

Alberta's Priority Rural Policy Research Questions



Lars K. Hallstrom, Shay Barker and Naomi Finseth

ACSRC Report Series #09-12

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Abstract

Rural communities are often limited in their capacity to collect data, access resources and conduct research to inform their decision and policy making (Caldwell 2010). At the same time, there is increasing interest from funders, governments and researchers in aligning the activities of researchers with the policy goals and priorities of communities (Caldwell 2010; Beattie and Annis 2008; Langille, Munro, Romanow, Lyons, Bull and William 2008). As a result, the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities (ACSRC) conducted a prioritization exercise in order to identify policy-relevant areas of research concern for rural Alberta.

The goal of this exercise was to discover what research question(s), if answered, would substantially advance the policies and management strategies for the sustainability and development of rural Albertan communities. In addition to generating a list of relevant, feasible and implementable rural research questions, this project was also intended to:

(1) identify potential gaps and innovations in public policy that could support rural sustainability in the face of demographic/social change, economic stressors or ecological variation;

(2) contribute to “horizon scanning” (Sutherland and Woodroof 2009; Sutherland et al. 2010; 2011) – the systematic search for potential threats and opportunities within these communities;

(3) increase communication, interaction and potential collaboration between governmental, non-governmental and research communities and practitioners; as well as, increase the exposure and knowledge base of the research community to the policy and research priorities; while also, generating and communicating the policy and research priorities of different levels and branches of government in Canada; and

(4) foster targeted research (Nutley 2007) to influence policy or practice related to:

- rural community and development;
- rural community capacity (to decide and implement decisions);
- rural sustainability (environmental, economic, social and cultural); and
- rural resilience (the ability of a community respond to, of limit the effects of, both exogenous and endogenous stressors such as demographic change, climate change, economic crises or environmental variability).

This method has been used to create priority research questions in the UK, Canada, Australia and United States. It is not designed to be a way for researchers to write policy, instead, it is designed to identify priority research areas (Sutherland et al. 2011). This would allow for researchers to conduct research that they know would directly relate to the concerns or needs of policy makers. These exercises also allow for greater collaboration to occur between policy makers, researchers and other stakeholders, with the end results of hopefully creating more effective policy.

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Alberta's Priority Rural Policy Research Questions Workshop Plenary Session Results

- 1. What provincial funding mechanisms would best serve rural municipalities and communities?**
 - Change best to equitable
 - Define best

- 2. What infrastructure is necessary to maintain the long-term sustainability of rural communities (at an individual community level)?**
 - How does infrastructure impact the long-term sustainability of rural communities?
 - What processes are required to determine (what is necessary to maintain the long-term sustainability) crucial infrastructure needs of the community?
 - Infrastructure- everything- water sewer, school, recreational, etc.
 - Individual needs of communities, can you generalize the needs of rural communities.
 - Every community defines sustainability different.
 - How do we determine crucial needs of a community, what can we learn from other places on how to do that?

- 3. What are the implications/effects; economic, social, community, etc. of enhancing (or costs of doing nothing) lifelong educational opportunities in rural (Alberta)?**
 - What kind of educational opportunities? What do you mean by enhancing?
 - k-12 and beyond (adult education)
 - If you don't offer the program are you setting your community for a future skills shortage.
 - Issue offering the programs or exposing them to the option?
 - Many rural communities cannot offer more than the basic educational opportunities.

- 4. What model for continuing care is most appropriate to small communities?**
 - Define best-
 - Define sustainability- (age in place)
 - Look beyond continuing care and seniors
 - Community input into health care services in the community?
 - Economies of scale

- 5. How do we enhance/increase volunteerism in rural communities?**
 - What is the effect of volunteerism on the sustainability of rural community infrastructure and services? Does it differ from urban models, and why?
 - Does the decline of volunteerism have a greater effect in rural than urban communities?
 - What do we do with these results and how does this change anything? How does this knowledge affect policy?
- 6. What regulatory policies and structures need to be developed or changed to enable a safe, Alberta food system that supports local food production and distribution?**
- 7. What are the other incentives (financial, cultural, social, professional status, etc.) that attract and retain health care providers?**
 - Already done RPAP?
 - Look at provider in a larger scale.
 - Everyone in rural Alberta has this problem (nurse, doctors, lab)
 - Barriers
- 8. How do you attract people to your community in order to ensure vibrancy and resilience?**
 - Youth, skilled workers, seniors, new Canadians
 - Attract and retain
 - Agricultural communities
- 9. What are the challenges for formal and informal leadership in rural communities? (regional collaboration, centralization, retention of leaders, legislation, and community engagement)**
 - Structural?
- 10. In what ways can rural businesses be supported? E.g. reducing leakage, local procurement, buy local, taxation, etc.**

