

EVALUATION APPROACHES TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Ian Hodge and Peter Midmore[†]

Abstract

Recent changes to the framework of agricultural support, particularly the rising prominence of the ‘Second Pillar’ of the CAP, have stimulated an increasing interest in the impact of rural development policy, and consequently a need for better understanding of the processes it is designed to influence. The spatial diversity of rural economic activity, and a high level of dependence of the countryside on urban economic activity, implies that the conception of a discrete rural economy is problematic. The paper argues that the nature of rural development has undergone a fundamental change and that this has profound implications for the evaluation of policy. This involves balancing the reductionist implications of quantitative evaluation against the relatively slender empirical base of rural sociological understanding. The paper concludes by suggesting new directions for improved understanding of the interventions designed to promote rural development.

Introduction

The recent increase in emphasis on evidence-based policy must be applauded from a number of perspectives. It is good from a social point of view because policy-making ought to be more precisely developed and targeted as a result of taking research findings into account; likewise, for academic and other researchers, more attention to their efforts to understand the mechanisms and impact of policy intervention provides an incentive to focus on immediate and relevant questions. However, in the specific case of rural development there are some fundamental barriers to development and evaluation of policy which need to be resolved. The most important of these stems from the fact that rural development, while it might reasonably in the past been viewed in terms of sectoral policy, has shifted to a territorial policy, or arguably a ‘local policy’. Longstanding controversies exist regarding the nature, scope and definition of rural territory itself. Different designations provide arbitrarily different results, and those which are based on some kind of threshold such as that provided by the OECD (less than 150 persons per square kilometre) conceal what most commentators agree is a diverse range of socio-economic conditions (Hodge and Monk 2004; Yarwood 2005).

In England, the re-organisation of ministerial responsibility following on from the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak resulted in a Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), at least part of which has a remit based on an uncertain geography: consequently, it sought an entirely new definition, based on an ‘underlying settlement classification’ built up from the location of individual households, in an attempt to uncover the “needs of rural areas and communities” (Defra 2004, 5). In England also (although not in the other constituent parts

[†] Department of Land Economy, University of Cambridge and School of Management and Business, University of Wales Aberystwyth. This paper is for presentation to the joint Société Française d’Économie Rurale and Agricultural Economics Society Conference on Rural Development, Paris, 29 March 2006.

of the United Kingdom), levels of population density and urbanisation differ significantly in relation to the European norm, so that the classical general equation between rurality and disadvantage is not valid. There are certainly some specific and intractable pockets of poverty and the socially mixed character of communities, but these are hard to identify (see, for example, Cloke *et al.* 1994). In the United Kingdom, responsibility for rural policy and rural development has been complicated by the process of political devolution to constituent countries. The Westminster Government, represented by Defra (and previously one of its predecessors, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), has overall responsibility on a European and international level, but in territorial terms covers only England. Elsewhere, the devolved administrations carry out the policy function.

A further impediment to evaluation is caused by confusion over terminology. Since the *Agenda 2000* reforms, most of the European Union's non-commodity EAGGF spending has been consolidated into programmes delivered under the Rural Development Regulation (EC1257/1999). cursory examination reveals that the accompanying measures of MacSharry's CAP reform, consolidated into the 'Second Pillar', are much more narrowly focused on farming and its environmental impact. Bryden (2000, 10) has shown that less than 10 per cent of planned expenditures under current RDR programmes are on 'Article 33' measures focused on activities outside the agricultural sector, and consequently a negligible fraction of overall EAGGF payments. While there are some evident indirect linkages between agriculture and the non-farm rural economy, it is difficult to disentangle the various strands of EAGGF support, other Structural Funds activity, experimental LEADER funding and national programmes for rural action when attempting to link outcomes to activities.

These are the challenges which the paper sets out to explore. It describes the changing and developing context of rural development and the implications for policy evaluation itself, using specific examples that show how the development of guidelines by both the UK Government (HM Treasury 2003) and the European Commission (CEC 1999) have contributed to making this a mechanical, path-dependent activity. It concludes by suggesting that although measurement of impacts on rural economies, environments and communities is a necessary component of overall evaluations, without more discursive and qualitative inquiry, it is not, alone, sufficient. This in turn has implications for the ways in which rural development decisions are made in practice.

