

www.e-Dialogues.ca
Royal Roads University

Rural Revitalization

Public Dialogue Forum
September 29th, 2014

Series VI of The Solutions Agenda
A research / practitioner partnership between Professor Ann Dale, Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Community Development, and Sustainability Solutions Group

Participants

Professor Ann Dale, Moderator, Canada Research Chair, Sustainable Community Development, Royal Roads University
Bill Reimer, Professor Emeritus at Concordia University in Montréal and Adjunct Professor at Brandon University.
Lenore Newman, Canada Research Chair in Food Security and the Environment and Professor of Geography at the University of Fraser Valley (UFV).
Dianne Looker, Professor Emerita at Acadia University.
Meaghan Kenny, Research Assistant, Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Community Development program
Rebecca Foon, Director, Sustainability Solutions Group
Yuill Herbert, Director, Sustainability Solutions Group
Rob Newell, Researcher, Canada Research Chair, Sustainable Community Development, Royal Roads University

---

Ann Dale

Welcome to our next theme in our Solutions Agenda research project, rural revitalization, a critical subject for all communities, and I hope our conversation will discover why? We have asked a diversity of people to join our research team, bringing both practitioners and researchers together.

I would like to start by asking each of you to briefly introduce yourself and why you are passionate about this topic. I'll start with myself, I spend most of my time by a lake that is largely rural, but is now facing the 'growth' dilemma of a large 'suburb' like development

going in behind some of our cottages. And a subsequent loss of biodiversity if and when all the lots are sold.

Lenore Newman

Hi Ann, I'm Lenore Newman, a Canada Research Chair in Food Security and the Environment and an associate professor at the University of the Fraser Valley. Much of my research looks at farmland on the rural/urban fringe, and I have explored many of rural Canada's towns as part of my work on Canada's food security. My worry is that rural Canadian towns are either experiencing population loss, or near the cities they are experiencing rural gentrification driving out locals. Neither path is sustainable.

Bill Reimer

Thank you for the invitation to join in this interesting discussion. I will be considering the value of this venue for discussion as well as the substance of our discussion. I have been involved with rural and remote issues for many years. Once I began (many years ago) the energy and insights of the people I met (researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and rural people) have kept me enthusiastically engaged for more than 40 years.

Some of the details of my involvement in these issues can be found on the CRC page (http://crcresearch.org/solutions-agenda/rural-revitalization) so I will add just a couple of updates that may be interesting to the participants.

I just returned from the annual meetings of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (http://crrf/ca) that were held in Prince George last Thursday to Saturday. It includes researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, business people, and citizens. There were plenty of presentations related to rural revitalization – with some of them specifically addressing some of the issues on our agenda. You can see some of the topics and presentations here.

I also wish to invite you all to explore the newly launched Rural Policy Learning Commons. This is a 7-year international project designed to facilitate collaboration among individuals and groups related to rural, regional, and northern policy. Our activities include support for exchanges, institutes, conferences, workshops, publications (academic and non-academic), a digital information hub, and social media – in short, anything that helps connect people, organizations, and groups concerned with rural revitalization. We welcome new partners, comments, and suggestions for new initiatives.

Robert Newell

Hi everyone, my name is Rob Newell. I work with Ann as a researcher in the Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Community Development program.

A quick note for the audience, this is the e-Panel forum where the main conversation with the panelists will take place. As the discussion progresses, we encourage audience members to enter the e-Audience forum to contribute questions and comments. For your convenience, we recommend that you open up the e-Audience forum in a separate window so that you can follow the conversation while posting your comments.

This is a direct link to the e-Audience forum.

At any given time in the conversation, you will be able to click the "Refresh Page" button in the top right corner to see the most recent posts of the conversation.

Ann Dale

Welcome Lenore and Rob. Bill, congratulations on your partnership grant. While we are waiting for others to join us, maybe you could talk about it a bit more, I see you already have?

Bill Reimer

The grant is designed to connect people interested in rural, remote, and northern issues. There are currently 8 countries represented with plenty of participants from across Canada. We are currently gearing up to support additional participants as interest grows. As indicated previously we have a wide range of knowledge mobilization activities on our agenda and are open to new ideas as they emerge. I encourage all of you to check us out and consider how we can help you.

Rebecca Foon

Fantastic initiative Bill, I look forward to hearing about how this progresses!

Hello everyone, thank you so much for joining this e-Dialogue today. My name is Rebecca Foon and I am a director with Sustainability Solutions Group. I spend a significant amount of time in the Laurentians in Quebec, where I also have been observing intense development over the last 10 years. I am particularly interested in innovative strategies that can successfully revitalize small communities by encouraging the cultural/social/environmental/spiritual aspects of a place to thrive. I am really looking forward to our conversation!

Y**uill Herbert**

Good afternoon (from the east coast!). I'm Yuill Herbert and work with Sustainability Solutions Group, often on community planning projects and with Ann on all sorts of wild and wonderful endeavors.

