

Building A National Rural Policy and the National Rural Development Partnership

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Abstract. While there are numerous forces altering the opportunity set for rural policy deliberations in the U.S. and elsewhere [OECD 1990 & 1993] there are three of particular interest: (1) the growing documentation and awareness of the diversity of rural; (2) the growing sensitivity of the federal budget (surplus/deficit) and its perceived effect on the choices the federal government has to address national issues; and (3) the increased social-political-economic attention paid to the changing role of government in the affairs of people. These forces provide an opportunity to rethink how we might address the issues concerning the 20 percent of our population that reside in rural America.

1. Introduction

Rural development initiatives have enjoyed brief flurries of attention on the national policy stage only to lose the spotlight to more traditional commercial agriculture interests or functional concerns (e.g., health, telecommunications) [Effland 1995, Freshwater 1991, Rasmussen 1989]. While there remains an apparent void in mechanisms for articulating a national rural development policy framework, this is not the case for explicit functional issues. There have been several eloquent calls for a national rural policy (see Castle 2001, Drabentstott and Shaffer 2001, Fluharty 2001, and Johnson 2001.)¹ The national rural policy suggestion,

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¹ All argue such laudable issues as digital divide, human capital, or place competitiveness, but Fluharty adds that a national rural policy's critical components are: 1) developing a more integrative, cross-sectoral, community-based policy approach, 2) addressing the significant need for community capacity building, 3) designing each of the above in a manner which encourages collaborative, regional, and cross-sectoral approaches, and 4) building a framework which encourages public and private sector entrepreneurship in rural America.

here, is not for one large inflexible structure, but rather one that explicitly recognizes the new context and manner in which the concerns of rural people can be addressed. In particular, there already exists a mechanism that can coalesce the diverse interests of rural people, state, and federal agencies, and provide a framework for articulating rural policy agenda as well as improve the delivery of existing initiatives. That mechanism is the National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP) that currently operates in 36 State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs). (see Table 1.)

Table 1. States with active SRDCs^a

| | | |
|------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Alaska | Michigan | Oregon |
| Colorado | Minnesota | Pennsylvania |
| Connecticut | Mississippi | South Carolina |
| Florida | Missouri | South Dakota |
| Idaho | Montana | Texas |
| Illinois | Nebraska | Utah |
| Indiana | New Hampshire | Vermont |
| Iowa | New Mexico | Washington |
| Kansas | New York | West Virginia |
| Louisiana ^b | North Carolina | Wisconsin |
| Maine | North Dakota | Wyoming |
| Maryland | Ohio | |
| Massachusetts | Oklahoma | |

^a California, Georgia, Rhode Island, and Virginia are organizing

^b No longer active

The heart of this proposal is that the NRDP and SRDCs represent key dimensions in articulating a national rural policy. First, they provide a forum for a sustained dialogue among public, private, tribal and non-governmental entities that have historically represented rural interests at both the national and state level. Second, since they are not a new funding source, the NRDP and SRDCs represent a way for all of the parties to engage in a new way of doing business. Third, they personify the diverse coalition needed to move a rural agenda forward.

The balance of this paper focuses on the National Rural Development Partnership after more fully developing the three major forces alluded to in the opening paragraph, and outlining the pre-conditions perceived necessary to sustaining any national policy initiative.

2. Forces Creating Opportunity

While the political and economic impact of farming (I'm using a broad definition encompassing ranching and forestry) should never be underestimated, neither should it be overestimated. It's an established and crucial economic component of many rural areas. It also plays a significant role in urban/metro economies where much of the manufactured inputs and food processing occurs. It contributes approximately 6.4 percent of the gross dollar value of U.S. exports.

Yet, despite all of this, farming can no longer be used to characterize rural areas or the economies of most rural areas. The BEA's estimates of 1996 Gross State Product suggest that farming accounts for 1.2 percent of the national GDP and ranges from 0.46 (NY) to 11.1 (SD) percent (USDA 1997). Recent estimates indicate that 1992 employment in and directly linked to farming averages 15.8 percent nationally and varies from 11.0 (NV) to 24.7 (IA) percent (USDA 1996, p. 58). The 1990 Census of population counted 22.8 percent of our population as residing in nonmetro areas, but only 6.0 percent claimed farming as their major occupation (USDA 1993, pp. 64 & 83). Finally, the recent analysis by Cooke and Mizer 1989 noted that only 556 of the 2,276 nonmetro counties had at least 20 percent of their three year (1987-89) average earnings coming from agriculture.

