

## THE IMPACT OF THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT SYMPOSIA

All across North America people are concerned about the quality of life in their towns and villages. They care about the stability and growth of economic efforts, the style and quality of decision-making, and the ways for interpreting and sharing the meanings of everyday events.

These are concerns about the present and the future. One indicator is the increasing number of people in local groups everywhere who are creating practical, innovative ways of dealing with new situations and tough problems. Another recent indicator has been the active participation of people from many different walks of life in the Rural Development Symposia (RDS) and other local events related to the International Exposition of Rural Development (IERD).

### THE EVENTS AND THE PEOPLE

The major intent of the Rural Development Symposia and the related local events was to identify and document these successful efforts so they could be shared and used by others. During the period between January 1, 1983, and June 30, 1983, there were 27 such events conducted in the United States and Canada, involving more than 2,000 people.

An encouraging aspect of these activities was the broad cross-section of citizens who participated by attending and providing financial support. In addition to the local development practitioners, the events included substantial representation from the private business sector, government and voluntary organizations.

Most of the participants were from rural areas; yet many of them came from urban communities. The participants were white, and they were black; they were hispanic and they were from native American reservations; and from Asian American communities. Their common denominator was their concern for the quality of life in North America, and their determination to insure that people working in development projects have an opportunity to share what they have learned.

### THE FINDINGS AND THE PROCESSES OF THE RDS EVENTS

Extensive and elaborate methods for documenting the findings of the IERD-related events were conducted by the regional preparation teams, event facilitators and ICA documentation/production teams. These included video and audio taping of key sessions, news media coverage of selected events, written document productions of workshop products, and evaluation by staff

and steering committee members.

Early samples of the event products indicate emerging patterns and points of commonness in a number of research areas. A review of the documents from symposia held in Tulare, California; Memphis, Tennessee; Des Moines, Iowa; Gorham, Maine; Orillia, Ontario; Lethbridge and Stony Plain, Alberta; reveal many of the ways in which people concerned about rural development are related to each other. These events involved people from 42 states of the USA and 6 Canadian provinces. Shown below are some brief illustrations of the findings:

TRENDS:: early samples from the reviewed documents listed dozens of trends that are shaping rural development today. Of these, 16 major trends seem to be common to North American efforts. Prominent among these were the following:

1. A STANCE OF SELF-RELIANCE: increasingly people are pointing to the need for successful development to be based upon local initiatives. This includes the use of local resources first, the establishment of local controls and "self-help" directed activity to take priority.
2. DISPOSITIONS TOWARD CREATING COALITIONS: at the same time that people are seeing the importance of self-reliance, there is a trend toward the creation of partnerships among self-reliant groups with strong relationships between the private, public, volunteer and local sectors. The creation of linkages to maximize the effective identification and use of resources; and the establishment of organizational networks to achieve long lasting results are becoming key indicators of successful development.
3. INCREASED GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS: more and more people involved in local development are seeing how their activities are related to the actions and events of people in other parts of the world and this consciousness is shaping the way that development practitioners make decisions and conduct planning.
4. EXPANDED COMMUNITY-BASED DECISION-MAKING: organizations that provide support to development efforts and make development decisions are increasingly seeing the need to expand opportunities for community involvement in decision-making in all phases of the development process.

KEYSTONES: all of the RDSs conducted in North America included process for allowing the participants identify those key elements of successful development that make projects workable. These were call "keystones" or "building blocks". Shown below are four of the most prominent:

1. HIGH DEGREE OF INFORMATION FLOW AND EVENTFULNESS: RDS participants saw the absolute necessity of having large amounts of timely information available to people in development; and to have that information flowing constantly to insure success. Simultaneously, it was important to include many high visibility community events to maintain community cohesiveness.
2. COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION STRUCTURES: these were seen as necessary for development projects to respond to the needs of citizens. Projects that had a meaningful impact were those whose structures allowed for dealing with many issues and all aspects of community growth.
3. LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND MOTIVATION: the development of models to keep leaders abreast of the latest methods and changing situations was seen as a critical part of projects.

4. MOBILIZATION OF LOCAL RESOURCES: RDS participants saw that only through making maximum use of local human and material resources can project hope to initiate and sustain effective projects.

The Rural Development Symposia also included processes for identifying the guidelines (the do's and don'ts), the social challenges, and scenarios for the future of rural development. Some of the Symposia developed specific strategies for accelerating development in particular geographies.

#### THE NEXT STEPS

The data from the RDS is currently being collected and analyzed. Already it is providing helpful insights for the selection of projects to be displayed at the India Plenary of the IERD. More importantly perhaps, the data is becoming helpful for creating a system that will inform development practitioners of the bold directions called for in the future.

The initial evaluation of data was used to begin the design of the data bank catalogue of successful development activities. Because the data comes from local practitioners, as well as the multi-sector participants in the RDS, it is useful for creating the new "screens" or categories for selecting and actuating development activities. This "BOTTOM-UP" approach is critical if the wisdom of people who actually conduct development activities is to be honored and used to inform the designs of future projects.