



NATIONAL
RURAL FUNDERS
COLLABORATIVE

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A PUBLICATION SERIES AND INTERACTIVE LEARNING TOOL OF THE
NATIONAL RURAL FUNDERS COLLABORATIVE LEARNING NETWORK

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INTRODUCTION

RURAL CONNECTIONS is a publication series and interactive learning tool developed by the National Rural Funders Collaborative (NRFC), a learning and funding initiative to strengthen and sustain rural American communities and families who face persistent poverty. Our purpose in creating RURAL CONNECTIONS is to stimulate an interactive learning network where ideas, experiences, lessons learned, and strategies can be exchanged. We welcome the participation of rural funders, practitioners, leaders, policymakers, grassroots organizations and concerned individuals. We encourage you to use RURAL CONNECTIONS to help transform rural America from a neglected symbol of our romantic past to a vibrant, fertile seedbed of innovation, industry and sustainable futures.

TOOLS THAT CONNECT PEOPLE, IDEAS AND SUCCESSES

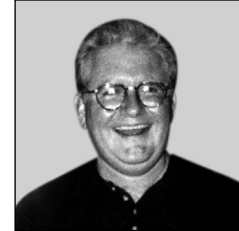
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Welcome to RURAL CONNECTIONS, a publication series and interactive learning tool developed by the National Rural Funders Collaborative (NRFC).

RURAL CONNECTIONS is a combination of:

- Printed materials, including this inaugural issue of our publication series; and
- Interactive resources designed to encourage and enable you to share your ideas and experiences on featured topics.

RURAL CONNECTIONS, in printed form and interactive format, features remarks, research and case studies that focus on community-based strategies for capacity-building and development of rural communities, and for measurable improvement in supports, services and quality of life for those who live and work within them. The NRFC believes the information is valuable to rural community leaders, funders, practitioners, policymakers, grassroots organizations and concerned individuals and encourages all to share their ideas and experiences.



In this issue, we are pleased to feature *Rural America: Our Crown Jewel* commentary focused on:

- 1) Why we should care about the future of rural communities; and
- 2) How funders, rural community leaders and practitioners can partner to help build capacity, develop leadership and foster new hope for rural America.

The Honorable James A. Joseph, former U.S. ambassador to South Africa, presented the commentary at the Council on Foundations annual meeting in Philadelphia on April 30, 2001. He serves as president emeritus of the Council on Foundations and professor of the practice of public policy studies at the Sanford Institute of Public Policy and leader-in-residence at the Hart Leadership Program.

Joseph addressed audiences during two separate sessions, speaking first to CEOs of major philanthropic institutions interested in addressing rural poverty and then to more than 75 funders. Joseph's remarks inspired lively audience discussion and comments in both sessions. Please see Page 4 for your opportunity to continue the dialogue.

This RURAL CONNECTIONS publication is designed for use with RURAL CONNECTIONS ONLINE — an interactive discussion tool accessible on the NRFC Web site. To join in the discussion, visit the NRFC Web site at www.nrfc.org and enter the section identified as RURAL CONNECTIONS ONLINE. This section of the NRFC Web site enables you to become a virtual participant in our interactive learning network. Here, you can connect with people, exchange ideas and share best practices with other discussion participants.

To ensure RURAL CONNECTIONS remains timely and thought-provoking, future issues will continue to provide new content for online discussion. In addition, RURAL CONNECTIONS ONLINE will feature a series of related discussion topics that will be updated on a regular basis.

We believe RURAL CONNECTIONS is a significant first step in fulfilling the NRFC's mission as *A Learning Partnership to Expand Resources for Rural Communities and Families*. We hope you are inspired to join our efforts in establishing new and effective connections between rural communities and families, and urban and rural places.

We welcome your questions or comments about the Collaborative, RURAL CONNECTIONS and our Web site. Please feel free to forward your thoughts and comments via e-mail.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James A. Richardson Jr.".

JAMES A. RICHARDSON JR., EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NATIONAL RURAL FUNDERS COLLABORATIVE
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RURAL AMERICA: OUR CROWN JEWEL

BY THE HONORABLE JAMES A. JOSEPH

In the following excerpt, James A. Joseph, president emeritus of the Council on Foundations, former U.S. ambassador to South Africa, and current professor of the practice of public policy studies at the Sanford Institute of Public Policy and leader-in-residence at the Hart Leadership Program, addresses why rural America is in need of revitalization. He provides eight reasons to encourage reinvestment. These remarks were presented at the Council on Foundations annual meeting during spring 2001.

