

# **Social Cohesion in Rural Canada**

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# Social Cohesion in Rural Canada

## 1. Area of Inquiry

### 1.1. Major Issues to be Addressed

This research will examine social cohesion issues in rural Canada. It will include an analysis of the meaning of social cohesion, describe how it is changing in rural Canada, identify some of the major structures and processes which affect it, and propose strategic options for rural Canada in the light of the new forms of social cohesion.

Our proposal will take advantage of the work and infrastructure established by the project entitled *Understanding the New Rural Economy: Options and Choices* (NRE).<sup>1</sup> The Strategic Grant will be used to advance research addressing social cohesion. This includes macro-level analysis of census and survey material, household surveys in 32 rural field sites, and collaboration activities among network members.

Social cohesion will be considered the outcome of processes through which people are linked into social systems. This may occur through the sharing of values, identities, or beliefs or through systems promoting economic, social, and political interdependence. It will be treated as a multi-faceted and dynamic concept.

Social cohesion is multifaceted since human relationships are structured in many different forms and maintained by many processes. In traditional rural society, relationships were largely structured by geographical proximity or kinship relations. In its contemporary form, social relations are more likely to be structured by economic activities, formal institutions, or the many interest-based groups making up civil society. Our first research question emerges from this view: What forms of social cohesion are found in contemporary rural Canada?

Social cohesion is also dynamic. The nature and intensity of human relationships have been dramatically altered in the shift toward advanced capitalism. Increased mobility and communication have reduced the spatial constraints on relationships, economic globalization and deregulation have meant that rural businesses are drawn into ever widening spheres of competition, and the dismantling of the welfare system has undermined key institutional supports for cohesion. In order to understand these shifts, we will ask how the form and intensity of social cohesion have changed over the last 15 years and what are the structures and processes underlying the new forms of social cohesion.

Our approach to social cohesion is informed by the work currently being conducted in the NRE project (cf. attachment). Research on the history of government programs and policies has shown how departmental distinctions, a regional focus, and urban pressures have fragmented rural institutions and populations. Our examination of the integration and isolation of First Nations communities points to the important role played by trade and geography for the economic and cultural cohesion of those communities. Our profiles of rural settlements have confirmed the dramatic differences in cohesion which exist throughout rural Canada.

The analysis of social cohesion will be advanced within the four themes of the NRE project. Within the theme of "spatial dynamics" we will examine the ways in which changing patterns of transportation, communication, labour organization, and consumption are affecting the cohesion of rural communities, families, and networks. Within the theme of "processes of inclusion and exclusion" we will examine the ways in which changing relationships among economic institutions, state institutions, and civil society are resulting in new configurations of social support and participation within society, particularly for the elderly, single mothers, the working poor, Aboriginal Peoples, and youth. Under the theme of "the changing structure of rural enterprises and institutions" we will examine the ways in which globalization and a changing labour structure have altered the labour, class, age, and gender relations within rural communities, and under the "natural resources" theme we

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<sup>1</sup> This 5-year project was begun in the summer of 1997 by *The Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation* (CRRF), a national non-profit association of researchers, policy-makers, and rural citizens. The Principal Investigator and Co-Investigators are participants in the NRE project.

will examine the ways in which resource extraction and citizen action related to it have introduced new tensions within rural Canada and between rural and urban interests.

## **1.2. Research Objectives**

Six primary objectives will guide the social cohesion research.

*C To describe the changes in social cohesion over the last 20 years.*

This will provide a basis for the second objective and serve as a framework for discussing the strategic options available to rural Canadians.

*C To identify the structures and processes underlying the changes in social cohesion.*

This objective will include the testing of key propositions regarding the forces affecting social cohesion. Initial propositions have been developed over the last 2 years as part of the NRE project. Demographic, economic, social, and political structures and processes will be considered.

*C To identify consequences of changes in the nature and level of social cohesion.*

This objective will provide a basis for the development of policy considerations. We will focus on those consequences which have important implications for rural Canada.

*C To collect information and develop indicators which are appropriate for understanding the dynamics of social cohesion in rural Canada.*

Information regarding changes in social relationships is difficult to find at the level and detail required. Census data is limited to demographic and economic variables and most national surveys are too dispersed to allow a detailed analysis of rural community relationships. We will collect and explore new indicators to overcome these limitations.

*C To increase the level of comparison and collaboration among researchers and citizens interested in rural Canada.*

This objective is consistent with SSHRC's role as knowledge-broker and with our recognition that collaboration is particularly difficult among rural Canadians.

*C To create a research base for policy development.*

This project will provide information for more appropriate policy-development and strengthen the network of rural researchers which has been growing over the last 10 years.

