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Total Rural Capital: A Model to Engage Extension Faculty and the Public in Rural Community Development

Sharon Cartwright

University of Alaska, ffskc@uaf.edu

Tom Gallagher

Oregon State University Extension Service, tom.gallagher@orst.edu



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Total Rural Capital: A Model to Engage Extension Faculty and the Public in Rural Community Development

Abstract

Rural community development is challenging work. This article introduces a tool that is useful for scholarship and for working with people in rural communities. Total rural capital is a multi-disciplinary model that can help faculty develop scholarship from their work while helping the public to better understand the complexity of community development.

Sharon Cartwright

Assistant Professor
School of Education
University of Alaska
Fairbanks, Alaska
Internet Address: ffskc@uaf.edu

Tom Gallagher

Leadership Development Specialist
Oregon State University Extension Service
Corvallis, Oregon
Internet Address: tom.gallagher@orst.edu

Introduction

Effective rural community development is a challenge for Extension faculty--field agents and on-campus specialists--who address rural issues. Part of the challenge is having productive communication with the public about the dimensions of rural development, which necessarily involves the disciplines of economics, political science, natural science, and rural sociology. Is there a way to talk about rural community development that both faculty and the public understand?

In this article we identify a thought model concerning rural community development that is academically sound yet accessible to lay people. The tool, called "Total Rural Capital," provides an academic foundation and framework for research and scholarship while presenting ideas in a real-world vocabulary used by rural people.

The matter of rural development has been a focus of national, state, and local policy for decades, with vast investments in rural resources such as electrification, transportation, and education. Lory (1977) argued that it is useful to think of these resources, and investments as "capital." Looking more broadly, Coleman (1990) proposed that there were three forms of community capital: physical, human, and social. Castle (1998) suggested, further, that it was more useful to divide the physical resource category into two subunits, natural and infrastructure. He called this set of four "total rural capital." In theory, these four categories contain all dimensions of rural resources (Castle, 2002).

Four Forms of Rural Capital

Human capital is about people and their ability, individually, to satisfy human needs, such as technical knowledge and leadership skills.

Infrastructure capital consists of human-created resources, those physical items created by individuals or groups to improve the community, such as roads and libraries.

Natural capital encompasses the entire natural environment, including soil, water, air, and vegetation.

Social capital pertains to human networks, whether of two people or many. These networks typically are characterized by customs, laws, and institutions, and they often involve trust and an expectation of reciprocity. Examples include the family, civic groups, government, and a host of institutions, such as public safety, education, and health.

A Thought Tool for Community Development

In this model all capital is contained under one of the four categories, and all communities have a mix of the four. It is the characteristics of that mix that give each community its character, and it is the balance, or imbalance, of the mix that creates needs.

The total rural capital model provides a way of analyzing these needs and a way to look at directing investments to create a different and more valuable balance in a community, what we call "community development." The assessment of needs and the projection of remedies is a faculty activity that can be discussed using the model. But is the model accessible to the public?

A Case Study in Progress

The accessibility of the model to rural community members was borne out in a recent needs assessment we conducted in each county in Oregon. Citizen participants in each county identified a range of needs, from 20 to 50, which they then organized by categories with headings. After several meetings it was apparent that participants were, despite substantial differences in issues across counties, placing their needs into categories very similar to Castle's. We are presently in the process of classifying the 800-plus needs identified by the various counties into the specific categories of the model.

As an early finding, so many of the needs are falling under "social capital" that we have found it useful to subdivide that category into four groups: social (including health), governance, education, and business/economic, creating seven in all. And, in the process of categorizing the needs, it became clear that the participants in the meetings see the connection between the various forms of capital in their communities. For example, participants would note the link between natural capital and education, and natural capital and youth development. The public is very aware that rural development is about multiple objectives.

The Academic Link

For faculty with a scholarship (which often means publication) requirement, the total rural capital framework links to the literature in a variety of disciplines, including economics, political science, and rural sociology. The framework permits faculty working in such diverse Extension programs as agriculture, forestry, energy, and family/youth development to analyze needs and to propose and test solutions within this framework.

The total rural capital model permits faculty to discuss issues with the public, including such fundamental questions as the priority of investments, maintenance costs of past or proposed investments, possible substitution of forms of capital, the value of conservation of capital for future use, and "path dependence," where an investment today limits future opportunities.

Value to Extension

Over 10 years ago, the Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy (ESCOPE) proposed additional funding for rural development and noted a variety of issues (Schutjer, 1991). Many of these issues, such as "Rural development activities" are directed at multiple objectives. We believe that the total rural capital model can provide the comprehensive theory for rural development programs. Further, the model provides a way for both academics and the public to answer the fundamental question about Extension programs: "So what?"

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