I live on a farm in rural Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia was earlier a patchwork of '100 acre'

farms. These farms would primarily sell cream, which is essentially liquid sunshine. Everything else on the farm, whether it was manure or crop residue was part of a contained nutrient cycle. In this way, the 100 acre farm was a model of sustainability. There are no longer functioning 100 acre farms in Nova Scotia and like in much of Canada, rural communities are collapsing with rapidly aging populations, no major sources of employment and at least on the surface, a lack of vitality. But I think there is a magic in rural areas and in the rural livelihood, a 'groundedness' that doesn't exist in the urban environment. I am very interested in thinking about and understanding the role of rural communities in modern society.

Dianne Looker

Hi everyone. I first logged in to the wrong place. Good to join you.

I'm a retired Sociology prof who has studied rural youth for most of my career. I'll leave it at that for now.

Meaghan Kenny

Hi everyone, sorry for my delay. I am a research assistant for Ann. I am currently working on a case study looking at the benefits, challenges of an incubator farm in L'Ange Gardien called Plate-forme Agricole. Previously, I worked for Just Food Ottawa and my main research interests revolve around food justice, land rights/access, and resilient communities.

Ann Dale

Welcome everyone, let's begin by discussing our first question of our two-hour conversation.

What makes rural communities so different from urban communities in terms of revitalization, are there unique barriers to these communities?

Bill Reimer

Rural communities are different from non-rural communities on the basis of distance, density, and identity. Although they share challenges that affect urban centres as well, the impacts are often different because rural places are farther from population centres, have lower density, and are differentially perceived by people in different places.

In another presentation I focused on five major changes that affect the trajectories of rural communities and create both challenges and opportunities for their revitalization found here. They were: urbanization, mechanization, immigration, state withdrawal, and

limits to resources. They all affect rural and remote places in a different manner than urban – because of distance, density, and identity issues.

Urbanization: Although rural populations are growing, their relative growth to urban areas continues to decrease. This affects relative power, perception, and attention to rural issues.
Mechanization: Our commitment to commodity trade of our natural resources helps to drive the substitution of capital for labour and the related decline of rural communities.
Immigration: We will become more and more dependent on immigration as Canadian birth rates drop below our ability to reproduce our population. Since immigration is, in general, more favourable to urban places, without significant changes rural places will be at a disadvantage.
State withdrawal from its social mandate: With the withdrawal of our governments from the welfare state of the 1960s and 1970s, the availability of social services has been transformed from our status as citizens to clients. This means that population and population density drives access to services – leaving rural places at a disadvantage.
Limits to resources: The collapse of the cod fishery, the occurrence of “peak oil” using conventional techniques, and the increase in extreme weather as a result of climate change all reflect the challenges of environmental stresses on our planet. Rural places are particularly vulnerable to these effects because of their proximity to natural resources and natural disasters.

Meaghan Kenny

Bill, I really appreciate your comment on immigration. I have worked with resettled refugees and diverse immigrant communities who come primarily from agrarian backgrounds. These people have tremendous rural and farming knowledge and would love to have their own land to farm. However, as you mentioned, the services they require as newly arriving immigrants are centrally located in urban areas.

That's why the innovative farm projects such as the incubator farms (Just Food and Plate-forme) can provide a great way for new farmers to build up a sense of the farm business and growing climate in Canada - with the possibility of successfully purchasing their own land to farm in the future.

Bill Reimer

These are good examples, Meaghan. I have often argued to some of the small communities that bemoan the fact that immigrants only settle there for a short time - that their communities might consider developing their capacity as 'receptor' communities for new Canadians. They are often very good at receiving immigrants, teaching them about Canadian opportunities, jobs, how to access doctors, manage government demands, and generally introducing them to Canadian culture. Having them develop enough capacity to leave could be seen as a good thing - in fact something that could be "marketed" to government as a contribution worthy of support. We do that all the time in universities since we celebrate the "loss" of our students. What is needed is a place to discuss these issues with urban places to get recognition and compensation for this

service that such receptor communities provide. It would increase their population and justify the development of services even though there would be high turnover.

Yuill Herbert

Rural communities are by definition sparsely settled by humans. They are more isolated from society in every sense (not that isolation is negative characteristic). Transportation is more challenging and there is limited if any alternatives to the private vehicle; those without the private vehicle for whatever reason are literally isolated. Many services found in an urban environment are not easily accessible. Economics systems are structured so as to extract wealth from rural areas and direct it to the urban areas so there is little financial wealth in rural areas. However, rural communities are not necessarily more isolated from people, as friends and neighbours are a known quantity. And with isolation, there are stars, quiet and greenery.

Lenore Newman

Rural communities in Canada face a number of challenges. They are overwhelmingly car dependent, and also can have limited employment options that support diverse populations. They can be a hard sell to young urbanites, and some of that is justified. The rural areas I work in are sometimes very socially conservative, which is particularly problematic when that spills onto town councils who are also against density and diversity. Changing these deeper issues can be very difficult.

Yuill Herbert

Rural areas can certainly be socially conservative and also closed to outsiders ('come from aways' as they are known). But rural areas can also be a refuge for 'outsiders', where experimentation that is crowded out of the urban areas (literally and metaphorically) can blossom. I think of Bread and Puppet Theatre in Vermont, Caravan Farm Theater in Armstrong BC and Ship's Company Theatre in Parrsboro, NS. From theatre to coffee- fair trade pioneers Just Us in Wolfeville, Kicking Horse in Invermere and Oso Negro in Nelson.