The transformation of rural development

Over time, the changing economic and social character of rural areas has undergone fundamental change. Figure 1 sets out the basic arguments. The immediate postwar model of rural development centred on the agricultural sector, and other objectives were seen as complementary to support to the agricultural sector. But through time the approach has changed, shifting to multisectoral, territorial and local approaches. The multisectoral policy sees agriculture as but one economic sector through which the development objectives can be attained. The territorial approach recognises the wider interactions within the rural economy and the importance of social as well as economic issues. Finally, the differentiation between rural areas and the variation in individual circumstances promotes a search for actions that recognise the specificity of solutions at most local level. These changes have reflected both forces fundamentally associated with economic development and other factors more governed by local circumstances. And they have major implications for the methodologies that are relevant for the assessment of rural problems and the evaluation of policies.

Policy	Orientation	Mechanism
Agricultural Policy	Sectoral	Commodity support
↓	↓	↓
	Multisectoral	Diversification
	↓	↓
	Territorial	Rural development
	↓	↓
Rural Policy	Local	Local community development

Figure 1: The evolution of development policy

A sectoral approach

In the period following the Second World War there were overwhelming priorities that dictated the approaches taken to agricultural policy. These were driven by a need to ensure domestic food security and the central role of agriculture in rural economies. This placed support for the agricultural sector at the centre and promised a means of meeting a variety of objectives for food security, rural development, farm incomes and environmental protection simultaneously through a single agricultural policy approach. Agriculture represents the major sector in the rural economy and its success determines the performance of the local economy more generally. Agricultural decline promotes rural depopulation and a decline in rural service provision. Thus, a policy to stimulate agricultural production not only supports domestic food supply, agricultural employment and farm incomes, it also deters out-migration from rural areas and supports the rural economy more generally. However a variety of, by now familiar, factors undermined this approach and the general consensus about the appropriate policies. The decline in the significance of the agricultural sector and the widespread experience of counterurbanisation mean that agriculture plays a less important role in the rural economy. In the UK in 2000, agriculture contributed some 0.8% of total value added at basic prices. But there is substantial regional variation; agriculture's shares in the English regions varying between 0.2% for London and the South East, and 1.2% in the East Midlands and the South West.

A multisectoral approach

Thus, support directed exclusively through agriculture faces increasing challenge and can have less and less local economic impact. This suggests an alternative, multisectoral approach. The relatively small contribution of agriculture to many rural areas means inevitably that other economic sectors have come to play an increasing role in the rural economy. Recreation and tourism and more generally the service and industrial sectors have become dominant in the economy. Policy begins to seek other ways of supporting agricultural incomes and rural economies. Farmers can look for alternative sources of income by adding value to agricultural products, by making use of farm assets, especially land and buildings, for non-agricultural uses, by undertaking agricultural work on other farms and by becoming involved in non-agricultural economic activities off the farm. Following

this logic, it might be argued that the conventional view of agriculture as supporting the rural economy has come to be reversed to a situation where it is a successful local economy that offers the means of support for farm households.

A territorial approach

However, even so such an approach is only partially 'multisectoral'. A truly multisectoral approach to rural development policy would look more generally and equally at the actual and potential roles for other sectors in rural areas. While located in rural areas, these will often have no economic linkages at all with agriculture. Rural areas can offer attractive locations for the establishment of new economic activity, often associated with the most advanced sectors of a modern economy, such as in information technology and many areas have gained employment from the establishment of new firms and types of employment.

These socio-economic changes in rural areas have been associated with the breakdown of longstanding networks and linkages. In a context of agricultural decline the significance and penetration of agricultural norms is diminished within the wider community and this is generally not replaced by any alternative dominant perspective. In practice, we can recognise rural areas in a variety of different circumstances and facing quite different types of problem. In areas with low activity rates and high unemployment, it may not matter very much what sort of economic stimulus is introduced. Any sort of new activity can have multiplier effects that work through to other sectors and may in turn promote new opportunities for farm diversification, thus supporting the farm population. In fact, it will often be easier to create employment opportunities through the development of non-land based activities, either by encouraging the movement of new economic activity into the area or through endogenous growth. The latter may be seen as more sustainable, although the former may be a more feasible alternative in areas where the economy is especially undeveloped.

In other areas, economic change is characterised by a rather different pattern of development, which we can term the 'contemporary' model of rural change; in contrast to the traditional model that is driven by changes within the agricultural sector. This recognises that a proportion of rural areas have a significant comparative advantage leading to economic success and population growth or counterurbanisation. This embraces a variety of different processes of varying importance across different localities. A major driving force behind this is the fact that rural areas offer attractive environments in which to live and work, while higher incomes and improved transport infrastructure reduces the constraints on locational choices. Thus those working in towns can travel increased distances to work increasing the level of commuting. But the effect is more widespread than this; even relatively remote locations have experienced population growth. Earlier retirement has freed up older people to live in attractive locations away from a place of work. The increased congestion in urban areas and improved road and rail networks outside them have altered the relative accessibility of different types of locality; the less remote rural areas are generally more accessible than central urban locations that suffer from traffic congestion. Rural areas are also attractive to new forms of employment, often based on entrepreneurs choosing to establish new businesses in places where they want to live. Finally, there is anecdotal evidence of 'downshifting', people deciding to opt out of more stressful employment to take up a less pressured lifestyle, often in a rural location.