The purpose of the preceding litany is not to challenge the importance of agriculture, but to highlight the dynamics of rural economies and how additional points of policy entry have appeared. For example, in 1993 Medicare and Medicaid re-imburement flowing to non-metro counties was 4.25 times that of USDA commodity programs.² The average annual 1990-95 employment growth in retirement oriented rural counties was 1 percent per year above that in farming dependent counties (USDA 1996, p 60).

Regardless of your perspective the federal government is clearly using the current projected surplus to deal with other problems, e.g., social security, medicare drug benefits, tax relief, and is reluctant to start new initiatives without a budget 'offset'. Simultaneously, efforts to devolve federal initiatives to state and local governments mean that more of the policy action is likely to occur in states. The block granting of several federal programs (e.g., welfare, labor) moves major decisions and responsibilities to state government. It also responds to the contention that centrally set standards or responses (i.e., one size fits all) are less likely to be fully responsive to the uniqueness of state and local issues. Even in a decentralizing environment, the need to articulate and synthesize rural concerns nationally remains imperative.

The emergence of New Governance (Osbourne & Gaebler 1992) has challenged the existing paradigm about what and how government should operate. The two most obvious federal forms are the Vice President's National Performance Review (NPR) (Gore 1993) and the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act which will be fully implemented with the 1999 federal budget cycle. In short these initiatives al-

² Braschler and Nelson (1997) report that in 1993 \$56.98 billion of medicare & medicaid payments went to nonmetro counties. The December 1994 Agricultural Outlook, p.52 notes \$13.4 billion of direct government payments to producers.

ter the rules for how government should do business. They argue that customers or clients of programs need to be explicitly connected to the what and how of program delivery. It forces agencies to justify resource (budget, staff) requests on the basis of outcomes (improved understanding of rural economic processes) on program recipients, rather than outputs (journal articles), or inputs (scientist years, travel funds). Another dimension is the need to focus on strategic points of influence, rather than projects. This moves public activity to accumulating impacts over-time within a strategy that focuses on a core goal that exploits the potential synergism among short term projects.

These three forces in particular set the context for the re-examination (or even the creation) of rural policy. After a brief review of three pre-conditions for sustained policy, I'll turn to the role the National Rural Development Partnership can play.

2a. Necessary Conditions for Building a Sustainable Rural Policy³

The social and economic diversity of rural America poses high hurdles for creating the shared vision for program development and implementation among rural stakeholders necessary for a national rural policy. There are at least three necessary and interconnected conditions for a sustained rural policy initiative: 1) an active constituency, 2) local and national leadership, and 3) effective program bureaucracies and program delivery systems (Bonnen 1992). When each of these three concerns is adequately addressed, public policy is more likely to be politically supported and sustained. Historically, the failure of many prior federal rural (nonfarm) policy initiatives occurred because of the lack of one or more of these conditions.

Political legitimacy for federal policies emerges from the efforts of their **constituencies**. Constituencies can be very narrow and powerful or very large and unorganized. The more homogeneous a constituency is on a single interest such as age, moral concerns, or industry interests (such as specific farm commodities) the more likely a pragmatic consensus will form and an organized interest sustained. The diversity of rural communities presently makes it difficult for a unified national voice to emerge. The absence of a national political constituency reduces the likelihood of sustained federal rural initiatives.

The apparent absence of an organized national constituency for rural development overlooks the national constituency as diverse as rural America. This distinction between the absence of any organized national

³ This draws heavily on work for the Rural Policy Research Institute, University of Missouri-Columbia.

constituency and the existing base for a national constituency represents a fundamental dilemma. How might a national constituency be stimulated to coalesce and emerge? Chuck Fluharty (2001) has commented that we need a new AARP (American Association for Rural People).

