

GATEKEEPER SERIES No. 25



**International
Institute for
Environment and
Development**

Sustainable Agriculture
and Rural Livelihoods
Programme

**Participatory Education and
Grassroots Development:
The Case of Rural Appalachia**

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This Gatekeeper Series is produced by the International Institute for Environment and Development to highlight key topics in the field of sustainable agriculture. Each paper reviews a selected issue of contemporary importance and draws preliminary conclusions of relevance to development activities. References are provided to important sources and background material.

The Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) funds the series, which is aimed especially at the field staff, researchers and decision makers of such agencies.

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PARTICIPATORY EDUCATION AND GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF RURAL APPALACHIA

John Gaventa & Helen Lewis

The failure of the traditional trickle-down methods of development is now well documented. Though better recognised in Third World countries, it is also central to the steady erosion of livelihoods in rural, resource-poor regions of the industrialised countries. Perhaps nowhere is it more evident than in rural Appalachian communities of the United States of America.

The Collapse of a Regional Development Strategy

The Appalachian region refers to the mountainous region in the middle eastern part of the United States, stretching from as far north as western New York state, and running through parts of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia down to Alabama and Mississippi. Historically, the region has contained some of the poorest socio-economic conditions of any region in the country. It is one of the least developed in the United States in factors including agriculture, unemployment, housing, urbanization, poverty, economic diversity, and so on.

The plight of the region was brought to national attention in the early 1960's by President Kennedy. As an outgrowth of the War on Poverty, he launched the President's Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). For the last 20 years the ARC has served as the largest rural economic development agency in the United States, investing over 15 billion dollars for regional development. The dominant strategy of the Commission has been to invest funds to create infrastructure necessary to attract outside industry into the region. Large amounts of money were used for building roads, to increase the flow of goods into and out of the region, to build industrial parks, and to promote industrial recruitment.

Amongst many mainstream development theorists, the ARC strategy resembled the "modernisation" strategy used in other parts of the world. This was based upon the belief that through the development of regional infrastructure the region would reach a state of "take-off" and become "integrated" into the national economy. From the late 1960s until the late 1970s, the economic development strategy seemed to work. Industries came to the area, often leaving the urbanised North in search of cheaper labour, resources, and a more "favourable" business climate. Though the region as a whole still continued to lag behind the rest of the nation, per capita income rose, and outmigration was slowed and briefly reversed as new jobs were created in some places.

Today, however, Appalachia is in a state of economic crisis. By the end of 1985, four-fifths of the region's counties had an unemployment rate higher than the national rate of 6.7%. Eighty-five counties had double the national rate, and 28 had triple the rate - for an official unemployment rate of over 20%. Not reflected in the official statistics is the status of the invisible poor, who have never been counted on the unemployment rolls, or who have given up looking for a job and have dropped off the rolls altogether. This resurgent Appalachian crisis was dramatised by an Associated Press reporter who recently visited Eureka Hollow, West Virginia, the remote community that had stirred John Kennedy 25 years before. The reporter wrote:

"Kennedy's message from Eureka Hollow alerted America to the paradox of wretched poverty in an area teeming with rich resources. It resulted in \$15 billion in federal aid to West Virginia and a dozen other states....today's message from Eureka Hollow is this: both are still here, the resources and the poverty." (Loh, 1980).

The case of Eureka Hollow is not unique. In recent years, a series of reports have warned of a new poverty in the Appalachia and across the South, especially in our rural regions. One recent Ford Foundation sponsored study entitled 'Shadows Across the Sunbelt' had this to say:

After two decades of reasonably solid growth, many rural communities are now finding themselves in serious trouble...Instead, it has become increasingly clear that many structural changes are at work in the rural Southern economy, changes which are only intermittently visible, but that taken together promise profound and lasting consequences for the South." (MDC, 1986)

What has happened? At least part of the answer to the economic crisis in Appalachia and the South is found in the profound transformation of the American economy as a whole.

The Rural Economic Crisis

In the past, there has been a tendency to view the South and Appalachia as regions outside of the social and economic mainstream of the rest of the nation. Indeed, maps of socio-economic conditions in the United States in the 1960s revealed "pockets of poverty" in which Appalachia and the Black-belt South stood out, along with the Indian reservations of the Southwest, as being the nation's poorest regions. The assumption was that the mainstream economy was healthy; the depressed regions were simply those "left behind". "For all practical purposes", wrote the President's Advisory committee on Rural Poverty, "most of the 14 million poor in our poverty areas are on the outside of our market economy...they are on the outside looking in, and they need our help" (NACRP, 1967). Integration of these regions into the mainstream economy, not the transformation of that economy, was the problem to be addressed.

