

Some links between economic and social changes in rural areas and the need for reform in rural education

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Abstract

This paper discusses the principal economic and social changes taking place in rural areas of the OECD countries, identifies some of the key future challenges they face, and proposes some necessary shifts in the system of education of children and young people if these challenges are to be addressed.

Introduction

My aim in this paper is to link our present understanding of processes of economic and social change in OECD countries to some recent research findings on why some rural areas are 'performing' better than others in economic and social terms. I then want to use some of the key findings of this research as a framework to suggest some reforms needed in our approach to rural education and training. In this I draw heavily on the work of my educationist colleagues in the International Rural Network as well as my own research which has focused on understanding processes of economic and social change in rural contexts, on local economic development, and on rural policy issues.

Economic and Social Change

The British Foot and Mouth Epidemic in 2001 highlighted the scale and pace of rural transformation over the past two or three decades, changes which reflect those throughout Europe and indeed most other OECD countries, if in varying degrees. A report by the Countryside Agency² confirmed that the outbreak affected 40% of businesses in the region of Cumbria in North West England, and that these were mainly tourist, service, agricultural supply and other land-based firms, but "everyone from car hire companies to decorators, brewers, charities, outdoor pursuit centres, anglers, foresters, traders, craft people and shopkeepers had suffered". The worst-hit was the tourist industry, which suffered

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² www.defra.gov.uk/footandmouth; www.guardian.co.uk/footandmouth; report in *The Guardian*, 30/8/01. The Countryside Agency was formed in 1999 by combining the English Rural Development Commission with the Countryside Commission, and is in effect the Rural Development Agency for England.

losses of over £4 billion³. In addition to these economic losses, many inside and outside the farming industry had "suffered mental health and well-being problems", and "the viability of some voluntary organisations" was undermined. In the 1960's, at the time of the last Foot and Mouth epidemic in Britain, a government cost-benefit analysis to assess policy choices only considered the impact on farming, and this caused no controversy. What has changed in the intervening period?

The proportion of the rural population and labour force engaged in agriculture and other primary sector activities has fallen continuously in all rural areas of Western Europe. In four Scottish rural 'counties'⁴, employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing was less than 20% of the working population. This compared with over 20% in distribution, hotels and restaurants and around 30% in public sector services and between 15% and 40% in industry. In Sweden, public and private services dominate rural employment in a further four study areas, especially the two northern ones, and even there employment in agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing accounts for less than 8% of employment, which is similar to tourism. In the West German study areas, the primary sector accounts for less than 2% of employment and even in the Eastern German study areas it accounts for 7.1% and 5.4% respectively. Only in Greece do we find study areas with over 30% in agricultural employment, and this is 1991 data. Even so, primary sector employment is clearly diminishing rapidly in Greek rural areas - by 25% to 40% between 1981 and 1991 - and this trend has undoubtedly continued since then. Moreover, most farm households earn much, and often most, of their household income from non-farming activities. Agriculture is now a minority occupation and a diminishing element in rural economy and society, even in the more remote and poorest rural areas.

This shift in employment, which is reflected also in enterprise structures and levels of self-employment, is paralleled by changes within agriculture itself, whereby a few farm enterprises have become larger and more commercial in operation, while most farm families have adapted in other ways. Some have left the industry altogether; others have rented their land and taken up non-farming employment or self-employment while remaining in the farm house; most have combined farming with non-farming employment or in some cases non-agricultural enterprises such as farm tourism and contracting. Growth in off-farm work in farm households, as well as engagement in activities like farm tourism, is particularly marked among women⁵. Most farm households today, in most west European countries, as in our study areas, therefore depend heavily on opportunities for employment and

³ Farmers had so far received over £1 bn in compensation for capital losses.

⁴ The four are Orkney & Caithness in the North, and Wigtown and Annandale & Eskdale in the South West.

⁵ A major 12-country study of farm household adjustment and pluriactivity in western Europe pointed this out nearly a decade ago (Bryden et al 1992). Although more recent comparable data is not available, it appears that this trend, established in the 1980s, has continued. For instance, a recent study of farm and craft households in Caithness, in the North of Scotland, showed that 60% of farm women now work off the farm [Bryden, Grant & Munro, 2003].

enterprise that often have little or nothing to do with primary production, and are by no means solely reliant on income from farming.

The extent to which rural areas have been able to replace the loss of primary sector employment with secondary and tertiary employment, and the precise nature of that replacement, has been highly variable, as is confirmed by our recent research on the Dynamics of Rural Areas in Europe. The causes of this 'differential performance' are important for issues of rural education, and I will return to them later.

