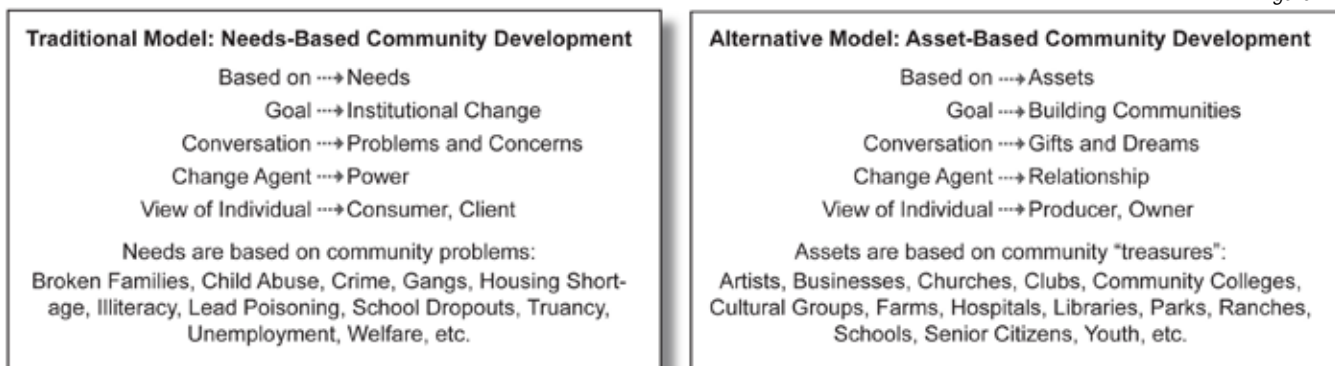
instance, has played out in many places as a game of winners and losers, sometimes simultaneously, as rural communities used local and state resources to entice manufacturers to relocate to their communities.

Today, new models of rural economic development are emerging to deal with the changing landscape of rural economies. These models are linking past, current, and future strategies together as they attempt to provide rural communities an opportunity to create a new and invigorating future.

Needs-Based vs. Asset-Based Community Development

One conceptual framework gaining ground in rural economic development is “asset-based” development.⁶ This framework, originally developed based on experiences in inner-city neighborhoods, reorients development from a “needs-based” approach. Needs-based models seek to identify weaknesses in a local community and then implement strategies to overcome those weaknesses. John Kretzmann and John McKnight, co-directors of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University, suggest that this method of mobilizing citizens focuses on negative characteristics of a community and demoralizes local residents, thus limiting proactive action at the local level (See Figure 4.1). They go on to suggest that focusing on local assets, instead of needs and deficits, allows residents to identify possibilities for change that they can control, and energizes residents to take action.

Figure 4.1



While the needs-based approach focuses on garnering external resources to solve problems, the alternative asset-based approach looks for residents' personal skills and dreams and links them to action through a public articulation of these local assets. The view of the individual is that of a producer or owner rather than that of a consumer or client. While the differences between owner and producer, and consumer and client may seem small, they provide a dramatic shift in where responsibility for the future lies. Financial resources are also viewed differently within the assets-based model; grants and loans, for instance, are seen as gap-filling instruments, rather than as guiding forces for the direction taken by the community.

The concept of asset-based community development is rather straightforward, even if its implementation can be difficult. In this approach, a community first organizes itself to identify local assets and, once these are identified, the community residents become mobilized and reorganize their local assets to create a positive future. Local assets may include individual, associational (voluntary organizations), institutional, economic (including hidden economic assets such as the transfer of wealth upon death), cultural and historic, and natural resource assets. Representatives of the community then map the assets for visual presentation to the community. Generally a large town hall meeting is organized and local residents collectively examine their community's assets and identify activities that are aimed at improving their lives. Examples of activities can include new businesses, recreational facilities, health care cooperatives, or other forms of community development.

Pursuit of these new activities often requires enhancements of community networks. When new relationships are built or emphasized in a rural community or region, they can develop new norms for interacting and increase trust among residents. These changes at the local level create an environment for mobilizing local citizens around their current assets, rather than dreamed-of assets that don't exist or

that aren't under the control of local residents. This model of self development (See Figure 4.2) has been used across the United States and in countries as varied as Romania, Australia, and India. The important point in the asset-based model is that mobilization of local citizens is a key component of local development efforts.