I was born in rural America at a time when the rural countryside was still romanticized by poets and novelists. I grew up in a small community in Southwestern Louisiana where large oak and pecan trees mixed with cotton fields and bayous give the region its own unique essence. Some of my memories are romantic — vivid images of moss-covered trees, flowering magnolias and the almost mystic influences of Cajun cooking and Creole cultures. We were the original rainbow people. All of us, despite our differences in color and status, reflected in some way the fusion of Acadian and African culture with the equally varied cultures of American Indians, the French, Spaniards, Germans, Scots, Irish, English, Caribbean islanders and other Latin Americans, who intermixed at various junctures to form what the citizens of my home town now call a cultural gumbo.

“THERE ARE STILL TWO RURAL AMERICAS — THE RURAL AMERICA OF OUR ROMANTIC DREAMS AND THE RURAL AMERICA OF CONTEMPORARY REALITY.”

My other memories are less romantic and less mystical. I remember the long days of picking cotton in hot dusty fields and walking miles past the white school to get to the colored school at the end of

unpaved and rarely traveled roads. This was the other rural America. Much has changed since then, but one thing remains the same. There are still two rural Americas — the rural America of our romantic dreams and the rural America of contemporary reality. I want to speak this morning about the new rural America that is no longer dominated by agriculture or represented by agricultural interest groups; the rural America that increasingly means not only poor, but diverse minorities; the rural America that is poised and well-positioned to protect our natural resources and provide for our recreation; the rural America that is badly in need of reinvestment and nurture. Let me, thus, offer eight answers to the question that I have been asked to address: “Why Rural America?”

1) RURAL AMERICA IS STILL THE CROWN JEWEL OF OUR ENVIRONMENT AND FOOD PRODUCTION, BUT IT ALSO IS A NEW PLACE WITH NEW PEOPLE AND NEW POSSIBILITIES. Slightly more than a fifth of the nation’s people live in rural communities, and rural places make up 97 percent of our nation’s space. Most of the land we cherish and want to conserve for posterity can be found in rural areas, but these communities receive less attention and fewer resources. If we use the word rural to refer to non-metropolitan America, approximately 2,300 rural counties in the United States meet this definition.

Rural increasingly means poor, and although almost three-fourths of the non-metropolitan poor are white, the probability of being poor is about three times greater for non-metropolitan blacks, Latinos and Native Americans as it is for whites.

More than 90 percent of all rural blacks live in the South. Latinos, once concentrated largely in the Southwest, are now to be found in almost every region of the country. The Native American poor, who are reclaiming their tribal identity in once unlikely places, should have benefited from the passage of the Indian Self-Determination Act in 1975, but they have had very little, if any, improvement in their economic well being. Why should we be concerned about the rural poor? Because it is still true, as Franklin Roosevelt argued in 1937, that the test of progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have little.

2) RURAL PEOPLE HAVE VERY LITTLE INFLUENCE ON RURAL POLICY. For a long time, agricultural policy was considered rural policy and the influence of agricultural pressure groups was considered rural influence, but all that has changed with Americans living, owning or working on farms constituting a very small percentage of the rural population. The federal government has a long history of concern for rural America that goes back to the 1908 Country Life Commission; however, country life until recently meant agriculture. There are signs that neglect of rural people by policymakers

could be changing. Led by lawmakers like Eva Clayton of North Carolina, the Congressional Rural Caucus is being revived. Foundations and others can help them bring rural people and the plight of the new rural America to the attention of their colleagues. Foundations can see that they have access to the best information and insights for the development of policy.

3) THE LEADERSHIP POOL IN RURAL AREAS IS VERY SMALL AND SUFFERS FROM ISOLATION, BUT IT NEED NOT REMAIN THAT WAY.

There are very few spokespersons that can articulate needs and urge self-help. The nonprofits working in these areas are identifying leaders and helping release leadership energies, but rural leaders do not have much interaction with other leaders and do not enjoy the same access to information sources. This is a good time for private donors to help broaden the leadership base, draw out and help develop talent across the lines of race, gender and geography. If we have learned anything about leadership from those who toppled communism, brought down the Berlin Wall or caused the collapse of apartheid, it is that the next generation of leaders is not likely to fit the traditional mold, nor are these leaders likely to come from traditional places. Many will be ordinary people with extraordinary commitments. Their styles will be different. Their accents will be different and so will their color and complexion.