Lenore Newman

Yuill is quite right that we have some great examples of rural done well in Canada - certainly Nelson fits that model, or my own home town of Robert's Creek. The trick is spreading that success elsewhere. So many British Columbia towns have gone down the road of chain stores and sprawl. I wonder what the defining differences are?

Robert Newell

I would add Kimberley, BC, to this list and give my thoughts around what I think lends to its success. I lived in the community for a couple years, and found it to be a marvel in the way that it didn't seem to succumb to the 'bust' part of the 'boom and bust' forestry cycle and the closure of it's mine. Furthermore, the community is quite active and 'alive' even though it is off the 'beaten track' and people need to travel off the main vein to visit it. Specific reasons for its success are hard to pin point, but it was very clear that community members were passionate about their community and place. What this means is that they weren't necessarily structuring their town around an economic dependence and were actively exploring what was important to keep the community thriving. Initiatives like the Kimberley Happiness project reflected this (a project that collected locals ideas on what is important about their community). In a lot of ways, it's a testament to the importance of social capital and place attachment in motivating communities.

Dianne Looker

As I said my focus has been on rural youth. A key difference between urban and rural is that many rural youth move to urban areas but few urban youth do the reverse. A challenge for rural communities is to not only encourage rural youth to return, but to expose urban youth to the possibilities of living and working in rural areas.

Rebecca Foon

Very interesting, and it seems that innovation / cutting edge initiatives are often spearheaded by strong leaders/champions (whether in government or community leaders). Interesting to think about when looking at rural revitalization success stories and the challenge rural communities face with regards to rural youth leaving for urban centres.

Meaghan Kenny

I think a great way to expose urban youth and encourage rural revitalization is to have more alternative farm projects on the urban-rural periphery.

Currently, there is a great divide between urban and rural. Historically, (in Ottawa) farm land was much closer to the urban core. The NCC expropriated a great deal of land to create the greenbelt. Having access to the arable land that is zoned as rural/agricultural along the urban/rural periphery allows for greater exposure to rural activities and jobs.

Bill Reimer

I like how the Japanese communities we have worked with approach the issue of departing youth. They keep in touch with them through bulletins and the internet - keeping them up to date with what is happening in the community and with the people there. They also invite them back to participate in community celebrations by showing pictures and talking about the places they have been. In this way they add to the community learning. They also use their community alumni as "intelligence gathering agents". They contact them if the community business people wish to evaluate potential markets. The community officials argue that when these youth start thinking about raising a family, if the contacts remain through these activities, some of them will think about coming back. Even a few might return in this way, but they bring with them considerable information and new networks from their time away.

Dianne Looker

Thanks, Bill. Yes, various communities have tried this form of "keeping in touch" program - and I know Newfoundland had some success with its "Come Home" year.

But I want to emphasize that the challenge may be more attracting urban youth to rural - many, indeed most rural youth do end up in rural areas (60% or more). The thing is over 90% of urban stay in an urban area. Not necessary their community of birth, but they stay urban. If rural communities want to revitalize, they have to not only keep and attract back their own youth, they have to be innovative in attracting urban youth as well.

Yuill Herbert

I have noted the taste of emerging 'back to the lander' movement take two. There is a trickle, and perhaps even a growing trickle of young people moving to rural areas in Nova Scotia to farm. It is starting to show up in the number of children in kindergarten classes. The Maritime Provinces, however, are unique in that land is accessible and affordable. But what are the conditions that result in a wide and broad urban to rural migration, driven by ideological reasons, if indeed that was the driver for the first wave of back to the landers? In my experience, that first wave significantly enhanced the vitality of rural areas.

Dianne Looker

In terms of identity, one of the interesting things I found in a recent paper I did was that rural youth are not the only ones with attachment to community. Urban youth also feel attached to their "communities", which are, I suspect neighborhoods or areas within larger urban areas.

Robert Newell

Earlier in the conversation there was discussion around identity, I understand from place attachment studies (and living in smaller communities, myself) that people living in rural communities can develop a strong attachment to place and sense of community. I imagine this would attract people that have grown up in rural areas back to the community and also serve to retain some youth population; however, I wonder if this would cause a barrier in terms of attracting new young adults? Is this an issue in terms of people trying to find themselves or relate to an identity that they did not form living in an urban place?

Yuill Herbert

Perhaps if they are escaping their 'urban' identity, they will be open to a new identity - was this what the back to the lander movement was about? To escape a new identity, you need to be dissatisfied with your existing identity. Are there reasons why people would be dissatisfied with characteristics of the urban identity now?

Robert Newell

This is an interesting line of discussion, and I'm tempted to explore it a little bit further. I've read a couple studies on the motivations of urbanites to move to (or at least gain seasonal residence) in rural areas, and the term 'escapism' crops up, referring to a desire for escaping the 'hecticness' of urban-living. What this seems to do, however, is create a population of people with a different sort of place identity than those that initially lived there and formed attachment to place through livelihood and heritage. There's a potential concern that you have a socially divided community (which is certainly the case with some seasonal residence communities), so that raises this new consideration of how (or even should) we foster convergent identities?

Ann Dale

We are talking about the unique barriers to rural communities? So jump right in, Bill has talked about identity. I believe that people identify very strongly with their place in rural communities, is this more so than in urban centres? And if so, does it make for greater land-use conflicts? Lenore, the question of amenities we have discussed often between urban and rural communities, would you like to expand more?

