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# Rural development in the highlands of North America: The highlander economic education project

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Recently, a series of economic reports have warned of growing poverty and underemployment in the rural South (of the USA). Rural areas are seeing plants close, as jobs move to newly industrialised areas in the Third World where labour can be provided more cheaply. The South, it is argued, can no longer depend upon recruiting outside industry as its strategy for development. Rather, we must turn to a policy that nurtures development from within that encourages and fosters community-based organisation and enterprise as the solution to the needs of rural communities.

While 'development from within' is a good idea, the rural South has had little experience from which to relate to it. Industrial recruitment relied upon enterprising elite to bring in outside industry and capital, which would in turn 'create' development. The role of the community was to make itself ready to receive and serve business; to make community and worker interests subservient to the needs of maintaining a favourable business climate. Development was done to and for local communities, not by the people themselves. If 'development from within' is to happen, communities need to develop a new literacy - an economic literacy which enables and empowers local citizens to analyse their own economic problems and resources to develop solutions to joblessness and poverty, and to gain the tangible skills they need to make rural community-based development happen.

In 1984 the Highlander Centre, a non-profit adult education centre in New Market, Tennessee, began to develop a program to assist communities to gain the knowledge necessary to support self-development. In the

last two years, we have concentrated our work in three rural communities: Dungannon, Virginia, in conjunction with the Dungannon Development Commission; Jellico Tennessee, in conjunction with the Mountain Women's Exchange; and Ivanhoe, Virginia, in conjunction with the Ivanhoe Civic League. The three communities have much in common: they are all rural, poor, and in search of a new economic base. Local citizens' groups led by low-income women have sprung up to create alternatives for the community.

At each site, Highlander has worked over a period of time, offering night classes ranging from 10 to 16 weeks in length and providing other types of technical and educational support for grassroots economic leadership development. Our role was not to create jobs or development; rather it was to help the community undertake a process of education and participatory research through which they could assess their own situation, define and implement strategies for themselves.

A number of methods were used, all of which are described more fully in a series of publications available from Highlander. In general, these methods emphasised the participation of community members in researching, analysing, valuing, and understanding their current economic state. This participation was considered vital to reversing the pattern of dependence on external economic forces. A few of the activities included:

- Oral histories: in order to understand the current economic crisis, people need to understand the changing patterns of work and subsistence in the community. Academics gain this knowledge from macroeconomic trends, changing

economic base, etc. Communities must seek this knowledge from within. Asking questions to grandparents, parents, and peers about their work and means of survival, and then charting those responses becomes an excellent way of understanding broad economic changes through people's own experiences.

- Community surveys: rather than rely upon external definitions of need, community participants developed their own needs assessment survey and used it to interview several hundred people in each community. The survey becomes a way of mobilizing the community to discuss their economic conditions. Collective analysis of the survey results also helps create a common language from which to state and prioritize problems to be addressed.
- Community mapping and drawings: visual portrayals became an important way for participants to describe current problems and relationships in the community, as well as to articulate visions for the future.
- Decision-makers' interviews: the process did not rely only on community analysis. After beginning their own research on the changing economy and on community needs, interviews were also conducted with key local decision-makers-bankers, industry heads and county planners. A prior process of 'reclaiming' the community knowledge about the economy was important, so that people did not simply defer to an 'expert diagnosis'. In fact, the community's definitions of needs contrasted so dramatically with those of the power holders, that participants were then able to understand why 'official' bodies often failed to reflect their own needs.
- Videos and readings: as people developed their own knowledge of their local situation, educational materials about other communities and trends were introduced. These included case studies of community-based development elsewhere, study of census data, videos on the global economic trends etc.
- Brainstorming and feasibility studies: participants brainstormed projects which they thought would help meet the community needs. They then developed internal feasibility studies, using the knowledge and research gained from other activities.
- Cultural components: at the community level, economic knowledge can not be separated from other ways of knowing. In Ivanhoe, community theatre became a way of recapturing and sharing knowledge about the community. In a very religious community, study circles about what the Bible had to say about the economy became another vehicle for analysing and understanding the community, as well as for clarifying values and developing a common vision of what should be done. Local cultures must be respected.

In each of these settings the purpose of the project was to reclaim knowledge and understanding of the economy in a way that could enhance effective citizen participation and strategy-development. In each setting, the education and research process were only part of a number of other activities in the community, so it is difficult to isolate the impact of this program alone. But in each case the educational process helped to spark results (which are still unfolding). Individual members of the community have gained confidence, knowledge and skills that have, in turn, contributed to action.

Perhaps these experiences give rise to a new understanding of the 'infrastructure' necessary for development. Traditional development policy emphasises the need for infrastructure development in physical terms - sewage systems, water and roads - as a necessary precursor to industrial development. The knowledge needed for development is 'technical' in nature business plans, feasibility studies, and market research. As important as these may be, case studies and experience suggest a broader view, especially if one is interested in participatory development. In the latter approach, the development of 'infrastructure' includes human development, an education for creativity, regaining and understanding of popular knowledge and history, democratic decision-making, and

consciousness of religious and political symbols. With this investment, people can become better equipped to rebuild their own communities and economies.

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