

# **RURAL NOVA SCOTIA ISSUES**

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## **Executive Summary**

Traditional rural sectors in Canada are under strain due to resource depletion and general economic trends. Rural communities, and organizations advocating for them, need to seriously consider what community economic development can achieve in such a socio-economic environment. In Nova Scotia there is a disconnect between the overwhelming challenges facing rural communities and the capacity of rural communities to confront and resolve them. Undoubtedly there is more the government could do to create an enabling environment for community processes. Nonetheless there are promising opportunities for rural communities in areas such as renewable energy and alternative agriculture. More importantly, however, rural leaders must clearly spell out what a strong community sector would entail in rural Nova Scotia over the medium term, the means to achieve it, and the ways to monitor development for or against the progress of rural communities. This would in turn potentially create momentum in catalyzing various levels of government to strengthen partnerships with a more clearly demarcated community economic development sector.

## **Introduction**

### Background

The Rural Communities Foundation of Nova Scotia (RCFNS) is a grant funding organization whose vision is to have a dynamic, healthy and prosperous future for Nova Scotia's coastal and rural communities. Through its support of community-based initiatives it seeks to improve the status of rural and coastal communities through a greater understanding of the issues they face; it seeks to offer solutions, as well as build a more sustainable community sector. This report will be used as a background document as RCFNS moves its programming directions forward. Dr. Greg Cameron, the author of the report, is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Rural Community Studies in the Department of Business and Social Sciences at the Nova Scotia Agricultural College (NSAC). He is also a member of the Rural Research Centre of the NSAC.

### Objective and Scope of the Report

The objective of this report is to produce an annotated list of the principle issues that confront rural communities in Nova Scotia, derived from a review of literature that includes three documents: *Between the Land and the Sea* (Praxis Research and Consulting [PRC], January 2004); *Building Our Future: Respecting Our Past (The White Point Report)* (Coastal Communities Network [CCN], June 1998); and *Painting the Landscape of Rural Nova Scotia* (Rural Communities Impacting Policy [RCIP], October 2003). Annotation could include estimates of the effect of each issue upon the social and economic progress of rural communities. The interconnectedness and the cumulative effect of these changes on rural communities could also be addressed. Though data collection or a wider literature review is outside the scope of this report, the author further reviewed two related supplementary documents: *Understanding Freefall: The Challenge of the Rural Poor* (Senate Standing Committee Report, December 2006); and *Rural Policy Forum: Communities Choosing Change* (Coastal Communities Network, March 2007), in order to provide a national framework as well as to review recent discussions from community groups, respectively. The author also did some general background academic reading on the history of regional development in Atlantic Canada vis-à-vis the community economic development sector: *Doing Development Differently: Regional Development on the Atlantic*

*Periphery* (edited by Susan Hodgett et. al. 2007). These are cited in the text and listed in the reference section.

## **Contemporary Challenges Facing Rural Communities in Nova Scotia**

### Trends in Rural Canada

Rural communities in Canada are increasingly vulnerable to a number of globally- nationally- and regionally-determined factors. The rural Canadian economy has historically been dominated by the primary sector – natural resource availability and the fertility of land – and its fate has been determined by boom-bust commodity cycles, exchange rate fluctuations, pressures from low cost competitors in emerging economies, trade policy regimes, border closures, and competition from subsidized imports (Senate Report 2006). Declining and aging populations, removal and rationalization of social services, industry concentration, along with rural-urban migration, in part a consequence of these trends, are ongoing manifestations of a recent Senate report that describes rural Canada as being in a ‘Freefall’ (Senate Report 2006).

The human side of these changes bear mentioning. Canada’s rural poor must be situated within the wider farm income crisis but one that also includes forestry, oil and gas, mining. Rural economies may comprise single mothers, the elderly, Aboriginal peoples, lower educated, disabled, unemployed among its disadvantaged. Further, many rural women lack childcare, are employed in low wage jobs, or work irregular hours. There is also a growing shortage of health care professionals (Senate Report 2006).