There also is the leadership potential of those who are returning to rural destinations as a matter of choice. There has been much attention given to the rural brain drain, but not enough to the brain gain, the many well-credentialed, qualified people who have returned to rural areas for recreation, retirement, romantic attachments or quality of life reasons. We need to find ways to engage them with their neighbors and the needs of rural communities.

4) MANY INSTITUTIONS IN RURAL AREAS ARE OBSOLETE OR NEARING OBSOLESCENCE. As rural America has changed, many institutions have remained the same. They are now ill equipped to deal with current challenges.

According to recent studies, this problem manifests itself in at least three ways: inadequate delivery of services, government units and programs that do not fit the size and shape of rural challenges, and lack of coalitions that represent broad-based rural interests. The most obvious obsolescence can be seen in deteriorating highways, bridges, roads, and water and sewer systems, but even rural governments were designed to function when there was little for them to do in either developing or implementing policy. With the devolution of power and federal funds now pushed down to the local level for distribution, rural governments need help in devising programs and policies appropriate to the new realities.

The obsolescence of rural institutions can be seen in many other areas as well. Many of my high school colleagues, for example, were members of the Future Farmers of America and the 4-H Club, two organizations created originally to preserve a lifestyle and skills appropriate to the family farm. Groups like these need to be re-invented to help serve the needs of rural communities facing fundamentally different challenges. MDC's Rural Community College Initiative provides an example of how once isolated tribal colleges and other rural community colleges can be made to work for the betterment of rural communities. We need to identify other rural assets that can be similarly transformed.

5) THE TIME IS RIGHT AND THE OPPORTUNITY GREAT FOR ORGANIZED PHILANTHROPY TO TAKE THE LEAD IN DEVELOPING NEW IDEAS AND NEW WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT RURAL AMERICA.

The government sector is too often paralyzed by politics, and the business sector is all too often preoccupied with profits. This also is a

good time for private donors to help broaden the base of information and insight, to include those whom we seek to help in the planning process. If strategies to eliminate poverty are to be effective, the rural poor must be included in their own development. We call it "assisted self-reliance" and "participatory development" in other areas, and that is precisely what is needed in rural areas. The emphasis is on the engagement of grassroots energies and enthusiasms through private, independent sector groups. Experience around the world seems to demonstrate that when we empower the poor to be active participants in their own development, we are likely to have not only new ideas and wider ownership of basic strategies, but increased effectiveness as well.

"THE TIME IS RIGHT FOR ORGANIZED PHILANTHROPY TO LEAD IN DEVELOPING NEW IDEAS ABOUT RURAL AMERICA."

6) ORGANIZED PHILANTHROPY IS IDEALLY SUITED TO HELP FIND WAYS TO STRENGTHEN THE URBAN/RURAL CONNECTION.

It will be increasingly important for rural communities to establish partnerships with urban communities. While they may face vastly different challenges, rural and urban communities are both watching a majority of resources flow into suburban areas. Supporting rural areas does not mean abandoning urban America. It is simply to recognize the connection between the two.

7) WE SHOULD DO WHAT WE CAN TO ENSURE THAT THE PRIVATE SECTOR HAS THE COMMITMENT AND THE PUBLIC SECTOR THE CAPACITY TO PLAY A MEANINGFUL ROLE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES.

This is a good opportunity to make Peter Drucker's concept of a fourth sector of partnerships real by working with both policymakers and opinion leaders to put rural America on our national agenda, to reconnect rural people to economic activity, to resolve the new tensions arising from immigration and to facilitate the full participation of the newcomers in rural economic and civic life.

8) THIS IS A GOOD TIME FOR BUILDING A NEW CULTURE OF COLLABORATION AMONG GRANTMAKERS. The potential and problems of rural America provide an opportunity for collaboration in learning as well as grantmaking. What we can learn is magnified by our efforts to learn together. What we can do is multiplied by the impact of our working together. Through effective collaboration, we can develop a common vision and build a larger capacity. But equally important, we can engage Americans more broadly in matching rural romance with rural reality.

RURAL CONNECTIONS ONLINE

Please visit the NRFC Web site at www.nrfc.org and enter the RURAL CONNECTIONS ONLINE section to participate in our learning network. Here, you'll have an opportunity to view ideas and experiences shared by rural leaders, funders, practitioners, policymakers, grassroots organizations and concerned individuals. In addition, you'll have an opportunity to share your experiences, concerns and best practices.