The debilitating fragmentation of rural policy interests appears to be a barrier to coalescing a national constituency. Yet, farm legislation over the years is a continuing saga of stitching together commodity, nutrition and environmental interests (Bonnen 1992). The only apparent difference is that they have done it longer. This suggests a basis for grassroots support for federal rural policy initiatives is not unreasonable.

Leadership is a very tricky policy pre-condition to induce or manage. Leadership impacts will be ephemeral, if not accompanied by an active constituency and corresponding institutional changes to improve program delivery. An early element for articulating a national rural policy is creating the banner to attract and energize the energies of the constituency. It is extremely difficult to lead when there is no constituency to help articulate program objectives and provide political legitimacy. Effective leadership includes both personal and institutional commitment to making federal development resources available to rural communities. It clearly is no longer sufficient to have just federal leadership whether legislative or administrative. But such leadership must occur at all levels of society and government, and the private sector.

No longer is rural development or the livelihood of rural people the sole purview of the USDA. The activities of numerous federal departments and agencies and congressional committees impact on rural people. They are found in such places as the Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Veterans Affairs (VA), Small Business Administration (SBA), Transportation (DOT), and others. The need to focus on the USDA is not because the USDA has the largest program commitment to rural people and places, because it does not. It is taken because Congress has designated the USDA as the lead agency for rural development.

The **effectiveness of program delivery** is directly proportional to the level of constituency input made and the ability of the bureaucracy to establish partnerships with constituencies. The diversity of rural America poses serious organizational dilemmas for program delivery. Unlike individual entitlement programs, rural development programs must involve community cooperation. There are historical precedents for federal and local partnerships within USDA. USDA farm services and conservation programs depend on local and federal program partnerships. Each program relies on independent local boards consisting of program stakeholders. Current Farm Services Boards (former Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Boards) and Conservation District Boards provide program flexibility and local political legitimacy for

USDA/Farm Services Agency (USDA/FSA) and for USDA/NR respectively. While both USDA/FSA and USDA/NR have command and control bureaucracies, their relationships with their local boards involve a considerable degree of local autonomy in interpretation of federal regulations. Were similar community/state rural development boards to be established, broad-based representation of community stakeholders would be critical.

The interdependence among constituencies, political leadership, and bureaucratic behavior in program delivery are the necessary conditions for a sustained national policy initiative. A national rural policy also must appear in an arena of dramatically changing inter-governmental relationships among federal, tribal, state, local and a changing boundary among public and private for profit and non-profit organizations.

2b. National Rural Development Partnership

In January of 1990, the federal government announced a six point Presidential Initiative on Rural America. The early formulation of the initiative (hereafter referred to as the Partnership or NRDP) emphasized comprehensive rural economic development.⁴ But, it was more than job and income creation (although those were important incentives for participation), it included health, transportation, environmental issues, etc. It sought to encourage a strategic vs. project response involving different levels of government and the private sector.

The Deputy Under Secretary for Rural Development and Small Communities in the USDA and a small staff housed in the National Partnership Office (NPO) operationally led the Partnership. Being housed at this level, permitted greater leverage in spanning across various agency and departmental lines.

A cluster of senior program managers and public interest groups created what is now called the National Rural Development Council (NRDC). Whether initially fully appreciated or not, this group proved to be a key mechanism that enabled senior program managers in various federal departments and agencies to have real input into the policy management and implementation phase of the Partnership.

The NRDC subordinated USDA's visibility and elevated the input of other departments and agencies. This broadened the scope of the effort and created internal support (i.e., commitment by senior staff) in non -

⁴ Although the Partnership has existed for ten years, it has never been formally authorized by Congress. The current basis for the existence of the Partnership is found in the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act of 1972 (Public Law 92-419, 86 Stat. 657) and the Rural Development Policy Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-355, 94 Stat. 1171). In addition, the Conference Committee Report on the 1996 federal Farm Bill created specific responsibilities and expectations for the Partnership and SRDCs.

USDA departments for the concepts of the Partnership. A sense of the breadth of this involvement is displayed in the number of Federal Departments listed in Table 2, committing staff and funds to the Partnership.

The NRDC represents a working example of the Inter-agency Working Group proposed in the 1996 "Farm Bill" [Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act of 1996, section 381L].