Thus rural areas often follow divergent paths, some in long term decline and others experiencing considerable prosperity. Some continue to be characterised by the 'traditional' rural problems. Even if their populations are not significantly declining, they can have low

incomes and activity rates, although those on the lowest incomes are not necessarily engaged in the agricultural sector. Others with relatively high average incomes experience quite different sorts of problems. While the majority of the population are often generally well off and can get good access to services, there is a minority who experience problems that are in many ways a consequence of the affluence of the majority, the fact that house prices are high or that, because the majority do not demand certain services such as public transport, they are not provided at all. These issues suggest some limits to a general territorial approach. Changes in the circumstances in rural areas indicate a higher degree of complexity. There is no single sector that can be seen as a source of employment growth across rural areas in general. Rather, specific opportunities will depend on local characteristics, especially the natural environment, such as landscape, topography or an attractive coastline. It may also depend on the presence of employment clusters in nearby urban areas.

Other relationships also seem less straightforward. While it may have been assumed that the maintenance of population numbers will provide for the maintenance in the provision of local services, this no longer holds. Under the 'traditional' model of rural decline, the level of service provision falls with the reduced demand associated with a declining population and the emphasis in debate has generally been on the decline in services provided in rural areas. But in practice many other factors are associated with the level of service provision relating to both supply and demand. Economies of size and centralisation in the supply of services, increased personal mobility, privatisation of service providers and altered patterns of demand have led to major changes in the way in which services are delivered.

The position is also complex when looked at from the perspective of particular individuals. An analysis of labour markets tends to assume that the presence of unemployment is a consequence of a lack of employment opportunities within the local labour market, with the obvious policy implication that the solution will lie in employment creation. However, there is a variety of factors that can prevent individual access to employment beyond a crude lack of vacant jobs (Hodge *et al.* 2002). These can include lack of transport, lack of childcare facilities or a mismatch between the types of jobs available and the skills of those without work.

A local approach

A response to these sorts of factors may be to adopt a 'local' or even an 'individual' approach. In principle resources need to be directed towards particular problems at the individual household or business level. This is clearly an impossible task for a central or federal government and indicates the requirement for decentralisation of decision-making. But it may still not be feasible for a regional government.

What is required is some mechanism for connecting the objectives and resources that are given for development policy at the national level to the problems and priorities that apply at the individual level. This is essentially a problem of information. There needs to be a system whereby local circumstances can be assessed against national priorities and information disseminated to individual households and businesses on the opportunities and resources that can be made available in support of the objectives. This will not occur at a single step and the ease with which it occurs at all will depend on local institutions and the level of social capital. A sectoral approach required little institutional development at the sub-national level. However, the move towards a territorial and especially a local approach involves a much greater degree of choice and discretion in the ways in which public resources might be

applied. This complexity makes far greater demands on information and local institutional development is required to handle it.

Experience with rural development schemes to date suggests that they can be successful in the development of institutions and social capital, especially as embodied in the organisations that have been developed in order to facilitate the implementation of the schemes. Valuable initiatives have been made towards the development of local institutional structures through such schemes as Objective 5b and LEADER albeit in a sporadic and piecemeal way (e.g. Ward and McNicholas, 1998, Ray, 2000). Local institutions have an important role in dealing with the increasing complexity of policy implementation by building social capital for dissemination of information, networking amongst participants and co-ordination of activities.

A variety of institutional arrangements at the local level are involved, some are illustrated in Table 1. Some of these are purely in the public sector, such as local government facilitation, but others are essentially private, non-profit organisations, but generally substantially supported through government funding. Some develop horizontal associations, such as land management co-operatives, while others develop vertical associations, such as facilitation for the implementation of policy. More attention is needed on the optimal form and level of administrative intervention in the delivery of rural development policies. This sort of activity falls between the conventional roles of the public and private sectors presenting a challenge to analysis that casts the two sectors in clearly separate roles. But, investment and maintenance of social capital as a legitimate element of rural development policy.