Dianne, you raise the question of demographics. Here just outside of Ottawa, we have a lot of the rural being 'developed' by baby boomers who are either down-sizing to condos and a cottage or moving to a semi-rural setting before their old age forces them into a condo, care to comment?

Dianne Looker

I think a key urban-rural difference is that rural are aware of and exposed to urban life styles and issues. They see it in various media; they experience it when they travel; many of them live in urban areas for their post-secondary years. Urban have fewer ways of knowing rural.

Lenore Newman

Yes, Ann, I think in many ways the amenity issue is a huge one. City life when done well has come to be dominated by walkable "villages" where maybe a thousand people or so all live near coffee shops, groceries, pubs, etc. My walk score for example here on Commercial Drive in Vancouver is 98. In many parts of the world rural life is also based on walkable villages, but in much of Canada amenities are absent or require a car. Where that isn't true (Ganges on Saltspring for example) prices are very high do to cottagers, weekend folk. The question is how to achieve dense amenities in rural regions yet maintain the natural setting, etc.

Robert Newell

Issues with transportation and access has been a common thread in the conversation, thus far, and I've noticed similar concerns through our case study work on how smaller communities can address climate change. I know some smaller communities think about increasing density and walkability; however, a tension arises when thinking about certain values for rural lifestyle. Do people live and/or move to rural areas to live in density? Indeed, I know places like Revelstoke and Bowen Island have been confronted with this question when considering densifying.

Ann Dale

This is a land-use conflict facing most communities in some ways, and requires fundamental change to how governments govern and raise revenues. Local communities have only one source of revenue, property taxes, so a built-in incentive to grow as much as possible, at whatever cost?

Lenore Newman

I would add that if we had the sort of rail networks enjoyed in other parts of the world the isolation and alienation of rural areas might be much improved. Basically no millennial, many of whom don't drive at all, wants to live somewhere that is an hour's drive from a decent restaurant.

Dianne Looker

Yes, I saw an interesting program when I was at a rural conference in Australia. Urban youth could spend a week or a weekend at a farm.

But rural is not just farming. There could be programs to encourage those taking various degree programs to spend time in rural areas. Medical schools talk about trying to encourage doctors to live in rural areas. Lots of other professions could as well. Rural areas need lawyers, bankers, teachers - and service personnel in a whole range of occupations.

Yuill Herbert

It is not long ago that train service was quite extensive- perhaps 20 years. But a train is and could be transformative for rural communities. It is a lifeline to the broader world, physically and symbolically.

Ann Dale

I agree, what about rural communities creating networks of connection, and building a commons that brings more amenities to adjacent communities, a kind of village green. I don't think there can ever be the walkability of a city, but there can definitely be more access to local food markets, local products, which is a different kind of development than simply building houses. I think we talked once about how important a baker is to building community? What amenities would rural youth need and how could several communities cooperate to bring them in?

Dianne raises another key point, keeping connected. Rebecca, what if the older folks reached out to younger folks who are artists? What about having more rural festivals, feasible?

Rebecca Foon

This concept leads to very exciting initiatives that increases social capital, nourishes culture and the arts - on a much smaller scale, a woman names Nerissa Rosati has been renovating warehouses in and around Whitehorse for over 20 years, turning them into beautiful affordable artists studios and galleries, helping to create a dialogue between artists and a rich centre for the arts.

Dianne Looker

One thing to keep in mind about rural communities "growing" is that - if they grow enough they are no longer considered "rural" - as Bill reminded us rural is defined by density and distance from density (and identity). Ray Bollman has a great power point presentation where he shows that rural is continuously growing in Canada for several decades, but at the end there are fewer people in rural than at the beginning. The

reason is, when rural areas grow they become reclassified as urban...

Ann Dale

Dianne's comment reminds me that we seldom talk about an optimal scale for community?

A controversial question, why should people expect to live in small communities, why not just move everyone to the large urban centres, aren't they flourishing hubs of innovation and creativity?

Leads me to our second question, why are rural communities important?

Dianne Looker

I agree, we need to be talking about optimal sizes for different functions. Also, we need to move away from the assumption that "growth" is the measure of success. There may well be enough people in an area to do what needs to be done; there may well be natural barriers (rivers, mountains, etc.) barriers to physical growth.

Just as people talk about "sustainable" communities and life styles we need to talk about optimal sizes for different situations.

Bill Reimer

Rural places and people provide the timber, food, minerals, and energy that aid in urban growth, and they are stewards of the water and other resources upon which urban people depend. Rural and northern places also process urban pollution, refresh and restore urban populations, and maintain the heritage upon which much of our Canadian identity rests. In return, urban Canada provides the markets for rural goods and employment, technology, financial capital, consumer goods, and much of its media-based culture (Reimer, Bill (2013) “Rural-Urban Interdependence: Understanding our common interests” Pp 91-109 in Parkins, John R. and Maureen G. Reed, Social Transformation in Rural Canada: Community, Cultures, and Collective Action, Vancouver: UBC Press.) See also.