A significant aspect of the Partnership was that no additional funding was provided to federal departments for new programs, nor was legislative concurrence sought⁵. Staff were detailed from other positions and budget support came from within existing Departmental budgets. The involvement of senior staff from numerous departments coupled with the early cloak of a Presidential Initiative enabled the Partnership to approach Departments and request funds for the first years of the effort.⁶ The funds for succeeding years came from similar sources, but inquiries from the Office of Management and Budget during budget preparations regarding where and how the Department was supporting the Partnership were difficult to ignore. An unintended result of this funding approach was the early imprinting of the message "this is not a new funding program for rural development programs." In addition, it reminded, however briefly, upper level administrators of the Partnership.

The mission statements for the Partnership and NRDC give some sense of the operating style and desired outcomes [Sanderson, 1993]. The mission of the **National Rural Development Partnership** is to contribute to the vitality of the Nation by strengthening the ability of all rural Americans to participate in determining their futures. The mission of the **National Rural Development Council** is to engage federal agencies and private and public interest groups to support rural communities by building collaborative partnerships and leveraging knowledge and resources in focused rural development effects through State Rural Development Councils.⁷

In its early incantations the NRDP emphasized six major themes: Osborne and Gaebler (1994, p.4)

building inter- and intra-governmental relationships;

⁵ This all changed with the passage of the 2002 Farm Bill that explicitly recognized the National Rural Development Partnership in SEC. 6021 of Subtitle D and authorized \$10 million.

⁶ The funds were used to support travel by NPO staff, the National Institute, and individual SRDCs. The SRDCs were expected to generate approximately one-third of their budget from nonfederal sources. The Federal contribution to the SRDC budgets averages \$120,000 annually and the nonfederal contribution averages 39 percent of SRDC budgets.

⁷ This national mission and goal statement applies to the NRDC only. Individual State Rural Development Councils adopt their own state specific mission statements.

promoting strategic development;
 making better use of existing resources;
 intervening in a problem solving role;
 addressing regulatory and administrative impediments; and
 representing a model of new governance principles.

Table 2. NRDP national participants.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT PARTICIPANTS

Appalachian Regional Commission
 Corporation for National Service
 National Endowment for the Arts Outreach Office
 Tennessee Valley Authority
 U.S. Department of Agriculture
 U.S. Department of Commerce
 U.S. Department of Defense
 U.S. Department of Education
 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
 U.S. Department of the Interior
 U.S. Department of Labor
 U.S. Department of Transportation
 U.S. Department of the Treasury
 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
 U.S. Small Business Administration

STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT PARTICIPANTS

International City/County Management Association
 National Association of Counties
 National Association of Development Organizations
 National Association of Regional Councils
 National Association of Towns and Townships
 National Governors' Association
 National League of Cities

PRIVATE SECTOR PARTICIPANTS

American Bankers Association
 American Forests
 Independent Bankers Association of America
 National Rural Electric Cooperative Association

NONPROFITS

American Association of State Colleges & Universities
 Aspen Institute
 National Council of Nonprofit Associations
 Rural Coalition

The State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs) became the actual vehicle for implementing a substantial portion of the Partnership. The particular focus on networking, strategic response and implementation represents continuing characteristics of the SRDCs and NRDP. Table 3 offers insight to the general criteria that the SRDC's have used to focus their energies. Behind these criteria is the judgment that the issue is of substantial importance to rural people across the state, and that multiple perspectives and contributions are necessary.

Table 3. SRDC criteria for identifying issues.

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- When multiple organizations have responsibility over all or only part of the problem.
 - When the problem is narrowly defined in the missions of many programs but a better understanding indicates factors outside the control of any one agency.
 - When problems cross geographical or political boundaries.
 - When resources are declining or limited, and public organizations can benefit from a coordination of resources to accomplish their own missions.
 - When program criteria do not reflect the reality of the situation they were intended to address, either because of changed conditions or an institutional inability to address an adverse range of conditions.
 - When problems require public/private collaboration to craft solutions.
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Source: Lovan and Reid 1993.