In any analysis of rural labour market changes it is helpful to distinguish four groups of employment activity:

- 'traditional' secondary and tertiary activities commonly linked quite strongly with the primary sector (food and forest processing, processing of metal ores, supply industries and sectors, some transport, some energy etc);
- 'new rural economy' sectors including tourism and recreation, new producer and consumer services including those based on ICT, and some new forms of value-added activities producing high quality products for niche markets;
- public sector employment including education, health and administration;
- employment in urban areas and cities accessible by commuting, especially in rural areas close to such centres, less so for peripheral and more sparsely populated areas far from such centres.

Demographic change, especially the transformation of most rural areas from positive and relatively high natural population growth rates to usually negative rates of natural population change⁶, is a second important dimension of rural change. This has been caused not just by falling family sizes and later marriage - common throughout Europe - but also by age differences in inward and outward migration. This has led in turn to natural losses of population, particularly in rural areas beyond the commuting zone of larger towns and cities. Thus maintaining or increasing population in rural areas now depends critically on the size and character of migration flows; and the countryside's traditional role of providing a 'reserve army' of (youthful) labour for urban development is diminishing.

Variations in migration flows have implications for the social composition of rural areas, as well as for emerging possibilities in the 'new economy'. The most significant differences concern inward

⁶ *The main exceptions in OECD countries concern the aboriginal communities, which often still have birth rates exceeding death rates.*

migration. In rural areas with commuting possibilities, younger families often move out of the cities for reasons connected with quality of life, including access to cheaper housing and to 'nature' and the search for a greater sense of 'community'. In rural areas beyond the commuting zone, migration flows depend on employment and enterprise opportunities in 'new rural economy' and in the public sector, even if considerations of quality of life and housing costs remain important. Where the labour market is diverse enough, the return migration and inward migration of younger people, often with children, can be significant. Return-migration of indigenous young people also depends on the extent to which they have a positive view of their home place and culture, giving them a clear and positive sense of identity. If the labour market and other conditions are not attractive to the young, positive migration balances depend on in-migration of retirees. In all cases, in-migrants move to rural areas because they perceive them as offering a preferable lifestyle⁷, a greater sense of community, or some other intangible benefit. From being recipients of what was thought of as a 'surplus' rural population, then, cities and towns have become a source of population, at least in the more successful cases, for rural areas.

All of this adds up to radical changes in the relationship between urban and rural areas. From being a source of raw materials and food for the urban areas, and a 'reserve army' of labour, rural areas have often become a net recipient of urban migrants seeking 'the good life' they imagine to exist there, as well as increasing numbers of city-dwellers coming for tourism and recreation, heritage, culture, family connections and to enjoy the landscape and environment⁸. Close to towns, urban areas benefit from a mobile labour force in the surrounding rural areas but, depending on local government organisation, may resent the loss of local tax revenues, especially when the better-off urban residents move out. The old political alliances between rural people and urban working classes, built on a common interest in minimising rural-urban population flow, have broken down.

Rural areas in the EU have therefore experienced dramatic changes in the recent past, to which they have responded in a number of ways and with varying success when it comes to maintaining population and employment. How, then, should education respond?

⁷ This includes lower crime rates, cleaner environment, outdoor recreational activities, scenery, gardening opportunities, smaller schools, and in some cases a better health service (e.g. fewer patients per doctor, shorter waiting times for hospital treatment).

⁸ Marsden et al (1993) suggest that the role of the countryside has changed from one of 'production' to one of 'consumption' of its largely intangible and perhaps imagined features.

Changes needed in Education

Rural areas exhibit markedly different capacities to adjust to changing economic conditions, policies, and demographics. These differences are manifested in the growth and prosperity of some ('successful') and the decline and impoverishment of others ('unsuccessful'). The DORA research in Europe sought a better understanding of the factors underlying this 'differential economic performance' or DEP over time. The details are available elsewhere⁹, but the key point is that we used a matching of pairs of rural areas ('counties') in order to make comparison of 'local' factors easier and more reliable. We also used an inter-disciplinary approach and team.

The overall conclusion is that in successful areas 'people are doing it for themselves'. Our analysis of the relative importance of the different factors explaining DEP between the pairs of study areas in each region led to identification of six key inter-related themes which together explain why some rural areas are doing better than others:

Culture and society in the shift from state to market

Peripherality and infrastructure

Governance, public institutions and investment

Entrepreneurship

Economic structures and organisation

Human resources and demography

These findings point to the features of places that make a difference to the prosperity and quality of life of people, and ultimately to their capacity to adjust to external and internal changes, and determine their own futures, by 'taking charge'. They serve as one framework for assessing the role of education in these processes. I want now to use the framework provided by these findings to explore some contemporary issues in rural education.

