

Recapturing Wealth on the
Canadian Prairies: lessons
learned about rural adaptation



AgriCulture with a capital C

- ARA — ad hoc group founded in 1999
- Is there another story to tell?
- Mission — broaden the discussion over evolution of agriculture and rural life on the Prairies;
- Impossible?

Facilitating a Discussion

- A series of conferences that would create opportunities for individuals and groups concerned about the future of agriculture and rural prairie communities to share, discuss and develop ideas for rejuvenating agriculture and the rural Prairie economy.

Our members included representatives from:

- University of Manitoba
- Manitoba Agriculture Food and Rural Initiatives
- Keystone Agricultural Producers
- Farmers' Independent Weekly
- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (PFRA)
- Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation

Our supporters included:

- Manitoba Rural Adaptation Council provided us with stable five year funds in conjunction with our member organizations who contributed in kind;
- Canadian Wheat Board
- Credit Unions
- Livestock commodity groups
- Manitoba Agricultural Credit Corporation
- Mennonite Central Committee

Lessons learned:

- Finding a date to hold a new series of conferences is difficult — farm agenda full;
- The ability of a society to adapt is limited by its definition of success — underlying values and assumptions must be identified then consciously and critically analyzed.

Prairie adaptation culture

- Focus on productivity versus profitability;
- Quick to adopt new technology — innovation in machinery, seed and inputs that perpetuate the status quo are quickly embraced;
- Difficult to introduce new ideas or systems; especially if they may result in lower volumes. Such systems are quickly relegated to status of “alternative” or “niche”.

Prairie adaptation culture

- Short-term thinking dominates the discussion and research agenda;
- People don't have time to consider the implications of far-out options such as – evolution of perennial cropping systems, the shifting energy balance, the impact of new technology on ethanol production.
- Inherent weaknesses of monoculture approach;

Millennium reality check: Recapturing Wealth 2000

- Industrialized model does not work for farmers or rural communities — John Ikerd;
- Nature always bats last — Tom Frantzen (Practical Farmers of Iowa;)
- Farmers as ‘charity cases’ losing public’s respect — Lawrence Solomon, National Post;
- There is strength in unusual alliances — Karen Armstrong Cummings (tobacco farmers)

What's YOUR vision for the Prairie landscape?

- Farmers drive an agricultural renewal which supports communities, works in close relationship with consumers, and sustains a healthy environment —
Recapturing Wealth 2000

New definitions:

- Are you a big farmer or a small farmer? It's all in your head. (John Ikerd)
- Power comes from knowing you are powerless to change things in conventional ways. (Bill Patric)
- Uncommon alliances a powerful adaptation strategy — Karen Armstrong Cummings