Fostering Entrepreneurship in Rural Areas

Drawing upon the concept of asset-based development, new models are emerging wherein many rural economic developers have begun drawing upon local assets in fostering entrepreneurship within their community. These contemporary models of rural economic development have several methods in common. First, they view industrial recruitment as a secondary activity for successful rural economic development. Second, they view local entrepreneurs as the foundation for developing a viable economy in the future. Third, they focus on local assets of the community and region. Finally, they pay particular attention to enhancing local and regional relationships and networks as they create their own future. Several of these models will be discussed below.

Economic Gardening

The first model, known as "Economic Gardening", evolved from a changing economy in rural Colorado. In 1987 a recession was occurring and the largest employer in Littleton, Colorado, laid off thousands of employees. According to local residents, there were nearly a million square feet of vacant retail space and downtown vacancies were approaching 30 percent.⁷ The town of Littleton began using local resources to grow their own jobs through entrepreneurial activity—Economic Gardening—instead of recruiting them from outside the community, or Economic Hunting. The idea evolved from work by Dr. David Birch at MIT who argued that a majority of all new jobs in any local economy were produced by small local businesses. The core elements

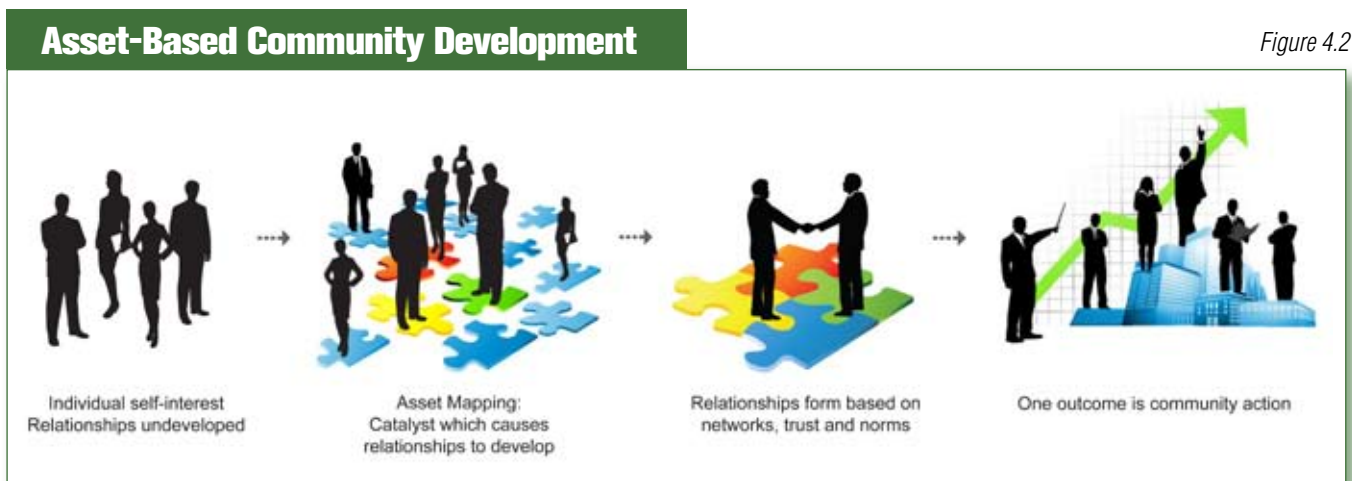


Figure 4.2

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of Economic Gardening are: 1) providing information, infrastructure and connections for local growth companies; 2) providing connections between industry and academia; and 3) focusing on quality of life and amenities.

The Littleton community assumed that not only were most industrial recruitment efforts unsuccessful but that there was a “darker side of recruiting that bothered them”.⁸ The dark side of business recruitment as they saw it was that these highly mobile businesses were looking for rural towns with cheap land, free buildings, tax abatements, and especially low-wage labor. Their experience had been that once the wages started improving the companies would often move to where costs were even lower, which often times meant moving to “Third World countries”.⁹

Yet as Littleton embarked on a new model for local economic development, several issues emerged that challenged some of their thinking. They found that only three to five percent of the companies being started were high-growth companies and yet they created a majority of the new employment. The term Dr. Birch coined for these high-growth companies was “gazelles”.¹⁰ This was a turning point for the community as they “got out of the small versus large debate”.¹¹ After studying characteristics of high-growth companies the community found that it was not the size of a company that predicted business success and growth, but the focus on innovation, new ideas and processes, and unique products. Since then, Littleton has been successful in creating high-quality jobs and maintaining a high quality of life. A diverse cross section of businesses and jobs have been created or expanded, ranging from businesses selling Scottish and Irish merchandise to high-end playthings for children such as elaborate pirate ships, space ships and Victorian mansions costing from \$30,000 to \$90,000. These businesses illustrate the concepts of innovation and uniqueness stressed by Economic Gardening advocates.