Culture, Society and Education

Some cultural traditions and local social arrangements are more suited than others to the contemporary ideological shift from state to market in many OECD countries. Notably, rural areas with a history of relative independence from the central State, for example through a history of minority ethnic or religious opposition, are relatively well-placed to cope with a withdrawal of central State support or

⁹ *Bryden & Hart (2003f)*

services and a decentralisation of power and responsibility to local levels. In such places there is a strong sense of identity. Just as with the individuals who comprise it, a community requires a strong sense of identity and self-worth if it is to be or become self-empowered and 'take charge'. This sense of identity and place is formed during childhood and youth.

As Nachtigal and Haas argue, "Cultural history is empowering. In order for rural students to invest in their rural place, they need to believe their rural place has value... Education that is place-based sings regional folk songs, reads local authors, documents ethnic histories, records the stories of community elders and view local citizens as unique and precious resources [2000: 20]. To make the point by way of a contrast with the reality of education, they cite Gruchow's account of his own rural education:-

Nothing in my education prepared me to believe, or encouraged me to expect, that there was any reason to be interested in my own place. If I hoped to amount to anything, I understood, I had better take the first road out of town as fast as I could. And like so many of my classmates, I did [Gruchow 1995].

They proceed to argue that the existing policy climate in the USA "is not friendly to place-based learning. While creative teachers have found ways to meet state standards through place based education, high stakes testing is seen as counter-productive".

At stake here is the value placed on a 'local' as opposed to a 'national' curriculum and related examination and ranking systems, and the ways in which the demands of a national curriculum can be met while allowing incorporation of local and indigenous culture, history and knowledge. Equally it is about the place of experiential learning through grappling with 'real' issues in one's own place¹⁰, as opposed to more abstract learning through books and a hierarchical knowledge system. Although such issues are much sharper when dealing with the dilemmas of aboriginal or minority culture education [Barnhardt et al., 2000; Ruttan, 2000; Macleod, 2003], they are indeed ubiquitous in the rural areas with which I am familiar. Moreover, I believe that the changes in rural areas, and the evidence of the DORA research on how rural communities can better 'take charge' of their own development, raise the importance of this issue to the highest level. Rural children and youth – today more than ever - need 'contextualised and place-based learning', and rural areas that ensure that they get it will 'do better' economically and socially than they would otherwise. Not only does this give them a sense of self-worth, and an interest in learning and its application, but it provides them with a more positive view of

¹⁰ See also the powerful account by Jack Shelton [2000] of the activities of the voluntary association of 29 small rural public schools in Alabama called the PACERS cooperative. He explains how their programs aim for "contextualised and place-based learning" ... "we have bog ponds, passive solar greenhouses, aquaponics unit, photography labs, publishing labs, presses, and number of things that are now spaces and equipment, industry-standard tools ... which ... attempt ... to bring inside the school the learning spaces that young people really need".

their own culture and place and hence a greater tendency to remain or return there, and equips them with the local knowledge resources to be more effective in the 'new rural economy' and in processes of local empowerment.

Peripherality and education

The DORA project confirmed that geographical location – as measured by distance from main markets and political constellations - remains an important factor in local economic performance, especially in the sparsely populated and physically isolated areas of Sweden, Scotland and Greece and in the eastern Länder of Germany. Yet 'peripherality' is both an 'objective' measurement (distance, time, cost and more sophisticated measures from 'gravity models') and a subjective perception. Both were found to be important in DORA. The example I know best is the contrast between Orkney (a group of islands just off the northern tip of Scotland) and neighbouring Caithness on the mainland. Caithness people perceive themselves to be very peripheral, a feeling that has been exacerbated by the removal of local government from the County to Inverness, some 2.5 hours South by car and 4 hours by train!

Caithness people generally feel themselves to be at the 'edge' of the UK, and a long way from British and European markets; Orkney people feel themselves to be almost ideally placed on the sea-routes between the large N American markets and the growing markets of Scandinavia, the Baltics, Russia and Northern Germany. Indeed they even produce maps showing this. They foresaw the need for large scale transshipment facilities, and their perception of centrality, as well as the presence of a large deep water harbour proven in both World Wars, allowed them to grasp the potential opportunities.

