

Challenges and Barriers to Community Participation in Policy Development



Rural Communities Impacting Policy

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With the help and guidance from the
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The goal of the Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) Project is to increase the ability of rural communities and organizations in Nova Scotia to access and use social science research in order to influence and develop policy that contributes to the health and sustainability of communities. RCIP is a 5-year research project (2001-2006), funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and co-sponsored by the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre at Dalhousie University and the Coastal Communities Network.

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Challenges and Barriers to Community Participation in Policy Development

Government and policy makers are beginning to recognize the important role communities can play in policy development and efforts are being made to allow them to become more involved in the policy-making process. However, despite these efforts, there are still many barriers and challenges that can stand in the way of community involvement. Understanding and anticipating these barriers and challenges is important when a community is getting organized for or involved in policy activity. This understanding can help individuals and organizations more effectively impact the policy-making process. Further, it is important for communities to understand that government also faces barriers and challenges that can hinder its progress in responding to and recognizing the priorities of rural Canadians. Overcoming the barriers and challenges to policy development faced by both rural communities and government will serve to facilitate the policy-making process. This paper will outline some of the more common barriers and challenges as perceived by rural communities and government.

Barriers and Challenges to Policy Development Faced by Communities

As noted above, individuals and community organizations face many potential barriers and challenges to policy development. Seven of the most common include:

- (1) Lack of understanding of the policy process
- (2) Lack of community resources
- (3) Reliance on volunteers
- (4) Lack of access to information
- (5) Absence of rural representation and certain community groups in the decision-making process.
- (6) Relationship between government and rural communities
- (7) Time and policy timeline restrictions

(1) Understanding the Policy-Making Process

Before rural communities can make attempts to impact public policy, it is important that they have an understanding of the policy-making process itself. The first working paper of this series, “A Brief Guide to Understanding Policy Development” (Rural Communities Impacting Policy, 2002) discusses the policy-making process, including key players, timeframe for policy development and steps for influencing policy. Understanding the policy-making process can help individuals and community-based organizations decide whether they will become involved in trying to develop or change a policy and, if so, how to best go about it. Unfortunately, the policy-making process tends to be very complex making it difficult for almost anyone to understand it completely. However, understanding the process can help empower individuals and community-based organizations to impact policy.

(2) Lack of Resources

In order for rural communities to play an active role in the policy-making process, it is necessary for their members to have access to resources. These resources include adequate funding, government training programs, education, leaders, and volunteers to support rural causes and initiatives. Many rural communities tend to lack one or more of these resources, a situation which interferes with their ability to effectively impact the policy-making process.

Having inadequate resources negatively impacts a rural community’s ability to effectively influence and develop policy compared to other players in the policy-making process. For example, corporations and professional organizations often have access to large amounts of financial and human resources. This creates an inequity whereby community organizations that may be equally or even more affected by policy change do not have the same opportunity to participate in and influence the process.

(3) Reliance on Volunteers

Lack of access to financial resources necessary to address problems and concerns of rural communities leads to organizations relying on volunteers to carry

out community-based activities. Low populations in rural areas can result in the availability of only a small number of volunteers to carry out all the necessary activities demanded by their community organizations. This situation can lead to a reluctance to become involved in the complex policy-making process. Even more difficult is finding individuals within rural communities with the skills, abilities and desire to initiate and champion rural policy development. Further, there tends to be a lack of programs to train, support and motivate new leaders and volunteers. As a result of a lack of these resources, some community leaders and volunteers face burnout that affects their productivity and progress in furthering the work to help their community. In addition, the loss of youth from rural communities results in a depletion of potential future community leaders and volunteers. Another factor which can be considered contributing to the absence of a volunteer pool may be the political and social visibility that can result from becoming active in the policy-making process. Such visibility may be uncomfortable for some and emphasize the vulnerability of certain community members, for example, those of low socio-economic status.