A substantial part of the NRDP is contained in the code words "new paradigms," or "old/new logic" or "New Governance."⁸ Table 4 outlines some of the key aspects of this new paradigm. In retrospect, an early difficulty of the Partnership was the failure to articulate the conceptual framework that was guiding the SRDC portion of the Partnership (i.e., leadership banner). The idea of new paradigms captured attention, but left many frustrated if all it meant was no money to allocate, more meetings to attend, and power sharing. A common theme that coalesced the interest of many NRDP members was the idea of "doing the business of government differently." This was stimulated by the perception that the problem with government was that governmental procedures, processes, and institutions were getting in the way of creating appropriate solutions [Kettl 1993]. The problem was not one of more or less government as much as it was a problem of getting the pieces of the governmental pro-

⁸ Some examples of the old paradigm are contained in phrases like "what forms do I need to complete," "all we need is more money," "please forward the 3-ring binder of procedures" that often appear in early conversations with new NRDP participants.

gram and agency puzzle to fit together to solve the problems people currently faced.

Table 4. Reinventing government in rural America.

Operating principles:

- Strategic, long-term view
- Collaborative among existing and new stakeholders
- Organization both horizontal and vertical
 - Open communications based on trust and understanding
 - Partnerships, including all governments: State, Federal, Tribal and local, and the private sector—profit and nonprofit
 - Reflects broad social-economic involvement

Characterized by the following behaviors:

Engaging and enabling others through participatory and consensus-building activities, rather than directing or announcing.

Activity is mission and vision driven, rather than program driven.

Creating opportunities (proactive), rather than just reacting (solving individual problems) in prescribed ways.

Acting entrepreneurial with flexible authority to achieve a mission through innovating and experimenting rather than acting in a centralized, hierarchial manner.

Serving citizens as customers, rather than special interests as clients.

Measuring success by results achieved, not inputs applied. Accountability is achieved through a process that involves policy makers, funders, front-line managers and customers.

Investing resources for long-term benefits, rather than spending for short-term pay-offs.

Forming horizontal alliances and collaborating with stakeholders (public and private) to achieve common goals, rather than acting hierarchically to impose uniformity.

Source: Lovan and Reid 1993.

Reinventing government, in the rural development context, requires that stakeholders reach beyond their own narrowly drawn program objectives. Through establishing an interactive process designed to utilize inter-organizational resources, a broader impact can be achieved. The goal is not only to deliver resources more efficiently, but to insure an effective use of resources. Moreover, the process builds organizational capacity to deal with diversity at many levels—sub-state, state, multi-state and national.

The challenge is to create public systems that can be flexible, creative and adaptive. This requires new multi-organizational arrangements, often temporary in nature, which cut across conventional boundaries between public and private activities.

The NRDP's new paradigm requires at least three major shifts in how the public and private sector address rural development (see Table 4) The first is a shift from input to results orientation. The second is a shift from agency driven responses to customer driven responses. The third is a shift from a patchwork of partial responses to a comprehensive strategic response that is flexible enough to accommodate the differences among rural areas and people.

2c. Some Examples

What follows is a partial listing of things individual SRDCs have done. It is only a partial listing, but it shows the diversity of outcomes pursued by each to “contribute to the vitality of the Nation by strengthening the ability of all rural Americans to participate in determining their futures” and the breath of constituencies and agencies involved. (National Partnership Office 1999; 2000) .

The Alaska Council, banks and other private partners worked to insure that the rural portion of the state's SRDC kept operating. Colorado's SRDC has worked with HUD to help rural Coloradoans become first time homeowners through affordable housing. The Florida SRDC has worked with state agencies in a coalition against domestic violence. Idaho has worked to consolidate all the relevant information from several state and federal agencies to help farmers and ranchers meet government farm conservation requirements. Indiana established the Indiana Housing Assistance Review Team (IHART) with several state and federal agencies to help rural communities with affordable housing. Kansas's SRDC worked to provide a forum for those interested in rural rail abandonmen. The Maine council helped to promote understanding of tribal culture and history via a conference. Massachusetts worked to help people understand how some social service agencies and food pantries were helping people become self-sufficient. Minnesota's SRDC in conjunction with private foundations, and state and federal agencies has created the New Immigrant Project to help move new immigrants to self-sufficiency. New Mexico, working with a private foundation and local government, organized an employer driven training program for nearly 500 displaced workers. North Carolina worked with several other state agencies to document the rural devastation from Hurricane Floyd and to acquire additional federal funding. South Carolina worked with several federal and state agencies and non-profits on effectively implementing community strategic plans. Vermont's SRDC worked with the state human services agency to organize a teen summit which worked on how to effectively engage teens in after-school activities.

