7 | Expectations and Outcomes

Changing Expectations

The rural initiative that emerged from the White House in 1990 went through a number of changes in the period from 1990 to 1994. Some of these changes are explained by shifts in personnel and the change in the presidency in January 1993. As important as these changes were, however, the transformation of the initiative also occurred as a result of an evolving and learning process at two levels: first, between the state councils and the Washington-based staff, and second, within the councils themselves.

As Chapter 4 indicates, in its early phase, the initiative was largely driven by the general ideology and substantive agenda of the Bush administration—questions of deregulation, reduced federal activity, emphasis on the private sector, devolution to the states, and a comprehensive rational approach to council activity. Within a year of the initial activity, a different approach took form, characterized by a process rather than substantive agenda. In this phase, the initiative focused on means rather than ends, attempted to broaden the range of actors involved in the councils, and tried to encourage initiative participants to focus on the complexity of the issues that were raised.

The 1992 publication of the Osborne and Gaebler volume, *Reinventing Government* gave participants in the process (particularly staff in the Washington-based aspects of the initiative) a language to use to describe their activity to others. That book allowed them to view their own concerns in a broader fashion, highlighting a modified role for the federal government (minimizing the traditional control aspects), diminishing the boundaries between levels of government and the public and private sectors, and emphasizing a collaborative approach to decision making. It also provided a bridge to the change of administration that took place in January 1993.

The Clinton administration, largely through the National Performance Review and its definition of new governance, embraced many of
these principles. At the same time, however, there was also a substantive agenda that was imposed by the new appointees, particularly those within USDA. This new agenda provided a way for the Clinton appointees to make modifications in what was viewed as a Republican initiative. Concern about the membership composition of the councils (particularly the representation of racial and ethnic minorities) was articulated. In addition, the new officials searched for ways to mesh the councils and the initiative with other Clinton administration policies (such as the empowerment and enterprise communities). In this sense, the balance of the initiative tilted to a focus on substantive outcomes, looking to the process approach as a means to support substantive ends.

Expectations also changed within the councils themselves as the process unfolded. These shifts occurred as a result of the interplay between a broadened set of actors, experience with the complexity of the rural development policy field, and shifts in the state-level political and economic environment. In addition, councils began to learn from one another and to understand the similarities and differences between states.

The relationships between the councils and the Washington-based initiative staff also changed over the four years. Few councils continued to have a blanket negative characterization of “the feds” after operating for a few years. In some cases, the councils reduced their antagonism to Washington, D.C. In other cases, councils developed a less compliant approach, minimizing their perception that the effort “belonged” to the federal government and instead embracing it as an activity within the state. But whichever direction the shifts moved, there continued to be some tension between D.C. expectations and those of the states.

**Initiative Outcomes**

The seeming intractability of rural problems and the complexity that surrounds possible solutions make it difficult to evaluate the contribution of a single intervention in terms that focus only on a single measure. Although the real goal of this effort is to change the life conditions of rural Americans (particularly those who live in isolated and poverty-stricken areas), it is unrealistic to expect an initiative that focuses on changes in resource allocation, organizational and policy shifts, and is only four years old to be assessed in terms of its ability to provide new
opportunities or services to rural residents. In addition, given the shifts in expectations that characterize the life of the initiative, there has not been a focused strategy for change that has emerged over these years. At the same time, however, it is possible to assess this initiative in terms of incremental changes that move states (and perhaps the country) toward these eventual goals.

Within the states themselves, as Chapter 6 has indicated, the councils vary in terms of the processes used to make strategic choices of programs (e.g., goals, objectives, their plan of action, their definition of mission). Some of these variations are explained by factors (e.g., political shifts) that are beyond the control of the councils themselves. Some choices are dictated by the type of rural setting within a state; others are a function of personalities and past relationships between council participants.