Yuill Herbert

This seems to be a pragmatic take on the relationship between urban and rural life. Are there not elements of exploitation in that relationship? Given that the urban areas have all the capital, are the locations of the regulators and politics, the lawyers and the lobbyists and rural areas are far from power. This would particularly seem to be the case with indigenous peoples...

Bill Reimer

I agree Yuill, that the relationship is unequal. I don't think it will improve until rural people work out the kinds of alliances and negotiations that get many of their non-tangable contributions recognized by urban people. That is why food is so important at a point of negotiation. Water is another. I like the example of New York City that negotiated community development funds for those in the Catskill Mountains in exchange for the stewardship of the water in those mountains. NYC's water supply was vulnerable if the communities became stressed, so they worked out this long-term agreement.
Similar agreements can be found in the Alberta Hub around Edmonton and the Miramichi Valley. These things take rural people recognizing the benefits they provide to urban, then negotiating for the recognition of those benefits. Urban people won't take this initiative.

Ann Dale

I think the question of food security will become even more important as climate change impacts are realized across the country, and relocalizing agricultural services and ensuring a secure access will be key? In our action agenda on rethinking growth and prosperity the peer-to-peer learning workshop identified relocation of key services as one of the strategies for increasing economic diversity in smaller communities, as well as the adoption of more cooperatives as a strategy to regain local autonomy from the global marketplace?

Bill Reimer

Good point Ann. The issue of food security also has the advantage of being a topic in which urban people are also very concerned. This means it provides a great basis for possible alliances between rural and urban people. Such alliances are strategically important for rural places since the major centres of power are in urban places - and will continue to be so as urbanization continues.

Lenore Newman

That's such a great question, Ann, and one that doesn't get enough attention. I think rural communities are important for a number of reasons. Firstly, they allow a much more direct access to nature, secondly, they are actually important for national security (the definition of national ownership is occupation) and thirdly diversity is valuable for its own sake. To be honest one could argue it is more sustainable to have everyone living in dense walkable urban neighbourhoods in a collection of giant cities, but diversity is what makes us human. I can't see myself ever living rural again, but I certainly wouldn't want to see rural life disappear, and that is a real danger in much of Canada. We are a country of lost and vanished towns. And each of those towns had its own culture and worldview.

Rebecca Foon

I completely agree, and I think this hits on the work of Zita Cobb - Fogo Island, just off the coast of Newfoundland where she discusses the importance of recognizing that nature and culture are two beautiful components to human existence. She founded the Shorefast Foundation to help locals revive Fogo Island's economy and establish the outport as an international cultural destination.

Robert Newell

To add to this comment around diversity, there would be quite a danger in having a national population that is entirely urban-bound as it probably would reduce our resilience as society. Try and imagine what it would be like if we didn't have any examples or best practices of living in rural areas (and in direct contact with nature and natural resources) in the face of exogenous shocks that could affect urban infrastructure. Cities and urban living are in no way indestructible, so truly a mix and understanding of living outside the city is essential for societal knowledge and long-term resilience.

Yuill Herbert

A fascinating question... Which is more essentially human- the urban environment or the rural environment? A fundamental challenge, at least in the modern urban environment, is sensory overload. I suspect there are all sorts of consequences of sensory overload... But then involuntary physical isolation which can sometimes result in rural environment is also problematic. On the positive side, the opportunity to connect with the rest of 'creation' is much greater in the rural environment, but the likelihood that one appreciates that opportunity is perhaps lower. The dominant experience of nature among teenagers in my community seems to be from the seat of an ATV, whereas city folks go hiking and bird watching. This is the lens of Eco literacy... but the conclusions are not readily apparent, from the perspective of an observer...

Lenore Newman

Yuill raises an interesting point about urban conditions, and perhaps one of the problems is that urban areas in Canada are becoming so much more desirable. They are innovative hubs of walkability, bike lanes, co-working spaces, a return to public space, urban food production. Maybe cities are just doing a much better job of advertising themselves as leaders. However they do have such a big cost disadvantage, yet rural land in BC in particular just isn't much cheaper? I think cost is one reason that the East Coast is building better rural towns?

Rebecca Foon

Yes I definitely think cost is a critical component - and yet I do know people artists, both young and old, that are moving away from Vancouver as it is so expensive and choosing to live in rural areas in BC as it is more affordable - and can find a deeper connection to nature and tranquility to inspire their art....for perhaps both the benefit of urban and rural communities?

Ann Dale

This is where I think the role of internet communications has such a bridging role to play, many professionals can now live rural because of increased access and bandwidth, access to libraries and so forth. Another critical feature is for creatives, many of whom need quiet, others thrive on noise. I just spoke to a book designer this morning and she told me she does most of her work in the country, it is where her creativity is highest?

Lenore Newman

I think Ann's questions are interesting in the Canadian context in particular, as we are so overwhelmingly urban. 80% of Canadians live in cities or suburbs, which is one of the highest ratios in the world. One has to wonder what happened in Canada in particular to depopulate the rural areas. Transportation changes? Lack of opportunity? It is really quite striking, particularly on the prairies.

Robert Newell

For those interested in looking at the trends on this 'city migration', we graphed and blogged awhile ago on Canada population trends, investigating percentages living in rural and living in urban over the last 150 years. You can see a clear reversal in percentages as the country became more industrialized here.

