Philanthropy Needs a Rural Strategy

Last year Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack called out philanthropy for its lack of commitment to rural America. By all accounts foundation support to rural communities has dropped even since the USDA signed an agreement in 2011 with the Council on Foundations to spur more rural investments. Rural philanthropy now accounts for less than seven percent of the total compared with a US rural population of 20%.

The truth about rural disinvestment is of course more complicated than the lack of foundation presence. As we might expect, foundation contributions, or lack thereof, play a fairly modest role in the overall picture.

As those of us attending the Forum of the Sustainable Agricultural and Food Systems Funders (www.safsf.org) learned last week in Louisville, Kentucky, disinvestment in rural communities has been a problem for decades, caused in large measure by changes in US anti-trust policies that have increasingly encouraged scale and efficiency over competition, fairness and local control.

In 1970, for example, rural communities retained on the order of 60% of farm income compared with only a third today (at least in Iowa, where we looked at data). Having himself fought some of the forces responsible for this trend, the Secretary knows well the industry pressures on both Des Moines and Washington. Those forces have created a policy environment that rewards a few companies (and families) with enormous returns from corporate consolidations which would have been unheard of 50 years ago.

The US treats its rural communities like colonies – extracting profits and rents from the production of food, fiber and energy, and sending them mostly to urban centers. Many farms in the Midwest have lost half their topsoil in just a few decades, a result of extractive practices that are systematically depleting our most productive rural asset. It’s like sending tiny pieces of soil away with each bushel of corn or soybeans harvested. Intensive animal agriculture degrades water and air, making uninhabitable swaths of bucolic countryside, while producing jobs that systematically keep rural workers poorer than their urban cousins.

This bigger picture doesn’t excuse philanthropy from playing a role in improving rural lives. Our collective contribution has been woefully inadequate, not simply in relation to population and need but considering the opportunity to achieve the goals we care most about. For example, as some of us learned at the Forum, small changes in how we treat land, when made at a landscape scale, can yield dramatic improvements in the climate picture, as well as economic benefit. By encouraging farmers to adopt new products and progressive practices such as cover
crops or added rotations and other methods that capture carbon, we can make a meaningful difference to planet health.

There are no doubt many other ways where, if foundations were paying attention, we could make a huge difference, not just to rural communities, but to the entire country. So what’s getting in our way?

The National Center for Responsive Philanthropy identified several reasons for this gap in their 2007 Study, *Rural Philanthropy: Building Dialogue From Within*. Although the research is several years old, the reasons cited remain valid. Among them are the attitudes of mostly urban based foundation boards and staff who misperceive rural folk as living in a backwater without the ability or organizational capacity to make use of foundation support. Or worse, urban foundations see rural communities as self-sufficient.

Although accurate, the study’s insights about philanthropy are incomplete, and they have proved insufficient on their own to cause a change in grant-maker behavior. Cries of bias and the exhortations of the Secretary and others are inadequate because the core problem is probably more structural than attitudinal.

Most rural philanthropy comes from a very small number of large foundations and a few smaller ones based in small towns like the one I work for. Our commitments are articulated in our missions and in our budgets which make resources available for learning and for developing meaningful relationships with rural leaders and change agents.

Many foundations whose missions align with rural communities would be interested in supporting them if they had the organizational capacity to do so. It’s not attitude. Foundation staff and trustees even at small foundations are by and large progressive and smart. They would be there if they could.

Many other larger foundations are urban based, like the largest of US community foundations, whose missions and bylaws preclude them from supporting communities outside their city or county limits. (Ironically, although such data isn’t collected, we know anecdotally that at least some of the wealth preserved by these institutions comes from rural profits and rents.) If you really think about why urban agriculture is a big deal today, it’s probably not unimportant that many of the food movement’s strongest supporters have geographic limitations. And, to their credit, many smaller, urban foundations who have minimal staff follow the lead of these well-staffed and typically smart, larger organizations.

Five questions lingered for me after the Louisville Forum:

- How can the field promote better understanding of the opportunities philanthropy has to make a difference in rural communities relative to foundation missions?
• How can those of us who care about rural communities support the foundations who have the interest but not the organizational capacity to work in rural communities?
• How can foundations with geographic limitations come to think more in terms of systems than their own neighborhoods?
• What actions can philanthropy take to support and advance policies that can leverage impact on the bigger picture? And finally,
• Who can lead an effort that’s based more on collective action than pleas to individual foundations?

It seems to me what philanthropy needs right now is a rural strategy, not more shaming.

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