Given these constraints, this assessment of the outcomes of the initiative attempts to identify a number of indicators or actions that represent significant areas of possible change and reflect a movement toward increased attention to the problems of rural residents. This discussion focuses on six different types of outcomes that can be discerned from this initiative to this point: networking, developing strategies, allocation or reallocation of resources, visibility and awareness of rural development issues, redefinition of rural policy, and levels of institutionalization.

**Networking**

As is discussed in Chapter 5, the emergence of a variety of networks was one of the major results of the strategies behind the initiative. The relationships that developed through the activities within the councils became more complex and differentiated as the effort progressed. The multiple partnership configuration became a way of dealing with difficult or undeveloped relationships between a number of institutional actors. The council format became a way for some state-level actors to reach out to local levels, establishing connections that had been difficult to develop earlier. In some cases, federal officials had little contact with state officials, even when they operated in the same programmatic areas. Some councils provided a setting for new relationships between public sector and private sector actors (both for-profit and nonprofit groups).

While varied, many of the networks that emerged from the process had a number of common attributes. They were able to provide broker-
ing and mediation functions; they were able to defuse past antagonisms, unfreeze some policy logjams, and smooth out conflicts as they created opportunities for participants to deal with one another in face-to-face, personal terms. They were also able to broaden the issue beyond traditional actors (although some actors, such as agriculture agencies and interests, continued to be important in a number of states) and sensitize some participants to the potential breadth of expertise that might be utilized to solve rural development problems.

The relationships that emerged from a number of the councils were possible only because of a concerted effort to depoliticize the rural development issue; that is, to acknowledge that concern about and ability to address these issues were not monopolies held by one political party or one institution (such as the legislature or the governor). The methods that were used to accomplish this were nontraditional in many states: meetings held in different geographical locations, shifting leadership responsibilities, and collegial relationships among participants. However, in several states the leadership was shared but shared only by the inner circle participants.

Networks of those concerned about rural development were not new in a number of states and the councils in those jurisdictions were able to pick up on investments that had already been made either within the state itself or as a result of activities such as the CGPA Academy. But even though networks may have existed in the past, the council activity was frequently able to expand their composition or, in a number of states, to create the momentum for the development of specialized networks around specific policy issues or focused on specific institutional actors. In a few states, the creation of the council provided the first opportunity for network development; no natural institution existing inside the state facilitated these types of relationships.

As might be expected, councils were not always able to deal with problems that had plagued the state in the past. Some councils were largely composed of the “same old players”; others existed as parallel institutions to the real power in the state. Political feuds between the governor and legislature or between the governor and lieutenant governor continued to be a part of the council’s environment. Politics, race, and value conflicts could not be ignored in states with those policy battles.

It should be noted that networks also developed within the initiative between states. A number of councils developed relationships with other councils in their geographic areas, often around specific policy issues
(such as the activity around the timber summit). Other councils were able to use the opportunities for meetings between executive directors to establish relationships and to share program and strategy ideas.

**Developing Strategies for the Council**

The councils have defined themselves, in terms of missions and goals, in quite diverse ways, as discussed in Chapter 3. Most states have adopted a strategic planning process to operationalize their activities, but the way in which the states use the process falls into three categories. Some states have developed plans that allow for significant flexibility in implementation. For example, a strategic plan may embody missions and goals but council activities are not necessarily specified. The specific activities to be undertaken may emerge through interactions with local communities or from working groups. The strategic plan incorporates a flexible, decentralized approach to implementing council activities. In a second group of states, the strategic plan is more detailed and used more formally in determining council activities. A council may even derive work plans directly from the strategic plan or assess proposed activities in terms of consistency with the strategic plan. A number of states use an annual review of the strategic plan as the reference point for internal accountability. In a third group of states, the strategic planning process is either perfunctory, for compliance purposes, or nonexistent. Some councils believe it is not their charge to determine strategic direction but rather look to other agencies (usually state executive agencies or the legislature) for direction.