Bill Reimer

Note how Robert's graph shows the emergence of this trend with the introduction of mechanization and the explicit policy (later confirmed by the Agricultural policy of the 1970s) to support large scale commodity exports. We are now able to produce more food with many fewer people. Unfortunately this depends on fossil fuels and the overuse of the soil, etc. It also means that the commodity producers (and the gov't supporting this policy) is uninterested in the welfare of rural communities. They focus on mega storage and large scale transport. Most of the small elevators on the prairies have closed and the Cargills of the world have built huge grain terminals that are unconnected to communities. Communities that seek revitalization by chasing smokestacks simply exacerbate these conditions.

Ann Dale

We are certainly raising some interesting questions. I agree that smaller communities are not 'advertising' their unique amenities, for example, they offer critical landscapes for landscape artists (being a failed one myself), access to unmanufactured hiking, access to biodiversity, space for reflection through connection to nature. Going back to Dianne's example of other communities reaching out to the young people who have left, keeping them connected, imagine if artists return to offer workshops, retreats, concerts?

Dianne Looker

And not just artists. If rural communities invite various groups, conferences, etc., assuming it is organized appropriately, they will be exposed to the rural area and hopefully its amenities and advantages.

Ann Dale

Our discussion reveals that rural communities provide critical ecological services to urban centres, and the latter have very attractive amenities that appeal to young people, and thus, attracting human capital away from smaller communities. It seems to me that given the dependence of urban centres on rural, and the increasing interdependence which will emerge as a function of climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies, we need to reconcile the relationship between rural and urban? Maybe it starts with integrated land-use planning that includes those ecological services?

Okay, you guys have convinced me that we don't all need to move to the city. Now, for our last question, and you have already begun to touch on this, with Bill's comments about new negotiations over water.

What rural innovations or strategies for revitalization come to mind? I encourage you to provide any website links you have for our audience and subsequent readers once we have archived the conversation.

Yuill Herbert

My favourite project is the Intervale Centre in Burlington, Vermont. The project has many dimensions, but it is approximately 700 acres of river bottom on the edge of Burlington (which is a city but a very rural city!). There are number of established farms that are leased on the land and there is a farm incubator program so that the established farms can help get new farmers going. There is also land available for new immigrants and refugees who have farming experience or want to grow their own food. There is an organisation which works to bridge the practical and philosophical gap between institutional buyers and farmers and on it goes. I have never seen a comprehensive evaluation of the impacts of Intervale but I suspect that it has had a massive influence...

Meaghan Kenny

Similar projects are Everdale Environmental Learning Centre, Just Food Ottawa, and the L'Ange Gardien Plate-Forme Agricole

---

Rebecca Foon

To further highlight Fogo Island, check out the work of Shorefast - and in particular The Fogo Island Inn, as they call it, their first economic engine.

Bill Reimer

In my Harris Centre presentation I pointed to seven strategies for rural communities that address these challenges. They are:
- Look to urban demand and organize to respond to it;
- Identify global niche markets and reorganize local assets to fill them;
- Learn to integrate strangers;
- Build social infrastructure;
- Build all capacities: market, bureaucratic, associative, and communal;
- Develop regional opportunities; and
- Make rural-urban interdependencies visible.

You can find an elaboration of these strategies in the presentation. Several of them have been mentioned in our exchanges today.

Yuill Herbert

These are interesting points... and seems like a useful roadmap. Have any communities used them that you know of?

Bill Reimer

You will find examples for all of them in my powerpoint notes - via the link. I have others I could add.

Yuill Herbert

This presentation looks very interesting- addresses many of the forces at play by the looks of it - from neoliberalism to fracking... have you considered rural landscapes from the perspective of indigenous peoples?

Bill Reimer

Yuill - the conference I just attended in Prince George opened my eyes (again) the tremendous potential for revitalization insights and actions that are emerging from indigenous peoples. This is especially the case in BC where many land and governance arrangements are being negotiated and with the insights from previous failures in mind. In speaking with the indigenous people at the conference it was clear that they were conceptualizing the "rural landscape" issue from a dramatically different perspective.

The landscape was not a place, but a living, cultural, and spiritual space, for example. They are busy working out the details of this in the context of our legal systems and political policy that promise to create a sea change in thinking about these things if they are successful. I look forward to the many ways in which this is being worked out and learning from their successes (and failures).

Lenore Newman

It seems from the dialogue one thing that is needed is better connection between rural and urban, both physically through transport networks and through cultural connections. Imagine a small town with a rail link to a major city developing a walkable village with bike paths out into the surrounding areas. People who want ten acres could still be an easy bike ride or car trip to the local village hub. That would be ideal in my view, but would require huge changes in how we treat our rural areas.

Dianne Looker

My major suggestion, as is evident from my comments, is to encourage rural communities to develop activities that bring a range of urbanites to the area, and then ensure they are made familiar with the options and opportunities for living there. There may be subsidies of various types to locate a business in a rural area.

Immigration is another avenue, which was touched on earlier. There are a lot of options that can be explored.

Meaghan Kenny

I understand that rural revitalization is more than farming. However, most of my experience is in farming and food justice – therefore, I will, mostly, speak to that aspect of the rural landscape.