### Trends in Rural Nova Scotia

The global, national, and regional changes impacting rural communities in Nova Scotia are sobering. The core and supplementary reports note the rapid urbanization of the province’s cities and the population decline of both coastal and rural Nova Scotia (PRC 2004: viii; Senate Report 2006). This decline is manifested in demographic trends pertaining to aging, out-migration, and lower birth rates (a general trend in the West), among other indicators. These wider structural trends in turn have implications for rural Nova Scotia in terms of the government provision of health and education services, the replenishment of the labour force, and the rising costs of transport for households (PRC 2004: viii; Senate Report 2006). In the Atlantic Region since 1991 there have been a series of economic shocks including the ground-fish collapse, military base closures, coal and steel shut downs, and the ‘9/11’ attacks in the US, with its impact on tourism and cross-border traffic (PRC 2004: viii). There is also ongoing shrinkage in employment in primary industries in Nova Scotia due to mechanization and corporate consolidation (PRC 2004: xi; Senate Report 2006).

Unemployment in rural Nova Scotia is higher than the national average. And while, on the positive side, there is growing employment in the service sectors (RCIP 2003: Chapter 2), there remains a dearth of permanent well paying jobs in the rural areas, especially for rural youth (RCIP 2003: Chapter 2). Out migration is further fuelled by formally-educated youth who must seek work to pay off their costly student loans. Immigrants to the province gravitate to urban centres, either in Nova Scotia or beyond, where there are ethnic/national networks, or jobs to be had. This is due in part to the lack of economic support to settle in the countryside, as in the past. Rural Nova

Scotia ranks highest for rural-urban disparity in Canada. A closer look at the rural and coastal sectors will show these trends in more detail.

### Agriculture

In Nova Scotia in 2005, 3.1% of people were employed in primary agriculture as a percentage of rural employment (Senate Report 2006). Any weakening of the current supply management infrastructure, for instance, as a consequence of further WTO rounds, would potentially further impact traditional agricultural sectors. Further, farm families, engaged in one of the most dangerous occupations in Canada, are under increasing pressures to comply with costly health, safety, and environmental regulations, even as their economic futures remain tenuous. There are also the closures of large, externally controlled agricultural food processing centres. Farm deficit became greater than farm receipts in the late 1990s, and continues to widen (RCIP 2003: Chapter 2). ‘Census farms’ are declining in numbers but increasing in acreage, another sign of consolidation (though employment appears to be steady).

At the same time, renewed interest in local and regional production has given rise to consumer interest in healthier food choices, especially in the cities, and may open the way to major shifts in the conventional agricultural model. Issues with common policy themes are the result: food security and insecurity (encompassing rural poverty, as well as food quality, safety, and sovereignty concerns by farmers), ‘buy local’, slow food, local processing, and other citizen- and farmer-based initiatives. Rural depopulation is thus coupled with unprecedented expansion – and attendant growing pains – of organic agriculture. For instance, an emerging Nova Scotia Organic Council (strategically located among federal and provincial governments, organic certification bodies, NGOs, and growers) will seek to advocate for the organic sector as well as propose provincial legislation, and provide feedback on funding programs. In sum, there are both tremendous obstacles as well as possibilities facing farmers, and rural communities more broadly.