Several states that became involved in the strategic planning process at a relatively late date have used the process to address or correct earlier shortcomings. Many states have addressed tensions between those advocating action-oriented, problem-solving approaches and those advocating a long-term policy development agenda by including both approaches in their plans. Elements for the strategic plans were often derived from the Rural Academy for those states participating in that activity.

**Allocation or Reallocation of Resources**

One means to measure the effect of councils is through changes in the allocation or reallocation of resources in the agencies and organiza-
tions that participate on the councils. Although councils themselves have very limited resources, they may be able to mobilize or affect the use of resources by others in their attempt to improve rural areas. To date, the councils have had quite modest effects on the actual use of resources. When such effects occur, they appear to be correlated with age of the council and the degree to which the council is project-oriented. The first-generation councils have had more time to develop relations with agencies and thus greater opportunity to affect resource allocation decisions. In addition, the councils that are action-oriented are more likely to affect resource allocation decisions as a result of projects undertaken or promoted by the council.

Councils can affect resource allocation in a variety of ways. Many councils assume the role of broker while working with agencies in council activities. This role is frequently seen in council-sponsored projects but can occur indirectly through spin-offs of council activities. A number of councils have been asked to review grant proposals in programs run by other agencies and thus affect resource allocation decisions of those agencies. In one case, a council actually administers a grant program for another agency (New Mexico). In another case, an agency created a new pilot program as result of learning about a particular problem in a council meeting (Texas).

The councils affect resource allocation in other, more subtle ways. A substantial number of examples have been found where agencies have started cooperating, opening the possibility of some reallocation of resources, after being brought together through the council. In these instances, the role of the council is not that of a broker, but rather the council provides a forum for agencies to interact. In addition, there are a significant number of examples where agencies assume responsibility for council functions, such as maintaining databases. These functions may coincide with ongoing agency functions, but nevertheless represent instances of their own resources for council activities. Finally, many agencies use councils as a means to discuss and promote their programs.

Most councils adopted a needs assessment exercise as they were formed. This step, recommended by federal officials, appears to have been a useful confidence building activity for councils. There was little evidence that the first round of needs assessment/inventories produced any notable results on subsequent council activities or on agencies. However, councils that display an ongoing concern with gaps/needs have produced some interesting results, particularly in those councils that
place a high priority on local communities. Meetings in local communities have been useful for informing state officials and agencies about problems of rural communities. Problems of local communities have helped establish work agendas for several councils (for example, in Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, and North Carolina).

Visibility and Awareness of Rural Development Issues

Another potential outcome of councils is raising the visibility and awareness of rural issues in a state. On this measure, the councils have had very limited independent effect. In several states, visibility of the issues had already been established, as a result of the nature of the economy of the state (as in the plains states). A number of councils depend on state agencies or gubernatorial leadership for generating visibility about the issue. A few councils have adopted a low profile in their endeavors so as not to impinge on leadership roles of other agencies. The nonpartisanship posture taken by several councils may reinforce a low-profile orientation. It may also be the case that increasing the visibility and awareness of rural issues in a state will become a priority for councils once they have consolidated their institutional base; for the present, however, this is a low priority.

Redefinition of Rural Policy

The state rural development councils have, for the most part, not yet attempted to become involved in rural policy development in their states, much less attempted to redefine rural policy. The constraints on becoming active in policy development range from the prohibition against lobbying activities by federal employees to not wanting to infringe on the prerogatives of agencies or government officials. These constraints are substantial and councils may never become effective in this role.

The question of redefining rural policy, in the sense of broadening the definition beyond concerns of agriculture development, has been moot for most of the councils. It appears in virtually all states; the transition from the traditional agriculture-oriented policy to a broader definition has been made without much assistance from the councils. Even in the Plains states, where agriculture development is central to rural development, a sophisticated understanding of policy issues exists indepen-
dent of council efforts. Nevertheless, many individuals participating in
council activities report that they have a broader perception on rural
issues as a result of their participation.