By the mid-1980s, socio-economic maps of the United States revealed, in fact, a picture very different from those of the 1960s. Rather than growing smaller through integration

into the national mainstream, the traditional pockets of poverty had expanded. Eighty per cent of the poorest counties in the country could be found in 17 states which formed a giant V or wedge in heartland America, stretching from the steel towns of Northern Appalachia, down through the coalfields of Central Appalachia, and the mill towns of the Piedmont, on through the deeper South and then back up north to encompass the Rust Belt of the Midwest and the Farm Belt of the Great Plains. Rather than catching up with the national economy, many regions which were economically well-off in the 1960's, are falling behind. Now the crisis is not of a regional economy "on the outside looking in", it is of the mainstream economy itself.

The new economic crisis in the region poses a crisis for traditional economic development policy. Historically, the development model for the region has been based on creating a favourable 'business climate', which in turn could be used to lure industry into the region. In the name of maintaining the business climate, workers received low-wages, and communities provided tax and other concessions to industry. Based upon a traditional understanding of 'trickle down' economics, the assumption was that what was good for business was good for communities and local livelihoods. To some extent, within its own definitions of success, the 'business climates' model of development worked. Thousands of industrial plants came to the region. The overall standard of living grew.

Today, however, this 'success' is waning. Industries that once sought what the South had to offer are moving elsewhere; new ones are not locating in the region as rapidly as they once were, or if they are, only in certain 'hot spots', thus deepening the internal patterns of uneven development in the region. Groups like the MDC, a think tank in North Carolina, warn that the smokestack-chasing strategy is outdated: *"The situation is analogous to the great buffalo hunts of the last century. The stampede of plants to the South is definitely over - especially for the rural areas that lacked a skilled workforce, transportation, infrastructure and cultural amenities. Yet the hunters continue in the pursuit, hoping to bag one of the remaining hides"* (MDC, 1986).

The failure of the traditional industrial recruitment model has led to a number of calls for reform. The South, it is argued, can no longer depend upon recruiting outside industry as its road to development. Rather, we must turn to a policy that brings development from within, that encourages and fosters community-based organisation and enterprise as the solution to the needs of rural communities. Many suggest that we should put more emphasis on development 'from within', on more 'community-based' development.

An Alternative Strategy

While the idea of 'development from within' is good, by itself the plan fails to address another need. Historically, there has been little room for linking the concerns of development with those of democratic participation by the grassroots. The industrial recruitment model relied upon enterprising elites 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 to serve business; to make community and worker interests subservient to needs of maintaining a favourable business climate. Development was done to and for

local communities, not by the people themselves. Over time, the separation between the economic and the political, at least at the local level, meant that the economy was considered by most ordinary people to be something to be dependent upon. Even as local economies failed, workers and communities often tended to accept and adapt, explaining their hard luck in terms of the natural 'booms and busts' of the economy or in terms of 'the business prerogative'.

This separation of people from development has been paralleled in the production of knowledge and analysis about economic development. 'The Economy' has become something external to everyday experience, something to be defined and analysed by experts. Rural community groups, especially those at the grassroots level have lacked the educational opportunities which they needed to analyse the economy, to define and create development for themselves.

Many reports have pointed to problems of literacy in the workforce, which limits the ability of citizens to attract and function in today's jobs. But, to make community-based economic development happen, a more fundamental literacy is needed - 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, Highlander Research and Education Center¹ became increasingly aware of the fact that there were few places to which local grassroots activists and leaders working with economic issues could turn to develop their understanding, skills and training concerning the rural economy. We began to develop a programme oriented towards helping communities gain knowledge necessary for local development.

In the late 1980s, in addition to a number of workshops at Highlander, we concentrated our work in three rural communities: in Dungannon, Virginia, in conjunction with the Dungannon Development Commission; in Jellico, Tennessee, in conjunction with the Mountain Women's Exchange; and in Ivanhoe, Virginia, in conjunction with the Ivanhoe Civic League. The communities have much in common: they are rural and poor, and they have lost their traditional economic base, be it in coal, manufacturing or farming. In response, local citizens' groups have sprung up, led by low-income women, to create an alternative for the community. While energetic and determined, the members of each of these groups lacked the educational background and skills which would have been helpful for identifying and implementing alternative rural economic development strategies.