Orkney and Caithness are both equidistant from what most would see as the main markets and decision making centres in Britain and Europe, but their perceptions and outcomes are very different.

Educational differences are clearly not the main reason for these different perceptions, but it is clear that education can help to change the perceptions of people in Caithness. However, it needs a 'place-based' education to do so.

Institutions

DORA also found that local public institutions need an effective, autonomous, accessible and democratic framework that avoids overlapping functions and departmental conflicts by making clear responsibilities and contiguous boundaries for the different authorities and agencies influencing development (which includes quality of life features such as crime, health, education, and

environment). Although such things are heavily influenced by national and sectoral policies (and damaged by frequently ineffective coordination between these), and strong sense of local identity and shared cultural values is a vital supporting factor. Effective local governance and cooperation between public, private and voluntary organisations, ensures a common platform of goals, knowledge and values, reduces the cost of information and transactions, lowers risk and uncertainty for entrepreneurs and other actors, and leads to appropriate investment in local public goods.

Educational practice can assist in these processes where a 'place based' and 'consequential learning' approach is adopted. An example would be the Rural Systemic Initiative in Alaska which seeks to foster "interconnectivity and complementarity between the formal education system and the indigenous communities being served in rural Alaska [Barnhardt et al 2000:140-143].

Entrepreneurship

Vigorous local (and predominantly small scale) entrepreneurship is almost always a feature of successful areas. This cannot be attributed to the prior presence or absence of an 'entrepreneurial culture' that is 'born not made'. Policy can make a difference, as when the pattern of land- and house-ownership affects access to capital and its cost. The performance of public institutions clearly affects the chances of the 'new economy' taking root locally through appropriate investment in local public goods. Similarly, local governance affects how public funds and energies may be focused on locally-defined priorities and collaboration encouraged. An open and effective networking structure, fostered by public-private co-operation, is also important. Finally, local universities colleges and research institutes can (but often do not) foster co-operation and support local leaders and entrepreneurs.

I am sure that education can also make a difference here, not only by 'place-based' education discussed earlier, but also by the kind of activities described by Jack Shelton in his 2000 paper – providing the 'learning spaces' that young people really need (see the earlier footnote).

Human Resources and Demography

Human resources and demography constitute everywhere a very important set of inter-related issues. Rural areas often suffer from a set of inter-related problems including a low reproduction rate, negative natural population change, ageing population, outward migration of young people, narrow labour markets, and low formal education and skills among the local population. Demography is both a cause and consequence of economic performance, especially in the case of migration which is the most

important variable. The determinants of migration, whether tangible or intangible, may be influenced by policy. Education and training to meet the needs of the new rural economy also has a strategic role to play in economic development.

Ottar Brox (1974, 2003f), in his study of the individual career choices of young people in rural areas of Norway, identifies seven key dimensions of the decisions made by individuals, households and other management units, each bearing on local economic performance and rates of outward migration:

Resources

Rights

Household structure; family development cycle

Local organisation, economic units outside the household

External factors (markets, sources of finance, trade legislation)

Local possibilities of modifying external factors

The attractiveness of adaptation outside the local community.

By 'resources' Brox does not mean some quantitative measure of land or fisheries, but especially access to resources and individual and collective **rights** over them. These resources would also include knowledge (especially the formal kind with accreditation) which improve young people's chances in the labour market [OECD 1995:32].

McGarth studied the reasons why young people (especially males) in rural Connemara (Ireland) opt out of formal education, giving the following four explanations:-

negative teacher/pupil relations

loss of interest usually through lack of support/ attention

harassment by other pupils

school considered to be irrelevant to future

Walton, writing in the UK context, argues that "many of the young people who fail to achieve their potential within the education system feel alienated by the structure and content of the National Curriculum" [2000:72]. In some areas too there may be a "Culture of low ambitions" or "laddism" which may have its roots in the fact that in former times young men in particular tended to leave school early and go home to work on the farm or the fishing boat with their fathers, or in rural poverty where extra contributions to household income were urgently needed. The evidence is that this 'culture' is usually gendered [Jensch, 2001]. Of course the reality nowadays is that even if succession

to a farm does take place, it will take place much later in life than formerly. This is because machines have reduced that need even for family labour on the farm, farmers live and stay active longer, and young people have expectations beyond their earning power on all but the largest farms. In other words, young men need to get an outside job, and for this they need skills that are not normally farm related. At least in my own country, recent surveys of farm households in Caithness suggest that attitudes of both parents and children towards the acquisition of skills for non-farm work are changing [Bryden, Grant and Munro 2003].