Your participation will help promote meaningful ideas and experiences that offer new hope and vitality for rural communities and families. We encourage you to respond to the concerns and challenges voiced by Ambassador Joseph in his commentary.

CHALLENGE: Joseph describes two different rural Americas: one a "romantic dream" of countryside, regional cuisine and blended cultures; the other "a more contemporary reality" of increasing poverty, diminishing resources, outdated policy and unrealized potential.

DISCUSSION: How accurate, in your experience, is Joseph's description of the two rural Americas and the disparity between them?

CHALLENGE: Our society needs to broaden the leadership base for rural America and develop talent across the lines of race, gender and geography. It also is critical that we transform obsolete or near-obsolete rural institutions.

DISCUSSION: What successful models for leadership development are emerging in rural areas faced with persistent poverty? What corresponding institutional transformations taking place in rural America could give new hope for revitalization in rural communities?

CHALLENGE: Organized philanthropy should take the lead in developing new ideas and influencing thought processes about rural America. Organized philanthropy should have a role in ensuring that the private sector has the commitment and the public sector has the capacity to play a meaningful role in rural communities.

DISCUSSION: What are possible roles for philanthropy to play in transforming rural America? What are the new emerging models for rural philanthropy? What new opportunities and potential benefits exist for funders working together through effective collaboration?

ABOUT THE NATIONAL RURAL FUNDERS COLLABORATIVE

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL RURAL FUNDERS COLLABORATIVE (NRFC)?

NRFC is a learning and funding initiative to help strengthen and sustain rural American communities and families faced with persistent poverty. Seven private U.S. foundations, who are NRFC's initial members, are seeking to leverage \$100 million for rural reinvestment over the next 10 years to support the NRFC initiative.

WHAT IS THE NRFC'S VISION?

NRFC envisions sharing and leveraging collective knowledge, influence and financial resources to expand the availability and impact of human, technical and monetary resources for communities and families in rural areas of persistent poverty. NRFC focuses on partnering regionally to create and sustain measurable change in these areas.

WHY DOES NRFC FOCUS ON ASSISTING RURAL AREAS?

The Collaborative believes rural places are a vital wellspring of American society and recognizes an inextricable link between rural and urban areas. Of special interest are rural areas that historically have lacked access to resources to support sustainable, healthy communities.

HOW DOES THE NRFC PLAN TO FULFILL ITS VISION?

The Collaborative seeks to expand thinking on rural policy, philanthropy and community building through partnerships and published documents that effectively communicate the importance and centrality of rural America.

HOW IS THE NRFC DIFFERENT?

NRFC is a learning community working in partnership with local and regional funders and rural institutions. NRFC connects with and unites funders to encourage investing in rural communities, rather than simply spending funds. NRFC communities and families determine strategies, outcomes and measures that are important in sustaining and enhancing their vitality and viability.

HOW WILL THE NRFC INFORM PUBLIC POLICY?

The Collaborative operates using a multiregional strategy, including grantmaking and program activity within rural areas faced with persistent poverty. The Collaborative's regional projects will support a learning network where best practices are discussed and a policy forum in which national and regional funders work together to inform public policy.

WHAT CHALLENGES DOES THE NRFC FACE?

The NRFC's key challenges include:

- Addressing the culture of hopelessness in rural communities;
- Empowering rural residents to participate in decision-making processes and make an impact during vital activities; and
- Encouraging funders to recognize the strategic benefits in investing in rural areas.

WHO CAN ASSIST THE NRFC AND HOW?

Public and private funders are welcomed as strategic partners, and rural institutions are encouraged to participate in leadership, decision making and learning activities coordinated by the Collaborative. Participation by regional leaders, officials, grassroots organizations and concerned individuals also is essential to partnering and community building.

WHERE CAN MORE INFORMATION ABOUT NRFC BE FOUND?

For more information about NRFC, please visit the Web site at www.nrfc.org. You also may contact NRFC staff by phone at 214.946.2456, or by e-mail at info@nrfc.org.

To join the National Rural Funders Collaborative (NRFC) or to apply for participation,
please visit the organization's Web site at:

www.nrfc.org.

Questions may be directed by e-mail to
info@nrfc.org, or by phone at **214.946.2456**.