In each place, Highlander has offered a series of night classes for the group 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

1. The Highlander Research and Education Center (Route 3, Box 370, New Market, TN 37820), has worked for 55 years to provide education for empowerment of low-income citizens in Appalachia and the South. Highlander conducts training workshops at its residential Center and in the field to enable grassroots community-based organisations to act for themselves on pressing issues in their communities. In addition, the Center carries out programmes using participatory research, cultural expression and preservation, and leadership development as tools for empowerment and social change.

development; rather it was to help the community undertake a process of education and participatory research through which they could assess their own situation, and define and implement strategies for themselves.

A number of methods were used which were similar to those employed in participatory research and extension approaches such as Rapid Rural Appraisal, Rapid Assessment Procedures, and Farmer Participatory Research. A central point was the emphasis upon the development of peoples' knowledge, and peoples' research and analysis as an important part of the process of beginning to reverse the pattern of dependence upon external economic forces. These methods include those described below.

Oral Histories

In order to understand the current economic crisis, people need to understand the changing patterns of work and subsistence in the community. For academics, such an understanding might be gained by looking at macroeconomic trends, agricultural production, price changes and so on. For community people, asking questions of 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 peoples' own experiences.

Community Surveys

Rather than relying upon external definitions of needs, or community assumptions, community participants developed their own needs assessment survey and used it to interview several hundred people in each community. The survey became a way of mobilising the community discussions and consideration of the problem. Collective analysis of survey results became a way for developing research skills, and of stating and prioritising 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 about the changing economy and community needs, interviews were also conducted by community members with key local decision-makers - bankers, industry heads, county planners. A prior process of 'reclaiming' community knowledge about the economy was important, so that grassroots people did not simply defer to the diagnosis of the 'experts'. In fact, the community definitions of needs contrasted so dramatically with those of the power holders that participants were then able to analyse the next stage of why the 'official' bodies failed to reflect the communities' needs.

Videos and Readings

As people developed their own knowledge about their own 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 global economic trends, etc.

Brainstorming and Feasibility Studies

Participants brainstormed about projects which they thought would help meet the community defined needs. They then undertook a process of developing their own internal feasibility studies, using their own knowledge, or their own research, such as interviews in the community.

Cultural Components

At the community level, the economic knowledge cannot easily 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 an additional way of analysing and understanding the community experiences, and of developing values and visions of what should be done (2).

2. This training approach has been written up separately by Sue Ella Kobak and Nina McCormack with assistance from Nancy Robinson: Workshop on Developing Feasibility Studies for Community-Based Business Ventures. Available from Economics Education Project, Highlander Center. Other reports available from Highlander include:

- i) Remembering Our Past: Building Our Future: community history of Ivanhoe.
- ii) Telling Our Stories: a series of 80 oral histories collected by the people in the Ivanhoe project about their community.
- iii) It Comes from Within: Community Development and Local Theology by Helen Lewis, Mary Ann Hinsdale and Maxine Waller: the story of the community development process, and the use of empowerment education, including community religious discussions, forthcoming, 1991.
- iv) Communities in Economic Crisis: edited by John Gaventa, Barbara Smith and Alex Willingham: stories of the impact of economic restructuring on rural communities and their efforts to bring about change in the US South.
- v) Claiming What is Ours: an Economics Experience Workbook, by Wendy Luttrell. A general manual of exercises that involve community-based adult students in building their own knowledge and profiling their own economic needs.
- vi) The Jellico Handbook: Case Study of Community-based Learning in Jellico, Tennessee, by Helen Lewis and John Gaventa. A curriculum for educators in a community setting which demonstrates use of the participatory approach for profiling the community and assessing local needs and resources.
- vii) Designing and Implementing a Feasibility Study, by Sue Ella Kobak and Nina McCormack, with Nancy Robinson. A participatory approach to helping local groups conduct feasibility studies of their own economic development ideas.