### Natural and Coastal Environment

The natural environment is under strain due to a multiple of factors including forest depletion, threats to marine and wildlife, groundwater contamination (e.g. from roadside salt, pesticides and fertilizer) (RCIP 2003). A regional instance of general industrial consolidation noted in the introduction can be seen in the greater consolidation of control over shellfish (PRC 2004: 59). There remains inadequate public investment in harbour infrastructure which in turn affects social and development priorities and options (PRC 2004: xiii). For instance, budget constraints over the years have meant that wharves and harbours have not been adequately maintained (PRC 2004). This potentially impinges on the spaces to promote new rural paradigm initiatives (e.g. eco-tourism) (PRC 2004: 64). Also there are problems related to alienation of land and access to coastal waters. And as wharves close the trend to privatisation of small ports and coast line properties will continue apace. Nova Scotia does not have a coordinated coastal management strategy; instead development is happening in an unplanned and uncoordinated manner. The media have taken up this issue recently (see CBC’s *Going Coastal Exploring Nova Scotia’s Threatened Coastline* <http://www.cbc.ca/ns/features/goingcoastal/your-stories.html>). At a recent policy forum of CCN it was suggested that climate change be a unifying theme to tackle this (CCN 2007: 9). This is a sound idea, one with the potential to build rural-urban connections around one of the prominent public issues of our time -

climate change. Current renewable energy policy, based as it is on government regulations that are counter-productive to the development of distributed energy by community/locally-owned facilities (CCN 2007: 8), further speaks to what many activists see as a lack of government recognition of community economic development as an important economic sector in its own right.

#### The Policy Sphere in Nova Scotia

The general structural trends noted above are related to and enhanced by a pattern of government withdrawal of fiscal and institutional support from traditional areas of the Nova Scotia rural economy. The history of large scale investment approaches post-1945 range from manufacturing operations and urban growth poles in the 1960s and 1970s, to capital intensive mega-projects in the 1980s, and to the knowledge economy of the 1990s. With perhaps the exception of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), Canada's regional development policymakers have not directly focussed on the region's social and human capital (Bickerton 2007: 46, 50, 67). Though I am still learning about the community development sector in Atlantic Canada, I would concur with the observation that there is still a gap between policy and practice. And that there needs to be greater systematic documenting of the varied impacts of community economic development in order to understand its potential in playing a greater economic role in rural Nova Scotia (Bickerton 2007: 69).

### **Institutional Capacity of Rural Communities in Nova Scotia**

#### The Importance of Rural Communities

Community economic development theory asserts the importance of participatory democracy, the values of localism, small group dynamics, co-operative philosophy, and grass-roots activism as processes in pursuit of social integration and greater self-reliance (Johnson et. al 2007: 27, 28). Atlantic Canada is noted for its rural and rustic sensibilities, profound sense of localism, and fierce attachment to local community (Johnson et. al 2007: 35). Yet if market-driven economic processes are allowed to run their course then community cohesiveness and viability may be at stake, making the anchoring of local governance and public services increasingly untenable. For many decades much thought has gone into how to reverse this decline and protect rural Nova Scotia "even if such protection and promotion run counter to broader socio-economic dynamics of economic concentration, centralization and urbanization" (Johnson et. al 2007: 36). However all of these economic trends identified above are likely to continue.

#### Diminishing CBO Capacity

Government downloading onto community groups is an ongoing process that has had a number of effects, especially in coastal communities. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans – Small Craft Harbours (DFO-SCH) have transferred non-priority harbours to community organizations, while, at the same time, expanding private sector involvement for core harbours through the Harbour Authorities (HA) system. This leaves representative user groups the responsibility of daily operations, maintenance and regulatory responsibilities; at best they cover operating expenses but not capital expenditure (CCN 1998; PRC 2004). As a consequence, volunteer burn-out is common due in part to the thankless nature of operating HAs. Lack of youth due to out-migration further undermines the prospects for viable HA operations (some Aboriginal communities being the exception here). There are likewise calls for government to offer training to HAs in areas such as in management capacity and

conflict resolution (PRC 2004). This was also noted in the HA case studies where interview respondents indicated an interest in training on administrative best practices and conflict resolution (e.g. Bras d'Or Harbour Authority). Case studies of wharves also recommended increasing coordination and integration among government agencies that are involved in maintenance, management and building (PRC 2004).