11. What is the social value of having these local businesses?

- What are the best (purchase) practices and how are they adopted for supporting local business? (public sector, regulatory support) (best practice to buy local) (support e.g. community futures)
- How can policies and regulations impact local small business functionality?
- Buying local, how do you enhance buy local, basic services located in large cities, centralization of purchasing, small business disadvantaged because they can't afford to upgrade.
- Barriers of small business
- How can the public sector enhance the life of small business in rural areas?
- Buy local= beneficial
- What makes small business successful?
- How to keep dollars in the community?
- Which policies facilitate to keep money and resources in rural communities?
- Policy analysis and knowledge synthesis
- What can you do to help out small business?
- Facilitate the reduction of leakage from rural communities? Maximize

12. How can technology and (with) policies be used to improve rural quality of life?

- Rural broadband
- Core services: medical and education
- Not that the service wasn't accessible, instead inefficient
- What do you do with this technology to make communities sustainable?
- Selling a way of life (move from cities to rural areas)
- Services and economic development too different things.
- Removing policy restrictions on the use of technology.

13. What are the (sustainability) effects of piping water to outlying communities (e.g. Edmonton water to Viking)?

- Different types of transfers; urban to rural, rural to rural, rural to urban, etc.
- Environmental, social and economic sustainability.

14. What is the value (economic, social, cultural) of natural capital in rural Alberta (wetlands, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, nature related recreation and tourism, open spaces, scenic vistas etc.)?

- Costs of the depletion or preservation and enhancement of this natural capital?

15. Why do some rural communities thrive while others fail? What are the changeable characteristics or attributes (of success and failure)?

- Factors that lead to sustainability; proximity to major centres, Things you can change; strong sense of community (atmosphere), volunteerism, etc.
- Not universal characteristics
- Failure; communities that fail to thrive, others under the same conditions that do thrive.
- Comparative
- Meta question

16. What are the barriers and how do we overcome them to the development of alternative energy resources?

- e.g. What is the affordability to create sustainable energy resources?

17. Is it important to keep farm families farming (e.g. for food sovereignty, rural development, etc.)?

- Why is it important to keep farm families farming?
- Some consumers care?
- Food sovereignty
- Why don't people value this?
- **Important for whom?

Appendix 1.1

Alberta's Top 20 Rural Policy Research Questions University of Alberta – Augustana Campus Dr. Roger Epp Conference Room February 24, 2012

Item	Time	Activity	Person	Location(s)
1	9:30 – 10:00	Introduction and Overview of the day's goals & activities	Lars Hallström	Conference Room
2	10:00 – 11:30	Breakout Session I	Note takers: Shay Barker & Naomi Finseth	A) Conf. Room B) 2-110
3	11:30 – 12:15	Lunch		Conference Room
4	12:15 – 13:45	Breakout Session 2	Note takers: Shay Barker & Naomi Finseth	A) Conf. Room B) 2-110
5	13:45 – 14:00	Break		Conference Room
6	14:00 – 16:00	Plenary Session	Lars Hallström (note takers present)	Conference Room
7	16:00 – 16:30	Wrap-up and next steps	Lars Hallström	Conference Room

Appendix 1.2

Goals:

You are being asked to participate in an exercise to identify what you see as the most pressing or important questions for researchers to address in terms of public policy issues in rural Alberta. Given your role in the research, policy, non-governmental or rural communities, you have been selected to provide feedback and input into the content and organization of the questions that have been submitted. These questions are supposed to respond to the following:

“What research question, if answered, would substantially advance the policies and management strategies for the sustainability and development of rural Albertan communities?”

The questions must be:

- (1) answerable through a realistic research design;
- (2) answerable on the basis of facts rather than value judgments;
- (3) of a spatial and temporal scale that could be addressed realistically by a research team or program;
- (4) not answerable simply by *yes*, *no*, or *it all depends*;
- (5) if related to interventions and effects, contained a subject of the intervention, an intervention, and a measurable effect; and
- (6) if answered, will increase the effectiveness of policy about, and management of, resource use and biodiversity in the face of climate change and other environmental stressors.

The outputs of this process and workshop will be:

- (1) An academic article for peer-review and publication (all workshop participants will be listed as co-authors);
- (2) A policy brief or briefs for key departments in the provincial government;
- (3) Possible expansion to replicate this process at the national level;

Workshop Goals:

- 1) To reduce the number of submissions to 20 based on the criteria above;
- 2) To edit/amend, combine and modify as necessary the submissions in order to achieve goal (1);
- 3) To identify thematic consistencies or inconsistencies;
- 4) To NOT prioritize or order in any way.