However, the very proximity of Littleton to Denver, and its approximate size of 20,000 people, means that Littleton’s approach may not represent an appropriate model for small, geographically isolated rural communities that are still stuck in the “commodity trap.” The commodity trap can be described as a community that is tightly linked to resource extraction where

price is the only variable of importance. In these communities additional models have emerged that potentially deal with the issue of scale and historical economic conditions.

Enterprise Facilitation

Another asset-based model that has seen success in very rural communities is derived from the work of Ernesto Sirolli, who has exported his community-based model of economic development across the globe. His model is called “Enterprise Facilitation”.¹² In the enterprise facilitation model, local community facilitators are identified and provide moral and technical support for residents with dreams of becoming entrepreneurs. Where numerous models of rural economic development are action-oriented, this particular model relies on word of mouth to advertise the availability of an entrepreneurial facilitator. Enterprise facilitators are “passive” in that they do not initiate any projects until a committed individual comes forward with the enthusiasm to move the idea for a new or expanding business forward. After this individual comes forward, the facilitator helps the individual find a “team” to help with all of the functions that the individual may not have the skills or interest in completing for a business to be a success. The facilitator helps build the team to support the potential entrepreneur. Then the facilitator provides support to the potential entrepreneur by developing a formal business plan and securing financing for the business. This model focuses on individual entrepreneurs who have dreams (assets) of owning their own business in a rural community.



Data has suggested that developing local coalitions focused on supporting entrepreneurial activity locally increases the number of jobs created as well as the benefits paid for the newly created jobs.

An example of the businesses supported by Enterprise Facilitation is La Dolce Vita (The Sweet Life) in Baker City, Oregon, where Enterprise Facilitation was the base of the BEGIN, or Baker Enterprise Growth Initiative, project. Baker City is a very remote community in eastern Oregon traditionally based in agriculture, logging and mining. Donna Stone's new business focuses on roasting and creating unique coffee blends. She sells much of her coffee to her sons who have drive-through coffee shops in four eastern Oregon communities, and also sells locally and through mail order (www.oregonmade.net). She credits her success to the support she received through local enterprise facilitation.

Hometown Competitiveness

Based in Lincoln, Nebraska, the Hometown Competitiveness Collaborative (HTC) is another model of rural community and economic development. The national HTC model is a capacity-building strategy and its outcome is to build community capacity to support local entrepreneurs and enhance the local economy. As their materials state, "HTC is about people development".¹³ The HTC process is built on the foundation of four main tenets. They are: 1) mobilizing local leaders; 2) energizing entrepreneurship; 3) capturing wealth transfer; and 4) attracting young people. Their philosophy is that small rural towns must tap into a diverse leadership base if they are to be competitive in the twenty-first century. They, as do the economic gardeners, believe that too many rural communities invest in businesses that export rather than build local wealth. Therefore the HTC provides a variety of training programs to help communities support their local entrepreneurs.

The HTC program also works with communities to develop planned giving structures as a means to capture the local wealth that is transferred upon the death of a resident. Their research shows that a window of opportunity exists for communities to access these monies.¹⁴ These local financial assets can be the bedrock for future economic development activities. Community foundations can play an important role in rural communities as a vehicle to identify local wealth and to provide a mechanism for planned giving to the community. The HTC sets a target goal of converting at least five percent of the local wealth into charitable assets endowed in community foundations to fund community and economic development.

The final tenet of the HTC is youth attraction. Many rural communities see their young residents leaving the area because of a lack of economic and social opportunities. The HTC program provides communities with training to retain rural youth in their community through youth engagement, creating career opportunities and entrepreneurial support, and nurturing a sense of ownership in the community's future leaders.