## **1.3. Significance of the Project**

This project will be beneficial for academics, policy-makers, and rural people. For all three groups it will contribute to more extensive, grounded understandings of the major structures and processes affecting social cohesion and its consequences for rural Canada. As with the NRE project, conferences, workshops, and research networks involve all these participants, providing an excellent opportunity for the issues and results to be communicated as the research proceeds.

The information collected by the project is unique, not only to rural Canada, but to the research community in general. It includes national comparisons at both macro and micro-levels of analysis, within a clearly articulated framework among an extensive network of researchers from a wide variety of disciplines, experiences, and locales.

Rural Canada provides an excellent focus for the examination of social cohesion. Not only have rural communities undergone significant changes in social cohesion over the last few years, but they also represent considerable diversity in condition and experience with respect to the processes affecting cohesion.

Policy-makers and rural citizens will share in the benefits of this project. Information collected will be made available to all participants through the NRE Rural Canada Information Centre. This includes Internet-compatible material from all aspects of the research, in graphics, text, and numerical forms. Participants in all the sample sites will be trained in the use of this information for their community objectives.

Policy-makers will benefit from access to information, the research network, and rural citizens. As with the CRRF experience, we expect to find many of our insights reflected in government papers and policy documents.

Participation in the research network will benefit all participants. By doing so, each person will become aware of other people, communities, and issues throughout the country. We have found that this is of considerable benefit for increased understanding, as a source of ideas for local strategies, and in some cases, the establishment of long-term networks for local development.

## **1.4. Key Activities**

This project takes advantage of many research activities already underway as part of the NRE project. The NRE includes a research network of over 40 researchers, policy-makers, and rural citizens from Canada and several OECD countries. This network is supported by an Internet server dedicated to the collection, archiving, and distribution of information related to the NRE project and to the communication between all participants in the project. It also houses the Rural Canada Database of census and survey information on rural Canada from 1986 to 1996. This database was used to prepare the NRE sampling frame, select the 32 rural sites that form the basis of the NRE sample, and to prepare profile materials on each of the sites. The NRE project has also established working relationships with most of the 32 sites in the sample. Finally, the NRE project and CRRF hold annual conferences and workshops. We will be able to make use of all these facilities, events, and networks.

Key activities directly related to the strategic grant project will include the following. The four theme teams of the NRE will prepare background theoretical materials regarding social cohesion from the perspective of their theme. This will include theoretical materials, specific research hypotheses, and proposals for research instruments to collect individual and household data in the field sites. Pretesting of the instruments will take place in some of the sites and full implementation of the survey will follow in all appropriate sites. The results from the survey will be distributed to all the theme teams and made available to the rural communities with appropriate safeguards.

Concurrent with the preparation of field materials, several activities will be conducted using the macro-level information in the rural Canada database. This includes the verification of census and survey-level data with information from the field sites to test the validity of the census and survey indicators for examining issues related to social cohesion. In addition, several hypotheses regarding the relationship between social cohesion, economic structure, geographical isolation, human and social capital, leading and lagging status, and political context will be examined at the level of rural communities. This analysis will be integrated with the third sector information presently being collected as part of the NRE project. Our experience suggests that there will also be requests for additional analysis from theme teams, partners, and site teams as the research proceeds.

The results will be prepared in the form of academic papers, policy proposals, conference presentations, special workshops, and materials for the popular press.

### **1.5. Achievement of Objectives**

The research will achieve the six objectives in the following ways. The *description of changes* will be accomplished by the collection of data at the level of individuals and households in the 32 field sites of the NRE sample. Research instruments will be designed and tested by theme teams in collaboration with the field researchers. This work will be supplemented by macro-level analysis using census and survey data at the national and regional level.

The *identification and verification of structures and processes* underlying social cohesion will be accomplished by the theme teams using macro-level information from the rural Canada database and micro-level data from the 32 field sites.

The *consequences of changes in social cohesion* will be identified by the theme teams and analyzed using data from the field sites and information from the rural Canada database. The data will allow comparisons over time and across community types.

The collection of site histories and the use of census information from 1986 to 1996 will provide the basic ingredients for an *analysis of the dynamics of social cohesion*. In addition, we will explore the application of complex dynamics models to the analysis of this topic. A complex dynamic model being developed as part of the NRE will provide crucial expertise and experience to this end.

*Comparative analysis* is built into the design of the NRE at both the macro and micro levels. The sampling frame for research sites is designed to provide comparison on five dimensions crucial to the structure of rural sites in the global economy. Each of the research tools is designed to permit comparisons between research sites and between the micro-level data and macro-level information. Analysis of the relationship between these two levels is planned as a means to explore the validity of census and survey indicators for social cohesion.