Table 1 Between the state and the individual: building local institutions

Public sector facilitation
Development, housing and service provision associations
Collective supply associations for environmental goods
Local dedicated environmental funds
Conservation trusts

Policy evaluation

These changes in the nature and pattern of rural development have profound implications for evaluation. In the positivist tradition (Weimer 1998) policy evaluation is undertaken to test the efficiency and effectiveness of specific public actions designed to achieve social welfare benefits. For evaluation to work, therefore, policy objectives need to be unambiguously stated, and causal mechanisms need to be clearly understood. The latter is particularly important since other events or processes rather than the policy itself may affect the outcome, rather than the policy itself. Increasingly, therefore, and especially in the study of rural development, there has been a search for validating measures, or indicators, which can discriminate whether policy action has been justified.

Such indicators should, according to the European Commission (2001), cover efficiency (economic output in terms of quality and quantity, competitiveness and viability, and institutional efficiency) and equity (viability of rural communities and the maintenance of a balanced pattern of development, access to resources, services and opportunities, and labour conditions). Further, to appreciate the range of comprehension of different parts of the system and the stages at which policies impact, different kinds of indicators are required. Process indicators focus on policy implementation; output indicators provide quantitative measurements of effects identified as resulting from the policy; outcome indicators assess the extent to which policies achieve their stated objectives (Moxey *et al.* 1998).

Clearly, public resources for development assistance must be targeted on defined priorities. But two types of problems often encountered in the targeting of rural development areas (Midgley, *et al.*, 2003). The first results from an 'urban' characterisation of local economic problems. While the approach has now changed, in the UK, deprivation has in the past been assessed against indicators measuring children in flats, Commonwealth immigrants or overcrowded housing. None of these is representative of rural problems. No account was taken of the availability of local services, often a particular rural concern. Even an indicator of recorded unemployment might be argued to be biased against rural priorities. In a large labour market, those who are unemployed can expect that regular search will lead to the identification of a suitable employment opportunity. In contrast in a small labour market, people who are unemployed may well know that suitable vacancies are unlikely to occur and so decide to move to another area rather than remain unemployed within the local area. This suggests that recorded unemployment might be lower because of out-migration. Further, it may be that the costs of registering as unemployed are higher in a rural area because of the distance to be travelled to the employment office and the potential benefits lower as information might be more readily available by other, personal means. Thus we might expect that a rural area with a given level of economic disadvantage would exhibit a lower recorded level of unemployment. This sort of argument might be generalised in that it is possible that the take up of social security benefits is on the whole lower in rural areas than it is in urban areas. This might reflect either the cost of registering to claim the benefit where it requires personal attendance in a local town, or else where social norms may give greater priority to independence and greater social stigma to claiming benefits from the state.

A second type of problem relates to the way in which data are generally collected and analysed in compiling indicators of local economic conditions (e.g. Fieldhouse and Tye, 1996). Thus, the smallest statistical unit within the Population Census is the enumeration district, the area covered by a single enumerator. These districts are then aggregated into larger statistical units on which the analysis is conducted. In urban areas, groups with similar socio-economic characteristics tend to live in certain localities. These are often large enough to be identified as separate statistical units. However, within rural areas with smaller settlements, the unit will often include the whole settlement and so households with lower income will tend to be included together with those on higher incomes. Thus the mean figure for the rural unit may well fail to reveal the presence of a low income population.

Although there are some contextual differences between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, the articulation of policy and the framework of evaluation are relatively similar (perhaps because all four administrations share a common civil service, and the cultural imprint of is strong). Thus, for example, in England prior to the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, there was a strategic review of the nature and role of rural economies (PIU 1999), followed by a statement of rural policy published by the two responsible Westminster

Ministries (DETR/MAFF 2000). This established the scope of rural policy, which covers fair access to rural service provision, including housing and transport; business performance in both the farm and non-farm sectors; rural conservation and leisure uses of the countryside; and the vitality of communities and rural civil society. Attached to these four priorities are a series of 15 indicators. For economic development, for example, performance of policy initiatives have been measured from employment activity rates and unemployment rates in rural areas, the proportions of market towns that are thriving, stable or declining (based on service provision, business activity and employment), new business start ups and turnover of businesses in rural areas, total income from farming and off farm income, and levels of agricultural employment (*ibid.*, 166).

The consequences of the foot-and-mouth outbreak caused something of a paradigm shift (Scott *et al.* 2004), initially in terms of perception of the relative importance of constituent parts of rural economic activity, but perhaps more fundamentally a recognition that the administrative framework of policy delivery and evidence base was poorly suited to delivery of the policy objectives. In addition to a streamlining and reorganization of rural policy mechanisms, the new Rural Strategy (Defra 2004b) provides a more detailed and comprehensive approach to policy evaluation, so that much of the introductory discussion of this paper is reflected in its definition: “Evaluation is the process which objectively judges the actual outcomes, including any unintended side effects, of a policy or group of policies against the policy objectives, or intended outcomes, and the resources that are used in policy delivery” (*ibid.*, 96).

