

Community stability and the relationship between economic and social well-being in forest-dependent communities¹

by:

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Social scientists' first observations related to well-being in forest-dependent communities were that economic declines lead to declines in social well-being. This was a hypothesis empirically tested and supported in a number of studies (Gibson 1944, Kaufman and Kaufman 1946). A second observation, also tested and proven was that rapid economic growth may also be disruptive and lead to a decrease in social well-being. There exists a large literature on various types of resource boom towns in which higher rates of crime, suicide, substance abuse and other negative indicators of social well-being were shown to increase during periods of rapid growth (Freudenburg 1984, Frankena 1980). Recognition that both rapid growth *and* decline could adversely affect communities resulted in even more emphasis on the concept of stability and placed more pressure on policy makers to create mechanisms that maintained the status quo.

The boomtown literature notwithstanding, it is generally assumed at the individual level, that a person with a job is better off than a person without a job. And that a person with a steady income is better off than a person with none, or one that fluctuates dramatically over the course of their life or the course of a year. Similarly, communities with stable economic bases are thought to be better off than those that experience dramatic fluctuations in employment levels.

Clearly there is a connection between economic well-being and social well-being. What is nice about these some of these relationships, from a research standpoint, is that there are easily quantifiable measures of these economic factors that contribute to social well-being. Income, employment and poverty data are readily available. They are reported for individuals, groups, communities. Comparisons are easily made between communities, between different groups within communities (forest sectors workers versus non-forest sector workers), and so on.

Without denying that a connection exists between social and economic well-being, or that

income, employment and poverty data are legitimate and useful measures of well-being, it must be pointed out that such indicators are only tip of an iceberg. When it comes to assessing social well-being, or icebergs, it is the hidden, or submerged aspects that are more difficult to assess. Nonetheless, if you are the skipper of a ship, or a community leader in a forest-dependent community, you want to know about what is going on under the water. You want to know what factors affect social well-being, regardless as to whether they are easy or difficult to assess.

In the following section I will review three phenomena that relate directly to social well-being but which are not reflected by quantitative, economic indicators. These are only a few examples, there are undoubtedly many more instances where social well-being and economic well-being are uncoupled. The quality of employment (as opposed to quantity), social cohesion, and local empowerment are the three issues that will be treated.³

The quality of work refers to the extent to which people are satisfied and fulfilled by their jobs or livelihoods. Some aspects of this are quantifiable. Physical working conditions have steadily improved in both the extraction of timber and the manufacturing of wood products. Occupations in these sectors now involve much less menial, hand labor. Such advances can be measured in quantitative terms. However, there is also a subjective element to the quality of work. Some people have jobs that do not pay well, but that provide a great deal of satisfaction. A fine example of this phenomena are native trappers, who earn relatively little from that activity, but who consider the opportunity to trap essential for their well-being. Others may have financially rewarding jobs that they hate. This subjectiveness makes it difficult to compare or aggregate responses of individuals, but no one will dispute the fact that one's attitude toward one's job is fairly critical in determining

³ For a more detailed treatment of qualitative indicators of social well-being see Wilkening (1982).

individual welfare or well-being.

There are mountains of studies on job satisfaction, but few that attempt to link their findings with community well-being in forest-dependent communities. We know, for example, that loggers are very committed to their occupations, even though their work is dangerous, sometimes low paying, and very physically demanding. Occupational identity in this instance very likely plays a significant role in social well-being. But it is difficult to measure quantitatively, and difficult to compare to occupational attachment in other professions. The fact that quality of work is difficult to measure does not mean we should not try. Interesting work on attachment to one's occupation and the relationship between job satisfaction and social well-being exists in the literature, though more should be done (Carroll 1989).

Social cohesion is a slightly more slippery concept, but one that also contributes significantly to well-being. In simple terms, it represents the merger of two definitions of community. Community may be defined in terms of the shared values, cooperation, interaction, commitment, and levels of voluntarism within a defined social group. Community may also refer to a specific locale, a physical place. Social cohesion then represents the extent to which a geographical community possesses or achieves "community" in the sense of shared values, quality relationships, etc. Incidentally, these "communitarian" aspects of community can be "measured", but they are not variables that the U.S. Bureau of the Census or Statistics Canada have on a tape file.