Appendix 1.3

Breakout Room Questions

ROOM 1

1. How can policy-relevant data be made to best align with regional/political boundaries to inform analyses?
2. Can current revenues meet the anticipated costs of rural infrastructure?
3. Can rural municipalities exist without provincial funding?
4. How critical is infrastructure to the long-term sustainability of a rural community?
5. Are forced shared services financially responsible to ratepayers?
6. Is the provision of rural education different from urban (in terms of?)
7. What is the effect of volunteerism on the sustainability of rural community infrastructure and services? Does it differ from urban models, and why?
8. What fiscal model for continuing care (housing) is most appropriate to small communities?
9. What is a necessary policy or condition for rural sustainability?
10. Which stakeholders have the greatest impact on sustainability, development and capacity building in rural Alberta?
11. What are the health effects of above-ground, high voltage towers and lines?

ROOM 2

1. What is the most effective/efficient strategy for dealing with/managing brownfields in small rural communities?
2. How can we have multi-level food safety and health policies that regulate and support both industrial/agri-business and local/smaller producers? Are there places and regions where multi-scale food policies and regulations exist?
3. What are the necessary conditions for a stronger food system in rural Alberta?
4. What are the barriers or impediments for municipal leadership in rural communities?
5. How can we have food regulations and policies that facilitate, strengthen, and build the relationships between food producers and eaters both in rural and urban Canadian settings?
6. How can provincial food policies be created that support a food system that is equitable for the producers and all eaters?
7. How can food policies be created that allow local food systems to flourish and an industrial system to co-exist?
8. How can the present industrial food systems model be adapted and changed to a food systems model that is sustainable, equitable and regenerative?
9. What would a food sovereign Alberta look like? What is the present state of food sovereignty in Alberta?
10. What attracts health care providers to invest in a rural community?
11. What efforts/initiatives engage young adults in local government?
12. What are the sustainability (particularly environmental) consequences for urban water piped out to multiple, far outlying communities (i.e. Edmonton water to Viking)?

ROOM 3

1. How do proposed changes to water allocation affect the operations and business plans of municipalities in rural Alberta?
2. What public policy options exist to create equity and security in water licenses among junior license holders in the same watershed in rural Alberta?
3. What are integrated indicators for water use in rural Alberta? EXAMPLES: Virtual water footprints, use of water for energy...etc.
4. What are the key elements of the supply side of the tourism-related economy in rural communities?
5. What is the level of tourist visitation, tourist spending by spending category, and attendance level at major attractions and events in the community and surrounding region?
6. Are there skills, processes, "filters" or practices that can improve the 2-way communication of rural communities with urban based decision makers - for both to be effectively heard and understood and to nurture collaboration and solutions?
7. Rural communities can have very strong natural supports that are often ignored in formal "systems" (like education, health care, etc.). How can these natural community supports be recognized, valued and supported so that they continue in the tradition of RURAL and aren't diluted by "system" expectations?
8. People who live rural are increasingly required to travel greater distances for basic services (education, health care, recreation) as services and facilities are "regionalized". This is an unequal "penalty" for living rural. What is fair compensation for rural residents, to ensure they have equal access as their urban counterparts, to basic services?
9. Funding through many grant programs requires 50/50 matching dollars. For many rural communities, drawing from a smaller population of participants, this can be a disadvantage to urban agencies applying through the same "formula". How would adjusting the matching dollars based on population (rather than 50/50) enable more grant dollars to support rural initiatives?
10. The success of local rural businesses is impacted greatly by basic services being regionalized to larger centres, as rural residents increasingly shop in the larger centre when they are there for medical/school or other basic services. This makes it very difficult for the viability of rural businesses. How can rural businesses be supported to remain viable and contributing members of the community through programs that help keep the prices low (comparable to prices in the larger centres) - and still profitable?
11. Urban people benefit greatly from the stewardship of rural residents who (at their own cost) carefully manage environmentally significant areas. These environmentally significant areas contribute greatly to clean air, water and healthy habitats for animals all residents enjoy. How, and should, primary producers be fairly compensated, valued and appreciated for their efforts to protect and preserve environmentally significant areas?

ROOM 4

1. What is the value of natural capital in rural Alberta (wetlands, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, nature related recreation and tourism, open spaces, scenic vistas etc.)? Costs of the depletion of this natural capital?
2. What should a rural development policy for Alberta include/be/look like?
3. Why do some rural communities thrive while others fail? What are the characteristics or attributes?
4. What increases the attractiveness of rural communities to young people?
5. What economic area is most sensible for effective local governance to foster true, multi-level sustainability? (Note, I'm talking sustainability economically, socially, environmentally, culturally, and governance/public engagement wise.)
6. What is the research and decision-support capacity of rural communities?
7. What are the structural and local barriers in place that prevent the development of sustainable energy resources to meet the growing need for energy in Alberta?
8. Can the development of rural infrastructure, transport systems and technology ensure that health services are available equitably across the province?
9. What are the local and structural barriers in place preventing local/ co-operative ownership structures of energy and other resources?
10. What are the keys to successfully keep people in farming- and small farming communities vibrant?
11. How do existing water allocations affect the operations and business plans of municipalities in rural Alberta?