The evidence of the recent PAYPIRD project on young people and rural policy in Europe¹¹ is that those who leave school early want 'hands on' practical courses which they regard as more interesting and relevant for their future. This contrasts with the current educational bias in favour of more 'academic' courses and qualifications. Equally, it raises the issue of post-school training provision in rural areas for early leavers. The same source points to major constraints in this respect also – there is a lack of information on training courses and apprenticeships; only a narrow range of courses is available in rural colleges; colleges and other training venues are difficult or impossible reach by public transport from home. Equally, young people voiced considerable criticism of the quality of careers guidance offered by schools.

A major change in most rural areas is that rural women now go out to work. There has been a major increase in female participation rates in rural areas. Farm women go to work off the farm, and have largely lost their traditional on-farm roles. Like their urban counterparts, they need a suite of childcare services – infant, pre-school, before school, after school, during school holidays. Their demands are increased because (a) childcare services are usually fragmented and not co-locational with the school, and (b) they usually have to travel significant distances to their place of work.

Rural labour markets tend to become progressively narrower (i.e. less choice) as one travels further from cities and larger towns. Young people who have acquired good secondary or tertiary qualifications therefore often have to leave home to find suitable work. However, if they have strongly positive attitudes towards their home place, they will try to find work within reach of that place. Corbett [2000] documents such a pattern for Digby Neck, a small Nova Scotian community of nine villages in Atlantic Canada, tracking over 750 students who completed Grade 6 between 1957 and 1992. He found that nearly two-thirds of the population studied remained within the 'around here' area, or within 50 km of Digby Neck and a further 21.7% were in the 'not far' area, or within about

¹¹ *Coordinated by my co-Director at the Arkleton Institute, Professor Mark Shucksmith and completed in 2002.*

250 km of Digby Neck. On the other hand, I can think of rural communities in my own country where young people's attitudes towards their place are usually negative, and on completion of education many of them try to get 'as far as possible' from home. This is not a good sign; the situation of Digby Neck sounds very promising by contrast.

We have not yet addressed issues, normally controversial, of rural teachers, and possible conflicts with students, although this issue emerged from the interviews with young people in the PAYPIRD project. Gougeon [2000], writing in a Canadian context, argues that since many rural teachers nowadays come from urban areas they are often unprepared for rural conditions, and find it difficult to establish a rapport with their pupils and their parents. He proposes professional preparation for rural teachers in order to help them cope with the social and cultural differences that confront them. This argument is reminiscent of similar discussions concerning rural doctors.

I have not been by any means exhaustive, but I think I have said quite enough for one paper! Hopefully it will provide a somewhat different perspective, and some food for thought. I now offer a few brief conclusions.

Conclusions

What I have tried to do in this paper is to link our understanding of the economic and social changes in rural areas, and of the processes leading to greater or lesser economic and social success in rural places, to the increasing needs for change in the educational system in a rural context. I believe that what this all points to is the following:-

the need for 'place-based', 'contextualised' and 'consequential' educational system, to use the words of Jack Shelton, Paul Nachtigal, Toni Haas, and others. In most cases, this means turning the educational system driven by national curricula and examinations at least partly on its head. It does not mean that national standards in basic things like literacy and numeracy are no longer important, but the process of reform would also make these subjects more interesting and relevant for rural pupils. I am of course aware of initiatives that are seeking to do this, and some have been mentioned earlier. In my own country, I can point to the Gaelic-medium training college on the Isle of Skye (Sabhal Mor Ostaig) [Dix & MacGilliosa 2003], the Feisean Movement for semi-formal education in traditional music and song, and the special traditional music secondary school at Plopton in Wester Ross [Pincock et al, 2003]. But they are far from being the 'norm'. We need to make it so.

The need for an integrated approach to infant, nursery, before and after school services in rural areas which focuses not on the needs of the school but rather on the needs of the rural women and families.

The need for a new approach to training and apprenticeships in rural areas which recognises the need for hand-on skills training that is easily accessible and affordable for young people living in rural contexts.

The need to escape from the narrow sector-specific education and training embodied in agricultural schools and colleges. These institutions, especially where they have failed to adapt to the changing conditions I have outlined, are experiencing a crisis everywhere. They must change, or wither [Van den Bor et al, 1997]

There is of course much much more, but I hope what I have said will provide some food for the discussion.

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¹² In effect this was the Second Conference of the International Rural Network, the first being in 1994 in Townsville, Australia.

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