(4) Lack of Access to Information

Rural citizens have indicated that they feel there is a lack of access to information about government programs and services. Rural Canadians have also reported that the information that is available on policy, government programs and services is difficult to obtain and interpret. There is a desire to learn about and access information about government programs and services that is understandable, concise and timely (Rural Dialogue, 2000). Recently, the Federal government has moved towards increasing access to information concerning programs and policies. For example, a 1-800 number and website has been created that allows all Canadians to easily access information concerning Federal programs.

Another information challenge is the fact that little research has been conducted concerning rural communities and the policy-making process. Further, this research often is difficult to obtain. Rural Canadians have also indicated that they need access to information specific to the status of their communities. Once

again, this information, if available, tends to be difficult to access and may be expensive. One of the goals of the Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) project is to provide rural Nova Scotians with greater access to data specific to rural communities and how to use this data to better understand their communities and impact the policy-making process. Another paper in this series entitled, “Understanding the Link Between Research and Policy” (Rural Communities Impacting Policy, 2002), provides an overview of different types of research and how rural communities can use research to impact policy.

(5) Absence of Rural Representation in the Decision-Making Process

Living in a democratic society, we elect representatives to speak on our behalf at the government level. By virtue of their larger population, urban areas tend to have greater representation in the Federal parliament and Provincial legislatures than rural areas. The greater number of urban representatives is one factor that can lead these elected bodies to have a more urban focus and reduce the influence rural community members have in the decision-making process.

Specific communities and groups of community members must also be considered in the rural policy-making process. Unfortunately, there are some groups who tend not to be well represented in the policy forum, for example, people with lower socio-economic status or First Nations communities.

(6) The Relationship Between Rural Communities and Government

The relationship between rural communities and government is strained by the community perception that governments do not understand rural issues and impose policies and programs that negatively affect rural Canadians. Even worse, there is sometimes not even agreement among key policy makers that circumstances in rural communities are problematic and deserving of government action (Doern & Phidd, 1988). Government is also seen as sometimes downloading responsibilities on rural communities without providing the necessary resources (e.g., financial support, educational programs) for communities to assume these

responsibilities. Further, rural community members get frustrated and discouraged by rejections of policy proposals by government and ever-changing program criteria.

From the perspective of rural communities, the attitudes and action of governments have created barriers to working together to affect policy to improve the health and sustainability of rural communities. Rural community members often perceive government priorities and programs as detrimental to their community's health and sustainability. These perceptions create a barrier to community involvement in the policy-making process.

(7) Time and Policy Timeline Restrictions

Often the policy timeline can create difficulties for communities looking to impact policy around a particular issue. Although government may be considering a policy change for a long period of time, the public consultation process may be relatively short and not allow community-based organizations the time to research and properly prepare to effectively participate. On the other hand, the policy-making process can take a very long time, draining the resources of community-based organizations and frustrating those who want change.

Barriers and Challenges Faced by Government Policy Makers

It is important to recognize that it is not only rural communities that face barriers and challenges to rural policy development, but that government policy makers also face their own challenges and barriers that interfere with the development of policy beneficial to rural communities. These barriers and challenges can prevent the government from recognizing the role rural communities can play in the policy process as well as inhibit them in creating policy to help these communities. Four common barriers and challenges identified at the government level include:

- (1) Perceived resistance of communities as a partner in policy development
- (2) Jurisdictional issues
- (3) Attitude of government toward rural communities
- (4) Structural barriers within government

(1) Perceived Resistance of Communities as a Partner in Policy Development

Government policy makers who want to affect rural policy can sometimes be faced with community resistance to change. This may stem from the cultural identity of some rural communities and their reluctance to negotiate any of their beliefs and tradition even if the proposed change or policy could lead to improvements (Doern & Phidd, 1988). Another factor that may be reducing community involvement with change is the attitude that it is solely a government's responsibility to develop policy that benefits rural communities. Resistance to change can undermine government's ability to involve the rural community in the policy-making process.