Level of Institutionalization of the Councils

Most of the council states that were studied had past experiences
with initiatives that originated in Washington, D.C., and were skeptical
of what they saw as a common pattern around these efforts: the tendency
for initiatives to be short-lived, lasting only as long as a particular official
or administration was in office. Indeed, several of the states were reluc-
tant to invest in the organization of a council until they had fairly clear
signals that the Bush initiative would be embraced (at least in some
form) by the Clinton administration.

Despite this, several states were able to organize councils around
existing state activity. In at least one case (North Carolina), the council
was effectively grafted onto the governor’s program. The experience in
other states suggested that, even if federal monies would disappear, the
institution would become a part of the state apparatus. Efforts have been
made in the state of Washington to codify the council through state leg-
islation. States have varied in the extent to which they have acted on an
assumption that the councils will be permanent bodies. Some have
behaved as temporary organizations, chosen to assume a low visibility
posture within the state, to presume that the federal funds are likely to
be time limited, and have tended to spin off activities to other groups
(some of which may have been created through the council).

Perhaps the most important aspect of the federal funding occurs
through the support for staff and administrative support. Given the tight
budget crunch in a number of the states, it is not at all clear whether
funds would be made available to pay for the support of a coordinating
function. Such support would likely depend on the ability of the council
to increase the visibility of the rural development issue within the state.

Variables and Outcomes: Patterns or Randomness?

Looking at this range of outcomes, a clear set of attributes does not
emerge that seems to be associated with particular outcomes. This is not
surprising, given the variability within the states. What appears to have
facilitated the activity of the council in one state can surface as a blocking attribute in another. In addition, the sixteen states that have been studied represent three different generations of activity in the initiative.

This discussion includes attention to a number of variables that have emerged during this study: the impact of past and ongoing efforts in the state, generation differences between councils, membership strategies, relationships with the local level, leadership patterns, agenda development, determinations of degree of visibility, and demographic characteristics of the state.

The Impact of Past and Ongoing Efforts in the State. States that had a heritage of efforts related to rural development prior to the establishment of the council clearly had some head start on the activity. This was particularly true of the second generation of states studied. The issues were known, people may have already been identified for participation, and some level of conversations may have already taken place that facilitated the process. A number of the states studied had participated in one of the CGPA Rural Academies and were able to use much of the work done for that effort in the early stages of the council process. However, the past efforts may not have always been a positive force. In some cases, these prior activities meant that turf was already established regarding rural development, and actors had staked out specific areas. If the council believed that changes should be made, it was difficult to unfreeze those expectations and begin with a new start.

Similarly, a close relationship between the council activity and that which was ongoing in the state had both positive and negative consequences. Close proximity to ongoing efforts (either through the council agenda or its physical location) usually meant that the council activity would be taken seriously by other actors. In those states where rural was already defined to include issues beyond those of farming and agriculture, the council did not have to invest in the education that was required to achieve that redefinition.

However, if the council was very close to the governor (or the lieutenant governor or the legislature), then it was difficult to differentiate the activity of the council from those efforts. While this closeness was productive in some states, such proximity might be viewed as a skewing of the council’s agenda (for example, in several states the councils chose to ignore certain issues because they were effectively told to stay away from them). Councils that were close to ongoing activity also were vul-
nerable to secondary effects from changes such as elections, budget issues, and state level reorganization.

Generation Differences between Councils. The three generations of councils studied clearly exhibited different characteristics as they engaged in the process. The first generation—the eight pilot states—largely had a trial-and-error approach to the effort both in terms of state level activities and in relationships with Washington, D.C.—based staff. These included Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington. The pilots indicate a mixed record in terms of outcomes and, as well, most had a pattern of ups and downs during the course of the four years they were in operation.