All of the information gained from the research will be integrated into the rural Canada database being prepared by the NRE project. Researchers, students, and community activists will be

trained in its use in order to *facilitate grounded policies*. This will establish an important legacy for rural Canada in the future.

### **1.6. Use of Results Outside the Traditional Academic Community**

The strongest case for the general applicability for the research results can be found in the track record of the NRE research to date. CRRF has always sought to bridge academic and non-academic audiences. The clearest example of this is found in their program of annual conferences and workshops. They are always held in rural areas with the full participation of local people. In each case, the perspectives of academics have been welcomed and challenged by local business people, community activists, municipal administrators, and other rural citizens. As a result, we have nurtured a vibrant and active network of local people with perspectives that go well beyond their local situations.

Insights from CRRF and the NRE Project are also passed to provincial and national levels of policy formation. Our researchers have been invited to several Senate and Parliamentary hearings. The value of our work is reinforced by the frequent inclusion of materials from our research and positions papers in Committee documents. It is also reflected in the extensive partnering which we have enjoyed with those policy-makers.

## **2. Partnerships**

### **2.1. Partnership Development Plan**

The partnership plan for the Strategic Grant is an extension of the arrangements that we have enjoyed as part of the NRE project. Over 20 partners have been involved in the NRE project to date (cf. attachment). We have found that this list expands as our research reports are produced and regional organizations hear of the nature of our work. Since we operate on the principle that all partners get access to all of the information and expertise of the network (providing confidentiality and special contract considerations are met), we have had considerable support from partners.

We will be taking proactive measures in our search for partners in two major ways. As part of the NRE project, we are frequently called upon to present our case to government and business groups. These often result in partnership arrangements with those groups. A second way is through the solicitation of funds for a Rural Canada Endowment. This is a project underway by CRRF. It also periodically results in the identification of partners for the project.

### **2.2. Partners Contribution**

Following the NRE project we expect to have two major types of partnership arrangements: research partnerships and investment partnerships. Research partnerships will be established with those organizations that have appropriate research questions to be addressed, relevant information to share, or research resources to provide. Investment partnerships will be established with those organizations that wish to support the general objectives of the Strategic Grant through financial or in-kind resources. Both types of partnerships are in evidence in the NRE project with over \$250,000 per year as financial contributions from partners.

### **2.3. Role of Partners**

Partners will be involved in all stages of the research, from design and analysis to the communication of the results. The various interests will be coordinated through the intervention of the NRE Steering Committee and Principal Investigator. Scientific integrity is maintained through the regular appraisal of the plans by the NRE Steering Committee and the formal evaluation of results by the NRE Research Evaluation Committee. Peer review will also be accomplished through the publication of materials in academic journals.

### **2.4. Benefits**

Partners benefit by having their questions addressed by a network of informed researchers. They will also be connected to a network of experienced people (both academic and non-academic) who are committed to the improvement of rural Canada.

## **3. Budget**

Our estimated budget for the analysis of social cohesion under the Strategic Grant is \$185,000 per year for the three years of the project. Most of this will go to support the field research and macro-level analysis, with the balance used for workshop, communication, and

administrative activities. It will be supplemented by approximately \$250,000 per year from other sources through the NRE project.

## **Attachment i: Team Members**

### **Potential Co-Investigators**

Apedaile  
Beckley  
Bruce  
Carrier  
Fairbairn  
Felt  
Fuller  
Gertler  
Halseth  
Jean  
Joyal  
Keating  
Keddie  
Leblanc  
Looker  
Marshall  
Myers  
Rounds  
Simard  
Steeves  
Trott  
Wall  
Wilkinson

HRDC  
Industry Canada  
Laurentian  
Manitoba  
McGill  
Nfld Gov't  
RDI/Brandon  
Rural and Small Town Programme  
Rural Secretariat  
Statistics Canada  
The Ontario Rural Council  
UNBC  
UQAR  
UQAT  
UQTR

### **Potential Researchers**

Dionne  
Doiron  
Gwyn  
Johanneson  
Martz  
McCallum  
Simpson  
Woodrow

### **Potential Collaborators**

Armstrong  
Bollman  
Clemenson  
Donnelly  
Greenwood  
Illingworth  
Lindsay  
Merrifield  
Pong  
Reams  
Rutherford

### **Potential Partners**

Alberta Gov't  
Centre for Cooperative Studies  
Canadian Forest Service  
Concordia University  
DIAND  
FedNor  
Guelph