(2) Jurisdictional Issues

There are many layers of government, each with its own jurisdiction and responsibilities. However, it is difficult to develop policy in one jurisdiction without affecting another. Thus, there is a need to build bridges and collaborations between federal, provincial, municipal and First Nations governments concerning policy affecting rural communities. There is also a need for cooperation across departments within the same level of government. Historically, the structure of both the Federal and Provincial Governments resulted in a sector-based approach to policy development. For example, Federal Government departments tend to be organized around sectors such as forestry, environment, agriculture, fisheries, and mining. Each department has its own needs and responsibilities, providing a barrier to gaining an overall perspective on rural development. Recently, however, the Federal Government has begun to recognize the importance of rural Canada and has taken steps toward a more rural perspective. For example, Cabinet departments are required to examine new policy through a "Rural Lens" that forces them to consider the impact of the policy on rural Canada. In addition, the Rural Secretariat was created in 1996 as a focal point for the Government of Canada to work in partnership with Canadians in rural and remote areas to build strong, dynamic communities.

From a rural standpoint, the need for intersectoral collaboration is important if rural communities are to play an active role in the policy-making process. The creation of county “teams” in Nova Scotia i.e., Team Cumberland, is an example of the way rural communities can work together.

(3) Attitudes of Government Toward Rural Communities

Among some government policy makers, an “urban bias” may exist whereby the government pays more attention to larger, industrial centers. This “urban bias” may arise from the fact that some government members have only lived in urban communities, the lack of available information concerning rural communities, urban areas having a greater number of elected government officials, and government dependence on the political support of urban areas to stay in power. Whatever the reasons, the existence of an “urban bias” can lead to a preoccupation with urban centers at the expense of rural communities. Policies and programs created with urban centers in mind sometimes are made to fit rural communities. Unfortunately, these types of policies and programs have a tendency to ignore rural issues and cannot be considered equal in both urban and rural areas.

(4) Structural Barriers Within Government

Both government and rural communities can be frustrated by the lack of opportunity to communicate with one another. This limitation may be partially the result of an absence of “listening mechanisms” within the government structure itself. Government departments are primarily concerned with their own area and there are relatively few mechanism by which information can be conveyed across departments. This “silo effect” can be frustrating for community organizations whose concerns may span across the jurisdictions of more than one department. Further, other than for occasional public consultation processes, there is little opportunity for individuals or community-based organizations to speak to government representatives around their policy concerns and issues.

Overcoming Challenges and Barriers to Rural Policy Development

As outlined above, communities and governments face barriers and challenges in developing policy beneficial to rural Nova Scotia. Successful policy development will require reducing these barriers and addressing the challenges. Recently, both government and communities have recognized the need for creating ways to facilitate rural policy development and have taken initial steps toward removing obstacles that hinder the policy-making process. Some approaches and suggestions that government and communities can use to positively impact policy development at the rural level are highlighted below.

(1) Presenting a Case to Public Policy Makers

It is impossible for public policy makers to be aware and knowledgeable of all policy issues. Because of this, it is necessary to present facts and research that demonstrate rural community issues and concerns deserving of government action. This information creates increased government awareness of rural concerns and gives policy makers greater support when trying to influence rural policy. As well, rallying supporters, arranging media coverage, and suggesting viable compromises can raise the priority placed on community concerns and increase the likelihood of positive action. These efforts can be even more effective when rural communities and organizations work together to develop clear positions around common concerns. Developing a united voice on wider policy issues and building linkages with groups with common interests can increase government awareness of and interest in rural policy development.

(2) Government Initiated Programs

The Federal Government has recognized the need to establish programs to facilitate the policy-making process for rural Canada. For example, recognizing the need for further policy research in all of Canada, the federal government created the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) in 1996 to develop a research strategy for Canada and build a solid foundation of expertise and knowledge upon which sound public policy can be based (Policy Research Initiative, <http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca>).

In 1998, the Government of Canada created the Canadian Rural Partnership (CRP) that has as its goal to enhance the quality of life in rural communities and better equip communities to compete in a global economy. The Partnership achieves this goal by ensuring that federal programs, policies and activities provide support to rural communities. One important activity of the CRP was the creation of a national Rural Dialogue “for the discussion of issues relating to rural Canada to better understand local and regional issues and to identify the appropriate role for the federal government in addressing key rural issues” (Canadian Rural Partnership, 2000). Through this rural dialogue, Canadians are able to directly inform the government about rural concerns and priorities.