Ord, Nebraska, provides an excellent illustration of a community that has applied the HTC concepts to local rural economic development. Ord is a primarily agricultural community that has seen its population age and its young residents leave with little hope of returning over the past 100 years. However, after organizing the community to focus on entrepreneurship and identify those businesses with potential for growth, the community has seen an increase in its population and has been successful in developing local businesses. In addition, Ord succeeded in its efforts to recruit a call center. This success, according to local residents, was linked to the community's support of entrepreneurial activity. Ord has seen 10 young couples relocate to its town of about 2,200 people since initiating HTC, with six of the new couples receiving some form of relocation assistance from the Valley County Foundation. One couple bought the practice of a retiring dentist. The capture of local wealth and transference to a new generation of entrepreneurs is providing a renewed entrepreneurial attitude among many residents; this outlook has recently resulted in the development of an ethanol plant that will create 35 permanent jobs in the community.



Community-Based Entrepreneurial Training

Another model of community and economic development is community-based entrepreneurial training and support. This model, originally called EDGE (Enhancing Developing and Growing Entrepreneurs) and first launched in Nebraska (<http://nebraskaedge.unl.edu/>), has now been adapted in the West through support and facilitation of the Western Rural Development Center (<http://extension.usu.edu/wrdc>). The Western EDGE program and the EDGE program in Nebraska focus on developing local community capacity to identify emerging and existing entrepreneurs and provide technical support to them.¹⁵ Research conducted on this model illustrates the importance of building community capacity and culture to support entrepreneurial activity in rural communities and regions. Statistical data has suggested that developing local coalitions focused on supporting entrepreneurial activity locally increases the number of jobs created as well as the benefits paid for the newly created jobs.¹⁶ Drawing upon an asset-based approach the Western EDGE model has five primary objectives. They include:

1. Assisting entrepreneurs create and evaluate their business plans.
2. Assisting new and current small business owners develop and implement their business plans, and plan for business growth and expansion.
3. Providing program participants with follow-up support from their local communities.
4. Creating and retaining jobs through the start-up and expansion of small businesses.
5. Facilitating community capacity building by enhancing the structural field around entrepreneurial endeavors.

Through a conscious effort of organizing a coalition of local citizens, businesses, and service providers a community changes its network and relationship structures, providing a foundation for the emergence and support of entrepreneurial activity. A coalition that represents the diversity of the community provides a structure for sustained support of new entrepreneurial efforts. An example of how the Western EDGE or EDGE program operates on the ground is in North Platte, Nebraska. North Platte created a local coalition including local lenders, media, main street and home-based businesses to support entrepreneurship in their rural community. This coalition identifies potential entrepreneurs, supports a thirteen-week training course and provides follow-up services for those initiating a new or expanding business. Local lenders provide scholarship support for participants, reduced-interest-rate loans and an environment of moral and strategic support for the new businesses.

One example of a business supported by this coalition is the Fire House Gym in North Platte. The gym had been in operation under previous owners for many years. After participating in the EDGE program, the owner saw an increase in revenues of 7.4 percent the first year and 15.3 percent the second year. A personal training business also evolved as locals saw the emerging interest in physical fitness in their community.

Conclusion

As these new models illustrate, rural community and economic development is taking on new forms. While many states still focus their public resources on business recruitment, the new models successfully use public and private resources to develop community capacity for fostering and sustaining local entrepreneurial activity. As opportunities for innovation in rural communities emerge, identifying local assets and reorganizing the social and economic structure around unique products and services may provide a foundation to support small entrepreneurial efforts as well as fast-growing businesses in rural areas.

Lenders and public officials interested in generating new economies and job creation may find it more effective to work with a community and use public resources to fill in the gaps of the community's local resources. Financial institutions have an important role to play in supporting the emergence of rural entrepreneurship. The roles include participation in local coalitions focused primarily on supporting entrepreneurial activity in their community, identifying potential entrepreneurs, and providing guidance for business plan development and financing options for these future business owners. Lenders can also support and help develop local foundations for wealth transfer to provide alternative funding support for entrepreneurial activities, and CRA-motivated loans and investments may be one way to leverage local wealth transfer and capacity building in this particular area. To maximize the impact of their individual efforts, lenders, public agencies, and the private sector will be more successful creating new business and jobs by working together and leveraging their combined resources, and by focusing on local assets, local innovation, and local uniqueness. ■

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Addressing Community and Economic Development in Rural America: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Si Se Puede: Developing Farmworker Housing in the 12th District

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Native Community Development Financial Institutions: Building a Foundation for Strong Native Economies

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Big Lessons from Small Rural Communities: Working to Reduce Poverty Long Term

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