By contrast, the second generation of states studied (Iowa, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Vermont) appeared to have two attributes that distinguish them from the pilots. First, as a group they were much closer to their governor (or other state officials) than the earlier generation. As such, their agenda was more closely meshed with activity within the state and the membership of the council (and the executive committee) was more likely to include top officials than the first generation. One result of this was an early focus on substantive projects and the development of processes that would facilitate the projects. Second, this group of councils appears to have consciously learned from the experience of the pilots in terms of relationships with Washington, D.C., officials and, as a result, was able to "work the system" quite effectively. These states did not go through the protracted learning process experienced by the pilot states.

The third generation of states studied (New York, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming) had some difficulty getting started. Each had somewhat different reasons for these delays: some involved state-level political issues while others involved the adoption of a wait-and-see attitude toward the Clinton administration. As of mid-1994, none of these states had hired an executive director.

Membership Strategies. By definition, the concept of the five partners to be engaged in the council activity suggested that the groups would reach toward an inclusive membership strategy. A number of the councils further defined the partnership categories to include others as well (adding the education sector, and differentiating between for-profit and non-profit private sectors, and including state legislators). A few of the coun-
councils, however, attempted to define the membership in more exclusive terms. (The contrast of approaches is found between Texas, with 1,552 members, and South Carolina, with 53 hand-picked members.) Some of the Councils defined membership in terms of position within an agency or organization, others opened it up to individual interests.

The inclusive membership approach provides a way for the council to identify the breadth of issues involved in rural development and to involve relevant actors in the process. At the same time, the open-door policy of the council may mean that the agenda of the group is not stable; when new people come into the group, significant time is required to socialize them to the effort and also to give them an opportunity to reinvent the activity.

*Relationships with the Local Level.* During the first stages of the initiative, few of the original pilot councils emphasized the involvement of local officials or others who could serve as surrogates for local concerns. By 1993, however, both the original and new councils developed methods for reaching beyond state-level concerns to focus on rural communities. The challenge for the councils was to find ways to bridge state and local relationships without devolving authority to them or involving all the localities within the state. Most councils wanted to reach beyond the state capitol but to do so in a way that did not raise local expectations that the council could “solve” their immediate problems.

Three approaches were used to create these bridges: through membership on the council, through contacts with local groups (such as COGs, or RC&Ds who might be involved in the delivery of activities that were identified by the council), and through meetings held around the state that could help state and federal representatives understand the problems experienced by rural citizens. Representatives of local government, substate entities, community-based organizations, and statewide organizations representing local government (such as leagues of cities and associations of county officials) became members of many of the councils.

*Leadership Patterns.* Although the initial responsibility for the organization of the pilot councils was given to the Farmers Home Administration representative in the state, few of these officials remained in leadership roles in the councils. In part this occurred because of the depoliticization of the activities (the Farmers Home representative is a political
appointee). But it also was a part of a broader pattern of the absence of leadership by “traditional” rural actors, particularly those from USDA. Leadership in the councils rarely stayed with the same individuals; officer positions were rotated and new individuals were often brought into the organization to play leadership roles. Many councils appeared to search for individuals in leadership roles who could play a neutral broker role. In several instances, this meant that leadership came from representatives from the private sector or other groups that were not viewed as traditional rural actors.

*Agenda Development.* Councils frequently struggled to determine the dimensions of their agenda. By the end of the second year of the project, several of the pilot states focused on process issues to the exclusion of projects. Because the creation and development of a council required attention to process concerns (e.g., methods of communication, internal decision making protocols), this was not surprising. However, once past the developmental stage, there was pressure from members to reach toward project and substantive outcomes. Economic problems within states and political scrutiny made many members conscious of the need to justify their existence in project terms. The second-generation states were more conscious of the need to balance process and substance.

Councils also struggled with the time dimensions of their agenda. Some councils devised activities with very short time frames, concerned that they needed some “victories” to justify their operation. Other councils defined a longer-term agenda, focusing on more systemic problems of rural citizens. Still other councils decided that both dimensions were important and attempted to include both approaches in their strategies.