From the Rural Dialogue, the Rural Lens was created which is a way of viewing issues through the eyes of Canadians living in rural and remote areas. The Rural Lens resulted in two main tools that federal officials use to help determine the effects new Federal government services, policies and programs will have on rural Canada, in advance of their being set in motion. These two tools, the “Checklist for Rural Considerations” and the “Principles and Vision in the Federal Framework for Action in Rural Canada”, help ensure that new programs, services and policies are appropriate for rural Canadians (Rural Lens, 2000).

(3) The Creation of Mechanisms to Act as a Voice of Rural Communities

As noted above, rural community citizens often feel frustrated when trying to have their policy concerns heard by government. This frustration may be due in part to a structure that seems to limit opportunities for community members to communicate with government. Changing this structure requires the development of mechanisms that provides both communities with a voice and government with a means to hear community concerns. One way communities can speak with a louder voice is through the use of network type organizations, such as Coastal Communities Network (CCN) a network of approximately 200 Nova Scotian organizations that has as its mandate to provide a forum to encourage dialogue, share information, and create strategies and actions that promote the survival and development of Nova Scotia's coastal and rural communities. Networks such as CCN

and others tend to represent a broader range of interests by including many different types of organizations.

Not only is there the need to create speaking mechanisms, such as network organizations, but there is also the need to create mechanisms that allow government to listen to and represent rural concerns at government tables. For example, the Nova Scotia Rural Team, made up of government and rural community representatives, exists to listen to the concerns of rural Nova Scotians and to find ways to represent these concerns, using a horizontal approach, to the relevant government departments. A good example of the Nova Scotia Rural Team providing a listening mechanism was the Rural Dialogue held in Cornwallis in October, 2001 that allowed rural community members the opportunity to examine and voice their concerns to government representatives who were there primarily to listen.

(4) Access to Information

Communities and government have also recognized the need for increased access to information and knowledge. In 1999, the Federal Government set a goal to be known around the world by 2004 as the government most connected to its citizens, with Canadians able to access all government information and services on-line at the time and place of their choosing. (Community Access Program, 2000). One recent initiative to increase access to information is the Community Access Program (CAP). The Community Access Program is a Government of Canada initiative, administered by Industry Canada, which aims to provide Canadians with affordable public access to the Internet and the skills they need to use it effectively. CAP helps Canadians, wherever they live, take advantage of emerging opportunities in the new global, knowledge-based economy. In rural Canada, CAP has provided the benefits of affordable public Internet access and opened doors to new possibilities for rural communities.

Another recently initiated project to help reduce the barriers created by lack of access to information is the Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) Project. This three-year project began in the spring of 2001 with the goal of increasing individuals' access to information concerning the status of rural Nova Scotia as a

whole as well as information specific to individual rural communities. Further, the project also aims to provide the information and tools required to help rural community organizations impact the policy-making process.

(5) Horizontal Initiatives

Horizontal initiatives provide a means to link rural communities and create partnerships with government departments, organizations, and agencies. Horizontal initiatives need to be developed keeping in mind the needs, concerns, and resources of the specific communities involved. For example, horizontal initiatives have been created to overcome concerns raised by Canadians through the Rural Dialogue. Examples of horizontal initiatives include government approval of a proposal by Canada Post in 1999 to enhance the range and accessibility of retail postal services in rural Canada and a new policy framework announced by the Department of Finance for the financial services sector to help rural communities adapt to rapidly changing financial services markets (Canadian Rural Partnership, Annual Report, 2000).