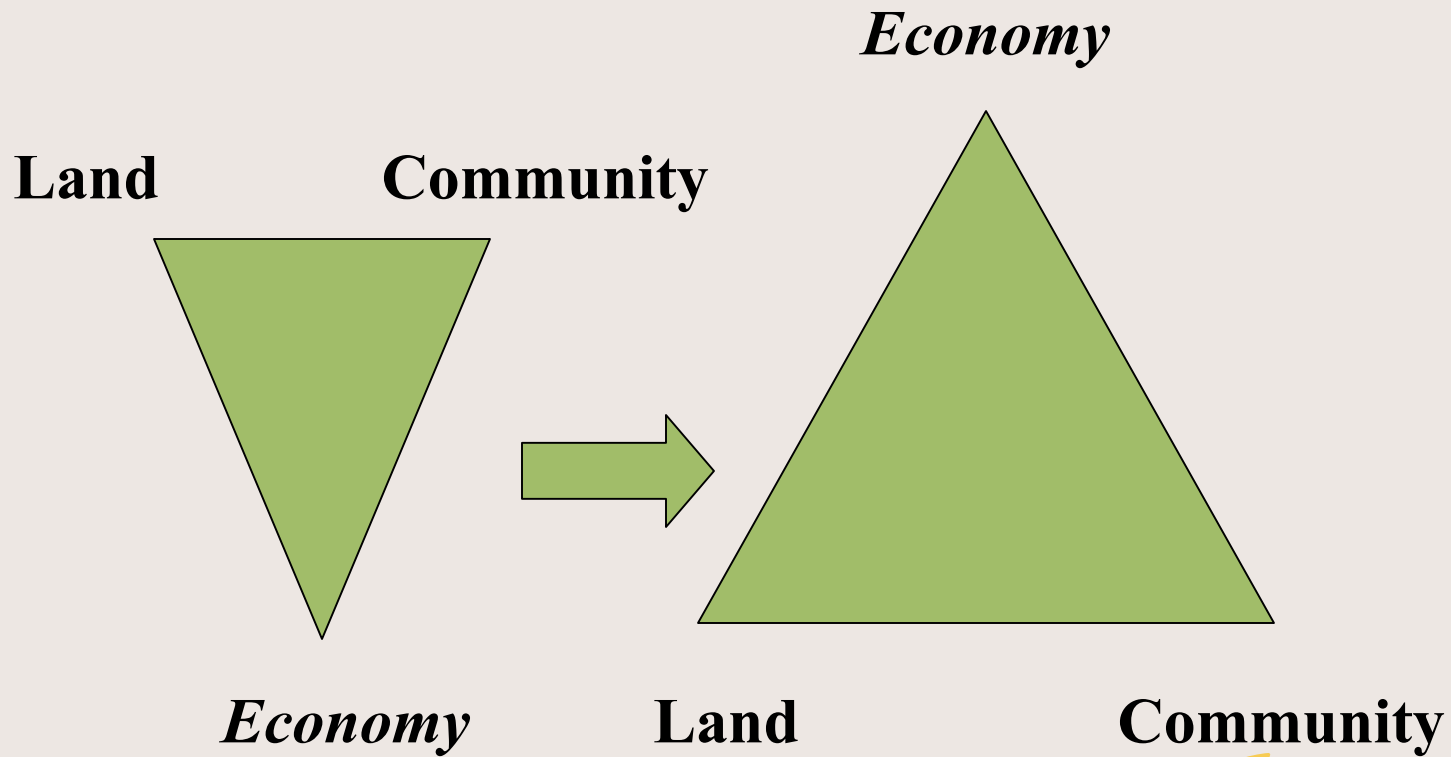
Building Alliances — Recapturing Wealth 2001

- Under the context of limited institutional supports,... the strength in independence, which has been the hallmark of those who live and work on the Canadian Prairies must be balanced with co-operation via alliances focused on supporting local rural enterprise.

Revitalizing Rural Communities — Recapturing Wealth 2002

- The primary requirements for successful and sustained rural enterprise development are rural community focused leadership and a sense of community among individuals.

Balanced Sustainability Base



How do we measure success?

Recapturing Wealth 2003

- The value and success of rural communities is built upon youth, education, enterprise and health;
- The future of profitable food marketing? — memory, romance and trust
- Family farmers have a pivotal role to play in value chains built on those qualities.

The Success of Rural Enterprise (CARCI)

- Stories of rural enterprise both agriculturally based and outside of agriculture;
- Highlighted the reality that if a rural community is a place where people want to live — they will find a way to make a living there.

Young and Beginning Farmers: Recapturing Wealth 2004

- Focused on young farmers
- Speakers emphasized they do not need to be locked into past approaches;
- Relationships are key with family, value chains and the environment.

Recapturing Wealth 2005 — Finding ways forward

- Restoring the optimism in Next Year Country;
- Channeling frustration into a positive force for change;
- Coalition building;

Channeling frustration

- Find and ride the waves - environmental linkages
- Getting politicians to act — It's not good enough to explain why a policy is good for you — why is it good for the people in an MP's constituency?
- Issue campaigns, getting on the political agenda -
- getting on the poll list.
- Farmers need to be more active in directing research priorities;

Farmers well positioned to lead the charge

- Well respected — seen as credible and honest
- Represent the foundations of memory, romance and trust in our food supply;
- BUT — they themselves must adopt a broader vision than profitability for farmers.
- Their interests must be viewed in context with sustainable rural communities and the needs of broader society.

The ARA's impact:

- Directly reached approximately 800 people
- Indirectly affected communities because of enterprises and new approaches adopted;
- Helped to broaden the discussion;
- Identified that the real force for change lies within people's own commitment to sustaining their communities;

Lessons learned:

- There is a role for this kind of forum in the agricultural and rural policy debate;
- People are looking for adaptation options but need support when looking to step outside the box;
- This forum provided a place in which to hold an open discussion and helped establish support networks that would sustain people exploring alternative options;

To find out more:

Full conference proceedings available
at: www.ruralrenewal.com