*Determinations of Degree of Visibility.* Councils differed in their determination of the degree of visibility that they would take within the state. Some councils sought a low profile approach, seeing their role as adviser or facilitator to others. These councils were not likely to receive much newspaper publicity but provided assistance to state and federal agencies (for example, some councils assisted the REA and the NEA in the establishment of project priorities). Other councils chose a more high-profile strategy, playing an active role in policy discussions, taking positions on state legislation, and vying with other actors for public attention.

*Demographic Characteristics of the State.* While geographical proximity does
not explain many of the similarities or differences between states, there
does appear to be a difference between the councils in small, rural states
and all other states. The councils were more important and visible in
small, homogeneous, and essentially rural states. Larger states with more
diversity in population (including tension between urban and rural sec-
tors) were less likely to invest heavily in council activity.

Impact on the Policy System

Change. This effort has operated in an environment characterized by
turbulence and constant change. Participants in the process cannot
assume that what works today will be effective tomorrow. Change comes
from multiple levels: the churning that occurs through the political envi-
ronment at both the national and state levels, the economy and (occasion-
ally) natural disasters and other unpleasant surprises (e.g., the
Midwest flood). It emerges from the idiosyncrasies of the individuals
who participate in such an effort. It requires policy designers to be mod-
est in their efforts.

Diversity. The Partnership provides evidence that it is possible to create a
policy design that acknowledges that “one size doesn’t fit all” and yet at
the same time provides the structure for a learning system where partici-
pants can learn from one another. The construct of the effort has
allowed states to respond differently, in ways that reflected the unique
characteristics of their state populations, institutions, and processes.
Many of the specific activities that took form in councils were developed
as a result of state-specific opportunities to share information, develop
common norms, and to create a sense of a collective enterprise.

Flexibility. Unlike most federal initiatives, the Partnership has worked to
institutionalize itself in nonrigid, nonbureaucratic ways. It has been
adaptable, has provided opportunities for participants to think in new
ways, and stimulated their receptivity to engage in new behaviors. While
a feature of the effort, flexibility is difficult to protect in traditional gov-
ernmental systems. As such, flexibility hangs as a slender thread in the
Partnership.

New Modes of Intergovernmental Relationships. The design of the Partner-
ship has provided an unusual opportunity to combine both bottom-up and top-down strategies. Unlike most intergovernmental forms (which choose between one or the other), this effort provided for legitimate vertical (federal, state, local) as well as horizontal (interagency, interorganizational) involvement.

**Collaboration.** The creation of an ethic of collaboration has been pervasive throughout the Partnership and has involved a wide array of constituent groups. It took several forms—it created forums that provided venues for communication between players and it moved into the creation of arenas that provided a setting for collaborative policy-making and implementation. Collaborative environments were found in the SRDCs as well as in Washington, D.C. While conflicts and disagreements continued in those settings, the Partnership provided a way for participants to manage their points of tension and to appreciate—if not always agree with—the perspectives of other players. Care was taken to avoid turf battles both in the states and in Washington.

**Process and Product.** The experience with the Partnership indicates that there is a close relationship between investment in process issues and the ability to move toward product outcomes. The complex environment that surrounds the effort makes it difficult to move into a simple task orientation. SRDCs, for example, provided a way for participants to change attitudes and identify problems that crossed traditional agency or organizational lines. Without investing in the development of the organizations, councils would not be able to reach toward specific product outcomes. At the same time, however, the focus on process issues sometimes made the creation of a product seem remote.

**Energy.** Despite the ups and downs of relationships and uncertainties surrounding the Partnership, participants in all aspects of the effort were willing to spend one of their scarcest resources—time and energy—on Partnership activities. The Partnership evokes unusually sustained and high levels of time and commitment from the participants. SRDC members and others invested heavily in the effort and were willing to fight for its continuation.