Outcome of Participatory Education and Development

As mentioned above, 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 educational and research process was only part of a number of other activities in the community, so it is difficult to isolate the impact of this process alone. Also, in each place the educational process helped to spark new activities which are still unfolding, and thus it is still too early to assess their impact. Nevertheless, some general and preliminary observations may be made.

First, it is clear that the participatory educational process had an impact upon the community's definition of the problem, and thus on their strategies. As can be seen most clearly in Ivanhoe, the community first turned to attracting a factory from outside, at whatever cost, as the solution to their poverty. Through their analysis, they moved to a new definition of development which grew from within the community. Economic education in this sense is not for the purpose of adapting to new jobs in an economic model that is externally defined and controlled, but is one in which people recognise the validity of their own knowledge of their economy, and to begin to create new definitions of development that would be successful in their terms.

Secondly, the process affected the level of participation and action in the community. People came to feel that their ideas, knowledge and experience were important resources to be used as a basis for action, that development was something which could be done by them, not just to or for them. As Maxine Waller, the leader of the citizens' groups in Ivanhoe, describes: *"If it is good or if it is bad; if it is a huge failure or it is a huge success, the people of Ivanhoe have to be in charge"*.

In both Ivanhoe and Jellico, project participants initially defined local projects for job creation. In Jellico, plans were developed for several projects which would combine job-creation with meeting other social needs in the community, including a worker-owned restaurant, a child care centre, a community-run retirement home. In Ivanhoe, plans evolved for changing the abandoned industrial site into Jubilee Park, a community owned recreation centre, that would attract and take advantage of increased tourist trade in the area. In both places, however, attempts at creation of alternative development have been stymied by local political structures. In Jellico, the government agencies responsible for economic development rejected support for the community-based ideas, either because they did not meet the standard definitions of economic (i.e. industrial) development, or because the group was thought to lack necessary skills or collateral for the job. In Ivanhoe, the County Industrial Board has, to date, refused to grant the community the land from the industrial site they have abandoned.

At one level, then, increased consciousness and action have not yet created jobs in the two communities. But by no means should the local activities be seen as a failure. Instead, the process of broadening participation in the development debate has led to more relevant definitions of what constitutes success.

In both cases, obstacles presented to alternative community-controlled development have led to increased action by the citizens in the policies that affect the community. In Jellico, citizens for the first time organised public meetings to hold the local officials to economic development decisions. In the first meeting, some 75 people came to question the public officials about their plans. In Ivanhoe, busloads of citizens began to travel to meetings of county boards, to the state capital, and to other hearings. Development came to be seen more of a political process, involving questions of power and control, as well as questions of job creation and local capital.

In addition, emphasis shifted from the initial focus on job creation to broader social and cultural projects which helped to provide the community with a better education, sense of identity and community pride. In Jellico, members of the class helped to launch the Jellico Revitalization Project, which involved schools, shopkeepers and others in cultural preservation and revitalisation of the community. In Ivanhoe, while jobs remained an important priority, attention also shifted to other concerns. A community-controlled education centre was started. Local history and drama projects gave the area a sense of pride and identity. Grants were received for various community development projects, ranging from home repair to a community building.

Such efforts are all seen by the community as a integral part of the process of combating poverty and of community development. In this sense, the definition of successful development expands to include criterion broader than jobs and income, but also community participation, democratic participation and dignity. Community development - economic, cultural and social - flowers when people value themselves and their neighbours, and begin to work together in common endeavours.

The process of education described here allows a community to develop understanding and awareness that can be used to plan, control and monitor change. It enhances a sense of history, belonging, solidarity and pride. The questions became ones not only about what development policies shall shape the region, but more about who shall participate in shaping the policies in the first place, and how to define success. They ask not only 'development for whose interests?' but also 'development by whom, towards what ends?'

Perhaps these concerns 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, these case studies and our 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 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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The Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Programme

The Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Programme of IIED promotes and supports the development of socially and environmentally aware agriculture through policy research, training and capacity strengthening, networking and information dissemination, and advisory services.

The Programme emphasises close collaboration and consultation with a wide range of institutions in the South. Collaborative research projects are aimed at identifying the constraints and potentials of the livelihood strategies of the Third World poor who are affected by ecological, economic and social change. These initiatives focus on the development and application of participatory approaches to research and development; resource conserving technologies and practices; collective approaches to resource management; the value of wild foods and resources; rural-urban interactions; and policies and institutions that work for sustainable agriculture.

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