To illustrate why social cohesion matters in the overall context of well-being in forest-dependent communities, I will give two examples from Rumford\Mexico, Maine. Rumford/Mexico is a pulp and paper mill town nestled in the mountains of western Maine. It has a century-long history of forest-dependence. This community has experienced an erosion of social cohesion over the years

through a variety of mechanisms. First, growth in the distribution and use of the automobile has decreased social cohesion in the community. This of course is not an example that is unique to Rumford/Mexico. Greater access to cars over the course of the century has led to people from Rumford/Mexico shopping for goods and services in surrounding communities. It also has also allowed mill managers to hire workers from a much wider geographical area. Some mill workers now commute over an hour and live in communities very distant from the one in which they work. Social networks today are much more diffuse and social cohesion has declined from the 1930's and 1940's when virtually everyone who worked in the mill lived within walking distance of that facility. In the middle decades of this century, remembered locally as the community's golden years, everyone worked in the same facility, attended local churches, played on the same ball teams, and participated in a variety of local social and cultural institutions. ⁴

A more important and more dramatic decline in social cohesion was precipitated by a major strike at the Rumford mill in 1986. Over three hundred "replacement" or "scab" workers were hired. According to official mill and state labor statistics, the jobs were still there and income was coming in to the community. The traditional quantitative economic indicators of well-being were virtually unchanged. However, to this day, some eight years after the strike, siblings are not speaking to one another and parents and children are not speaking to one another because they found themselves on opposite sides of a picket line. Again, this is difficult to express quantitatively, but it is a critical variable that, in this case, detracts from social well-being. Community members will talk for hours, if you let them, about how the community was more united and cohesive in the past. This second

⁴ Prior to this period, at the turn of the century, social cohesion in rumford/Mexico was negatively affected by the rapid population growth, contentious labor relations, and the inability of various groups of immigrant labor to effectively communicate with one another (Beckley 1994).

example of declining social cohesion was due to a single, watershed event. The affects of automobiles, television, and other technological changes tend to slowly erode social cohesion incrementally over a period of years or even decades. The end result, however, is similar.

A third area critical to social well-being that is indirectly connected to economic well-being is local empowerment. This involves two dimensions; the opportunity to act, and the capacity to act (see Kusel 1991, Kusel and Fortmann 1991). The opportunity to act, refers to the opportunity to make choices. Economists often explain their work as the study of how people make choices. In deliberate contrast to this definition, sociology has been described as the study of why people don't have any choices to make.⁵

For example, if there is a decline in logging jobs (for whatever reason - technological change or increases in legislated protected areas) and there are few or no other employment opportunities in a forest-dependent community, then the choice to stay in that locale and have fulfilling, meaningful, well-compensated work may not exist. The only choice available may be an undesirable one, the choice between staying in the preferred locale with a low-paying, unfulfilling job, or leaving the community in search of more agreeable employment. Due to isolation and transportation costs, logging contractors may be restricted with respect to where they can sell their wood. Students may face limited choices with regard to curricula, or in how far they can extend their education in their home communities. Again, these limitations of our choices, or constraints on opportunities to act, have implications for social well-being. At a personal level, these are disempowering phenomena. They result in a decline in individual welfare.

The capacity to act is another matter, more related to the communities' ability to make

⁵ This contrast was first pointed out to me by Tom Heberlein.

choices. The particular social structure that we find in many forest-dependent communities may have implications for individuals' or communities' capacity to act in their own interests. Many forest-dependent communities are economically dependent upon one firm, or a small number of forest manufacturing firms. These firms, whether the family-based companies of the past, or today's national and transnational corporations, wield great economic power within the communities where they own production facilities. Sometimes that economic power translates into political power and/or social power.

Again, Rumford/Mexico represents just such a case. Local residents became very comfortable with the fact that the managers of the local paper mill were simultaneously the economic, the social and the political elites of the community. However, the company was sold twice, and the new mill executives took a much stronger interest in regional and national affairs rather than local politics. As local mill managers withdrew from local politics, the community found itself without effective leadership. The community had grown dependent upon the mill for everything from funding for local festivals, to providing strong leadership in local elected and appointed political posts. Today, without effective leadership, and with only a vague sense that strong leadership is missing, the town is floundering. It continues to lose population, people feel helpless to counteract the decline in social cohesion mentioned above, and people express frustration and futility regarding their prospects for turning their community around.