I am seeing a lot of overlap in the themes of identity, rural importance, food security, connectivity and ideological motivations…the rural experience and motivations for moving back/staying in place is different for each individual. I have interviewed youth artists (black smiths and metal workers) who moved to rural locations to have the space, inspiration, and cheaper living costs to work on their craft. They also require the

connectivity to markets to sell their wares. Most of the artists or rural dwellers I have interviewed say they grow/breed their own food and sell their produce in local markets for both income and as an alternative to grocery produce that is conventionally farmed.

A young female youth artist I interviewed got her start in a rural community when she reached out looking for free/donated accommodation to both live and work until she had enough income from her art sales (and a significant side career) to purchase her own land. This speaks to the importance of social capital in rural areas. This was a case of a youth reaching out into a rural community. I think it is important that rural community members advertise their amenities and services to attract artists, farmers, lawyers, service providers, etc.

I have interviewed young farmers that may have been attractive to a romanticized image of farming and rural life but ultimately “stick with it” because they love the science of growing, the labour and lifestyle of farming, the skills and knowledge sharing in the community, and the independence of ownership. At the same time they are proud of their organic produce and contributing to the resilience of their ecosystem health.

Robert Newell

Granted, there is more to revitalization than farming, but I do think the food security is definitely a very important aspect, if not just for symbolic purposes. I'd like to draw attention to the example of T'Sou-ke First Nation.

Their most 'evident' innovation is the success that they have had with solar power and energy conservation; they are a leading example in Canada of energy self-sufficiency. However, they also have developed a community gardens and highlight these gardens when taking people for tours and presenting their work on solar power. The community gardens can not sustain the community's food needs; however, symbolically, it has great importance as it demonstrates steps toward a community creating its own access to nourishment and healthy foods, thus it is included in tours and presentations even though it might not be as 'impressive' as the solar facilities. To understate, food is such a fundamental of human living and cultural that even if a full food operation is not entirely viable, it can become more of a point of exploring these steps and showing that these pathways are possible.

Ann Dale

To build on Bill's last comment about impacts of mechanization and the move to larger scale, the District of Cochrane in Northeastern Ontario at one time had as many as 400 full time farmers. The mayor of Cochrane made it his mission to reintroduce farming in a sustainable manner. Their efforts are now beginning to pay off. Eighteen Mennonite farmers and one non-Mennonite farmer have collectively invested over an estimated $9M since mid-2012 in tile drainage, land clearing, new barns, sheds, homes etc. More are coming. Trials in growing Quinoa and Amaranth have also been conducted. I believe if I am not mistaken that the Mayor is 'someone from away', emphasizing the need once again for all types of diversity. Are there other examples, folks?

Bill Reimer

This is an interesting example, Ann. It reinforces the importance of the social dimensions of potential options. The region of southern Manitoba has a level of immigration that rivals Toronto - in spite of the general pattern of immigration being to urban places. They did it by leveraging their Mennonite heritage and targeted their religious cousins in the USA, Central, and South America since they recognized the compatibility of and objectives with their own. They had to negotiate special arrangements with the provincial and federal governments, but once it was done it opened the door for many other language and cultural groups to follow. This is good example of what can happen when rural people look at their local assets (in this case, cultural), think strategically about their objectives and options, then take action collectively.

Rebecca Foon

Although based in the States, I just recently came across this initiative - the National Farm to School Network (NFSN) founded in 2007, established from the desire to support community-based food systems, strengthen family farms, and improve student health. It was established by a collaboration of more than 30 organizations seeking to shape the farm to school movement, which has grown from a handful of schools in the late 1990s to 38,000 schools throughout the US. Tying together theme we have been discussing, food security, supporting rural farms, tapping youth into food security issues, etc.

Lenore Newman

As someone who left a small town at 17 to escape social conservatism, I think towns that truly want to attract urbanites would have to publicly embrace a social covenant to welcome all religions, sexualities, political views, and ways of thought. This might be really hard to realize, but the successful examples of small towns (Nelson, etc.) are usually places that are known for their diversity. Even in the small city where I work (Abbotsford) there is a huge rift between the Mennonite community that dominates town council and the East Indian farming community which makes up nearly half of the population. Somehow the small has to embrace the diverse.

Ann Dale

Lenore, you have hit on a key point. Where I mostly live just outside of Ottawa, in a semi-rural setting now, with a very sophisticated population, there is such conflict over development and a lack of appreciation for different perspectives, letting them be heard and that there are deeply held values that can inhibit dialogue.

Dianne Looker

I agree, but I would also argue that rural does not have the exclusive claim to social conservatism. The thing would be to find examples of rural communities that have faced this challenge and managed to embrace not necessarily all diversities, but the ones with which they have to deal.

Yuill Herbert

My town, Tatamagouche, has overcome this issue, at least in comparison to other NS communities. There was a significant influx of back to the landers with their new ideas, then a wave of Shambhala buddhists, who were also progressive-minded and then those two groups have created a foundation of events and initiatives, social infrastructure, you might call it, that is attracting all sorts of people...

Lenore Newman

Concerning strategies for rural revitalization, at the federal level...

1. A rebuilding of the rail network to provide fast train travel to rural Canada. That would be a game-changer

2. Infrastructure money to build and improve village cores near rail stations to lower driving in rural areas. I will add that until rural residents are driving less rural life in Canada simply isn't and cannot be sustainable.