Conclusion

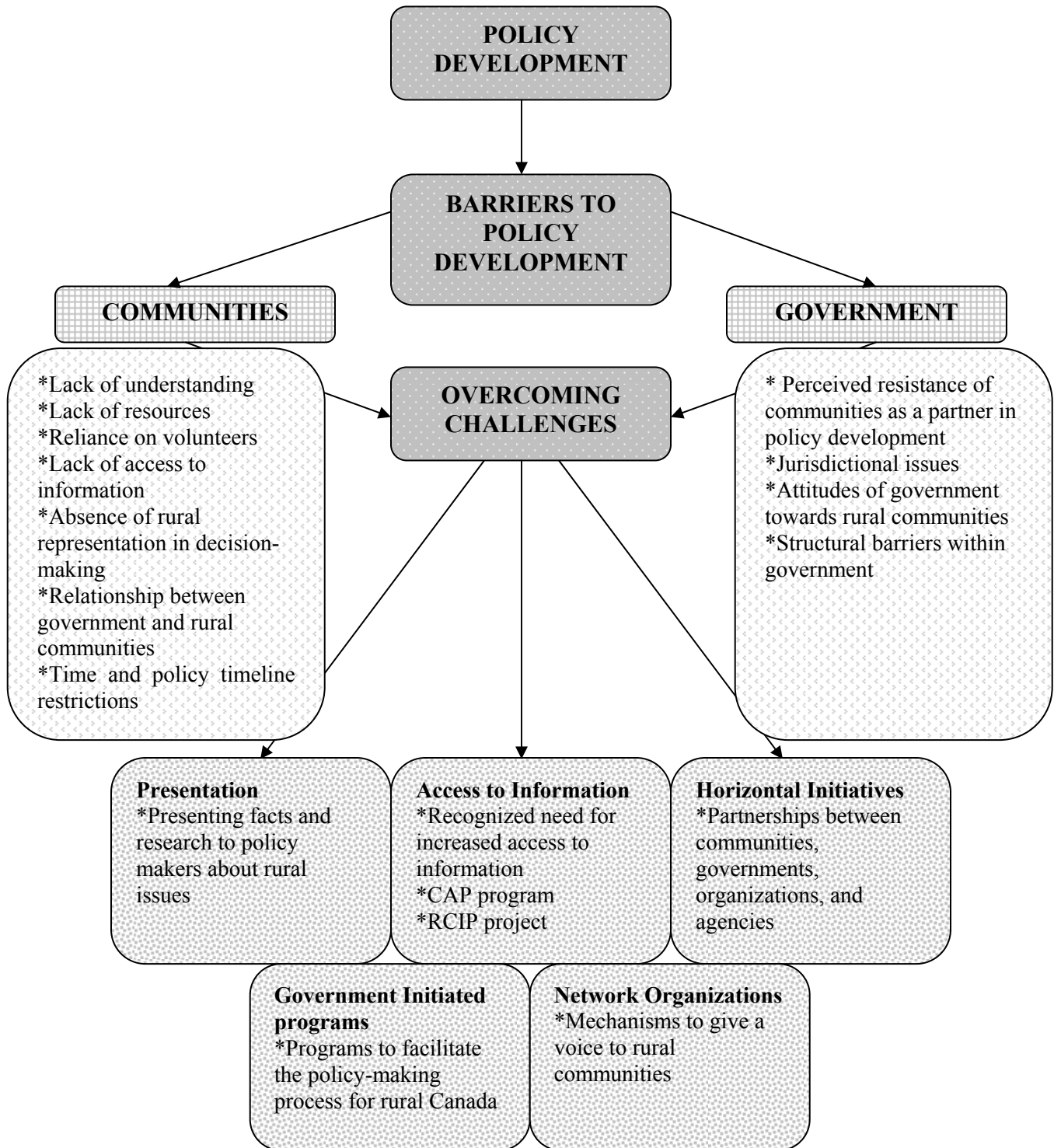
Rural policy development is a complex process with many challenges and barriers faced by both communities and government. Further, there seems to be much overlap between the challenges and barriers faced by communities and those faced by government. This suggests that ways to address these barriers and challenges may be most effective when communities and government work together in partnership. Recent efforts to reduce the barriers and challenges to policy development at both the community and government levels has likely increased government's understanding of rural community needs as well as increased rural communities' understanding of how they can work effectively with government and public policy makers. However, even though progress has been made in reducing the barriers and challenges to rural policy development, communities and government must continue working together with the goal of improving the policy process in a manner that meets the needs of rural Canadians.

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