Through no fault of the community or the company that operates there, a social system evolved that has impaired the community's capacity to act. That is, the leadership vacuum has limited the ability of the community to identify and address important local issues and problems that bear directly on social well-being.

I have made the assertion that social well-being goes well beyond easily quantifiable economic statistics and that social well-being and economic well-being become uncoupled in many instances. The next question, of course, is what to do about it from a research perspective? In particular, what do we do with variables such as social cohesion, the quality of work, and the opportunity and capacity to act. If we can't measure these with numbers, how do we take them into account?

While we cannot fully measure these variables with numbers, we can certainly assess them. Granted, these assessments are more subjective than what is possible with quantitative variables. They may also pose problems for comparisons between communities. Qualitative case study research is more likely to involve diverse methodologies that may or may not be practical to replicate in given community contexts. However, it is possible to make accurate, useful, and insightful qualitative assessments of the above and other variables that contribute to social well-being. One can make such an assessment by going to a particular place, by living there, talking to people, asking questions, seeing first hand how people act and interact. It is also useful to learn the history of a place. This ethnographic approach can provide a very good picture of local social conditions. In the past these techniques have lacked legitimacy outside a few social science disciplines. However, they are becoming more accepted within the scientific community, particularly as methods such as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) are further developed. Rapid Rural Appraisal, in particular, is an attempt to make qualitative, ethnographic research more efficient in both temporal and financial terms.

While academia may be slow to accept these new models of research and qualitative means of assessing well-being, for me, the proof is in the pudding. I would suggest that a well-reasoned, thoughtful, qualitative analysis of community capacity, social cohesiveness, and so on, that is done

after fairly extensive field work could be quite useful to community leaders or to communities without good leaders as the case may be. On the other hand, the traditional way social scientists have measured well-being -- through complex input-output models or quantitative multivariate models with a limited number of social indicators -- may be of less use to the communities themselves. These methods are often unintelligible to community members and significantly more limited in scope. I am not suggesting scrapping the quantitative set of tools with which we measure well-being, but rather expanding upon it. The best analyses combine both the rigor of quantitative variables, and the breadth and context provided qualitative techniques.

In conclusion, I would like to revisit the earlier discussion of means and ends. Most academics, community residents and policy makers can agree that a desired end is healthy, prosperous, interesting and vital communities. Stability, in and of itself, is not a meaningful or sufficient end. Stability may be only one means of achieving our desired end, but there is mounting evidence that community stability is an untenable means from a policy perspective. National and international politics, and social, economic and technological change impose serious limits on the extent to which local communities can shape their own futures. Community *adaptability* may be a more useful concept than community *stability* in assessing which communities will thrive in our rapidly changing world. Levels of human capital, the imagination of community leaders, the ability to access information, and the availability of a flexible, diverse resource base are variables that will likely affect community adaptability. Again, some of these things may be measured quantitatively, others must be assessed through qualitative methods. Analyses that combine the two will help show what combination of skills, information and resources will be necessary for twentieth century single-sector, resource dependent communities to thrive in the next millennium.

While change is often loathed in small, isolated, resource-dependent places, it is not

necessarily a negative thing. If people are prepared for it, it can be a positive, empowering phenomenon. While forest-dependent communities of the past were very cohesive, they had a woeful record in terms of the quality of work, and local empowerment. Some of these places had social systems that were more feudal than democratic. As these communities continue to evolve, there may be significant trade-offs to be made in these areas - less cohesion, but more local empowerment and better quality work. The hope is that through defining and assessing such less quantifiable contributors to social well-being that we might arrive at a combination that improves social welfare as a whole. Again, I caution against trying to "freeze" or "stabilize" the social systems that we have. Rather, we should encourage their evolution in positive directions. To do that we need to broaden our conception of social well-being and continue to create better tools to assess that well-being.

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