The preceding simply displays a variety of outcomes and approaches that the SRDC's have pursued. It is illustrative of the diverse

problems facing rural America and the importance of non USDA agencies in those solutions. It clearly shows that the SRDC's in partnership with other federal, state, nonprofit, and private sector actors have played a critical role in crafting solutions.

3. Conclusions

The Rural Development Policy Act of 1980 called for the establishment of "a nationwide rural development program using the services of executive branch departments and agencies, including, but not limited to, the agencies, bureaus, offices, and services of the Department of Agriculture, in coordination with rural development programs of state and local governments." Acting on this statutory direction, the first Bush Administration's rural development initiative called for the creation of a Washington-based interagency rural development coordinating committee and rural development councils at the state level.

The 1996 Farm Bill also directed SRDCs "to play a role in the formulation of local needs assessments and in the development of state criteria for the distribution of [federal rural development] funds. The last Farm Bill also called on SRDCs to "continue to play the roles of monitor and trouble-shooter for each state." It also called for the NRDP to "continue its role in monitoring and reporting on policies. The changing perceptions of rural and the political agenda of devolving federal government activities have created an opportunity to build a national rural policy. This effort will have a short life span if three necessary conditions are not present: 1) local and national leadership, 2) active constituency involvement, and 3) effective program delivery. The National Rural Development partnership offers an operating example to deliver these conditions.

The NRDP and SRDCs offer a chance to build a collaborative and strategic response to the needs of rural people. NRDP and SRDC's have opened the fullness of rural development problems to discussion. Complex problems, with little if any new money, require creativity and innovation. Creativity and innovation increase through inclusive processes in open forums. Collaborative partnerships that bring together both human and financial resources represent the new logic for achieving rural development goals. It represents a readily accessible mechanism to help frame the rural policy questions that are crucial to their locale.

The problems affecting the vitality of rural communities are complex. Contributing factors cross traditional geographical and organizational boundaries. Realistic strategies to address these factors lie beyond the mission and resources of any one agency, department or even level of government [Unruh and Kayne 1992]. During these dramatic and turbulent times the quote "In times of turbulence, turbulence is less the problem than using the old logic to address that turbulence" takes on

particular significance. The SRDC's are inventing and testing that new logic. Bryson [1993] observed that "the Partnership and SRDCs are actively engaged in rethinking how problems are defined and solutions are identified and are inventing outcomes on the way to solutions."

There are several aspects of the current Partnership that set it apart from prior efforts and also reflect what was learned from earlier efforts. First is the obvious broadening of the effort beyond the confines of the USDA. Second is the active inclusion of Tribal, State, and local government interests and private profit and nonprofit interests. Third is the minimal funding support for SRDCs plus the early and repeated message that this was not a new source of funds that caused the participants to alter their focus and change behavior. Fourth is the creation of a support system for the nurturing of the SRDCs as they seek to create their vision for rural development policy, i.e., National Rural Economic Development Institute. Fifth is the conscious effort to be strategic in responding, rather than just accepting numerous partial solutions. Sixth, the hiring of a full-time senior level civil servant, the executive director, keeps the SRDC effort constantly moving forward, rather than brief flurries of action caused by deadlines and emergencies.

The NRDP and SRDC's represent an ongoing experiment. While the progress made by NRDP pales in relation to that still needed, it is worth reflecting on the progress made:

The NRDP is implementing a partnership among Federal/State/local/ Tribal/ private profit and nonprofit interests (i.e., constituency building);

The NRDP is becoming a forum for actively rethinking how problems are defined and solutions identified (i.e., leadership);

The NRDP is performing an ombudsman's role in articulating perspectives of rural people before agencies that are not fully sensitive to the effect of their programs and current rules on rural people (i.e., effective program delivery);

The NRDP has made progress in breaking down geographical and jurisdictional barriers and often have created stronger working relationships between private and public sectors (i.e., effective program delivery and leadership).

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