#### Perspectives from Rural Organizations

A common call made in the reports has been for enhanced horizontal linkages among community groups. For instance, there is a call for increasing mutual support among harbour authorities, pooling of resources, bulk buying of goods and services, full time staff to write business plans, and district level meetings (PRC 2004). However, this level of cooperation is difficult because of the increasing stress that ensues when governments download responsibilities onto them, with limited compensatory financial resources. Rightly emphasized is that traditional rural infrastructure like wharves is not just about the fisheries but speaks to non-economic benefits and the centrality of wharves in the lives of local communities (PRC 2004: vi). Harbour Authorities are unable to become self-reliant, nor are communities centred on the wharf infrastructure able to depend on government support like in the past. This requires public debate throughout Atlantic Canada.

Reading the reports on meetings of community organizations representing rural Nova Scotia, one is struck by conflicting views about who is to play the lead role in pushing for rural community advancement in the still-emerging rural paradigm. On the one hand, there have been calls in the community sector for greater control over land, resources, and general educational awareness in order to strengthen the fabric of rural communities (CCN 1998), but without delineating how this could be achieved. More recently have come calls for food producers to receive health and dental plans and retirement plans (CCN 2007); guaranteed annual income de-linked from agricultural policy (Senate Report 2006); suggestions around promoting immigration to rural areas; establishing rurally-located educational institutions; and the setting up of transport and day-care facilities. These policy suggestions, while laudable, are little more than aspirational in the current policy and economic milieu.

### **Ways Forward for Rural Communities in Nova Scotia**

#### Short-term: Building Rural-Urban and Regional Synergy

There is much work to be done connecting the rural and urban around the issues discussed in this report. This would include not only greater awareness of the importance of the rural areas for urban living, but also how structural and policy changes are impacting rural communities. Advocacy around the symbiotic nature of rural-urban interaction would be a good place to start. As mentioned in the reviewed reports these issues could include increased public education to bring consumers and producers together (e.g. farm stories), the environmental costs of food (pesticides), and blockages to community-led alternative energy. Other issues might include the importance of rural public goods for the urban areas such as clean drinking water (Senate Report 2006). Many in the urban areas do not know about supply management issues (RCIP 2003: 32). Advocacy work could in fact broaden and deepen rural-urban community economic development and governance processes (PRC 2004: xv). Urban groups potentially receptive to such approaches could include local food groups, alternative think tanks, anti-poverty organizations, and opposition parties.

### Medium Term: Developing a Rural Community Framework for the Future

Addressing the challenges facing rural communities in Nova Scotia may actually go beyond notions of 'sustainability' broadly conceived, and further include the ways in which an ecologically-sound and economically viable way of life emerges. It has been argued that rural community disempowerment can be seen as opportunity for a deeper empowerment within the emerging new rural paradigm: a general philosophical approach that seeks to leverage the assets and talents latent in rural Canada (Senate Report 2006). Systematically exploring the theoretical possibilities and practical operational parameters of community economic development thus becomes ever more urgent (Johnson et. al. 2007: 410). CCN documents, calling upon the various levels of government to facilitate and not to dictate policy solutions for rural Nova Scotians, have advocated for a province-wide community economic development policy; a relevant evaluation and accountability framework; streamlined funding procedures; and, perhaps reflecting a certain frustration, serious implementation of such recommendations by government (CCN 1998). These ideas need to be further fleshed out. Rural community representatives need to coalesce and conceptualize the needs and aspirations of rural communities in their totality as part of a bottom up process. What would a progressively improving rural Nova Scotia look like over the medium term (organic and alternative energy sectors, governance of wharves, small business start-ups, land under common ownership, eco-tourism, environmental custodianship and so forth)? What resources would be required? How would achievements and setbacks be monitored and evaluated? Who are the concerned stakeholders? And what is the relation of the community economic sector to the corporate and government sectors? Working on these questions, and others, within rural civil society, and beyond, could help to create the critical mass required for a community-driven rural Nova Scotia to move forward its priorities into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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