The planned evaluation framework consists of several streams: improving statistical resources to establish a baseline for monitoring; using this to assess progress using the Rural White Paper indicators, and also the rural ‘Public Service Agreement’ targets set for Defra by the Treasury¹; rural-proofing the programme-based evaluation other Westminster ministries’ policies; a study of local rural services; and either a longitudinal study of rural households or case studies of a number of rural communities, to examine cross-cutting impacts of policies. When examining these policies themselves, however, there are some challenging complexities. The focus on economic and social regeneration is divided into two, sustaining the relative prosperity of the majority of rural territory, and more specific measures to address rural areas with economic and social disadvantage. Most of these consist of rural top-up funding for existing economic development policies (skills, business support, broadband technologies) delivered through other Ministries or their agencies, and some minor regulatory modification of the land use planning system. Improvement of the economic and environmental performance of farming and food production is argued to be directly relevant to economic regeneration, although the contribution it can actually make may be small.²

The status of evaluation

¹ This is to “reduce the gap in productivity between the least well performing quartile of rural areas and the English median by 2008, demonstrating progress by 2006, and improve the accessibility of services for rural people”: HM Treasury (2002, 111)

² According to Defra’s own economic summary, regional agricultural gross valued added does not fully reflect the contribution of agriculture to rural economies ... (and) ... presents a number of complexities as neither sectoral nor area based indicators currently provide a good basis for capturing the rural economy. Agricultural businesses account for 16 per cent of all businesses in rural areas, but they only account for 7 per cent of both employees and turnover. Employees in rural businesses are more likely to work in the manufacturing (17 per cent), tourism (8 per cent) and retail (15 per cent) industries.

What may seem to be lacking from this approach is a conceptual framework that recognises the changed and differentiated circumstances of rural localities. In the context of a single dominant sector, support for this sector may well have trickled down to the population more generally, although even here there may be doubts as to the extent to which such support ever did get to those who were most in need. But in the face of the complexity and diversity of contemporary rural areas, it becomes ever more critical to identify the specifics and spatial distributions of problems and their causes. But it is also necessary to reveal the causal processes that have the potential to resolve the problems. As has been indicated, this may well require novel developments in the civil society of rural areas, but we have little systematic information on the roles and impacts of networks and associations in improving social and economic conditions. And we know less about how they may be successfully established and sustained. Analysis crosses the boundaries between economics and sociology. Quantitative information is required on economic activities but it must be complemented by analysis of the influence of networks, trust or social norms.

There may well be areas in which the approaches may be combined. We know little about the comparative economic performance of different types of social organisations in different contexts. Are there economies of size in the operation of housing associations? What are the implications of community ownership for economic decision-making and financial returns? How effective can local business organisations be in promoting economic development within remoter rural areas?

The increased complexity and differentiation of rural development also has implications for the ways in which policy decisions may be made. Local diversity implies that decisions must vary at the local level. The principle of subsidiarity would then suggest that the processes of decision-making should also be taken down to a more local level. But who speaks for the disadvantaged at that scale? These issues are typically taken up by local associations and partnerships of various sorts. But their incidence is uneven across rural areas. What impact do they have and how do they interact? Limited resources and expertise for the development of such initiatives are available; is this well used? In practice it seems there is often a small number of individuals who are involved across many different initiatives rather than a broad engagement of the population. Does the approach reinforce the exclusion of those areas that lack the capacity to develop the institutions necessary through which to attract funds and resources? There is a risk that, rather than opening up opportunities to those who are excluded in present circumstances, they reinforce the influence of particular interests (see for instance Yarwood's (2002) analysis of the operation of the rural exceptions policy and Shortall (2004)). What is probably necessary is a better understanding of the operation of civil society across the countryside more generally. We may conceive of an ecosystem of associations and organisations (Edwards, 2004): how do they interact, do they compete, duplicate or complement each other, are there niches that need to be filled?

And this gives a further twist to the question of evaluation. Much of the analysis will be of a qualitative nature. Generally it would seem more difficult to pass qualitative information between different levels of decision-making. This implies that policy decisions relying on more qualitative data should be made at lower levels, closer to the level of implementation. It will though still be necessary to pass some information on performance back up to higher levels in order to permit higher level resource allocation and financial control. Perhaps this is the fundamental challenge to combine local level evaluation that fully reflects the complexity and diversity of rural areas, and yet to convey the critical information back up to higher levels

to permit balanced and informed decisions to be taken about resource allocation across different regions and even countries.

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