3. Help for new farmers in rural areas, in particular small scale farmers. The US runs rings around Agriculture Canada in this respect. We need massive investment.

Dianne Looker

Why do you say that rural residents need to drive less? While one can walk to many areas in urban areas, and while there are good transit systems in some parts of many cities, when I've been in cities (e.g. a year's sabbatical in Victoria) I drove more than ever I do in the small rural area where I live. I had to drive to get to almost everything - and I drove further. The times I've had to drive by Toronto and viewed the tie ups on the 401 does not suggest to me that urbanites don't drive....

Lenore Newman

Your experience doesn't reflect the norm. Car ownership is lowest in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal in Canada, and personally when I am in Victoria (half the time) I never use my car. 90% of folks in Manhattan don't own a car for example. And the biggest

contribution to our ecological footprint is car use. (Well, tied with the impact of red meat). If we can't get people to stop driving, we can't achieve global sustainability, period, end of story. I totally agree rural lives can involve less car use, and likely suburban living involves even more car use, but it is a rare person in rural Canada on average who doesn't have a car.

Dianne Looker

My point was more that it's not just rural who have to stop using cars. You are right that we need sustainable means of transportation - which might (or might not) be more sustainable types of "cars". The answer need not be rail.

But if rural is density and DISTANCE from density then those distant people will need some form of transportation to get them to the amenities that are feasible and sustainable only in larger settings. But there are other alternatives, which are being developed. Such as licensing nurse practitioners to do more so people don't have to travel to hospitals as much, various forms of distance transactions. Lots of very different options.

Yuill Herbert

Although I was just blown away - the highest walking mode share in Canada I have come across is Yellowknife! And it is cold there!

Lenore Newman

Yes, which proves what can be done when small towns are kept small! I love Yellowknife - easy to walk around though it is pretty cold!

Bill Reimer

When I was there I discovered how this does not emerge by chance. They have been working together (and in coordination with universities) on reconceptualizing the design of a "winter city". This includes things like designing sidewalks to take advantage of shadow and light to make them easy to clear and navigate. Very cool!

Ann Dale

Another e-Audience Question

I am wondering if any examination of rural revitalization south of the border has taken place and if so, are there lessons to learn and how do Canadian communities compare?

Meaghan Kenny

I have not done a great deal of research on specific examples south of the boarder. However, I have recently looked into this website for direction on rural revitalization.

Two significant strategies I have quoted below:

- Communities are stronger when more of the people working on farms and in businesses have the opportunity to own them. Quality jobs are also an asset for communities. But we must not overlook self-employment. Local owners are more committed to the community than distant corporations – which often leave at the drop of a hat.
- Agriculture and non-farm rural development should be integrated. We must revitalize family farming and ranching and capture more food system profit close to home to enhance the contribution of agriculture to the community. But agriculture alone cannot revitalize our communities. We must also pursue non-farm strategies – especially small business development.

Most importantly in my experience is the ability and access to own land. In the 1950's a great deal of medium scale farm land between the urban and rural interface was forced expropriated - forcing farmers to move to the city, remain on their land and lease it back from the National Capital Commission, or purchase farmland further out into the surrounding rural areas.

Forcibly removing ownership of land resulted in a significant loss of medium and small scale farms and discouraged youth and next generation farmers from following in the footsteps of their parents.

Bill Reimer

There is plenty of discussion regarding this. One point of contact you might look at is RUPRI. Our RPLC also has several USA partners who are involved with these issues. I could come up with many others if given some time.

Ann Dale

We have run out of time. Any last comments.

I would like to thank you for your invaluable time and commitment to our discussion. A most interesting discussion, respectful and stimulating. And you certainly raised a lot of questions--maybe we will have to have a follow up discussion. For the audience, this is the first time many of us have come together, so thanks to the panelists for their trust in a funny quirky way of talking virtually in real time and not having to leave our special places.

This was the sixth theme in the Solutions Agenda Research Project. So far, we have addressed food security, energy, multi-functional spaces, mental health, and the role of cooperatives. We will next be looking at the future of work and spatial justice, followed by a peer-to-peer workshop of all the e-panelists scheduled for February 27, 2015 in Victoria to craft the Solutions Agenda.

Again, thank you to the e-panelists and to our e-audience for your interest.

Robert Newell

I'm going to get my personal note in here before time runs out. It goes along with ideas around access to amenities and attracting young adults to rural areas. I grew up in Vancouver, and when moving out to Kimberley, a lot of my urbanite friends would ask me 'don't you get bored out there?'. The things that I love to do on my spare time is hike and enjoy the woods, which was just in my backyard. Really, it was much more access to the things I enjoy doing!

Thank you for the discussion everyone!

Meaghan Kenny

Thank you for the opportunity to connect and discuss Ann.

Lenore Newman

Indeed! Thanks everyone for a great discussion

Rebecca Foon

Thank you all so much for joining us today, it was a true pleasure.

Dianne Looker

It will be interesting to see what comes from this.

Bill Reimer

Thanks for this opportunity to explore a new form of communication and deliberation. It will take me much more time to go back and reflect on the very interesting ideas that emerged. Thank you all for your attention to these issues and I hope that our conversations will continue.
