

# **REFLECTIONS ON RURAL AND NORTHERN POVERTY**

**PRESENTATION TO THE STANDING SENATE COMMITTEE  
ON AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY**

**MARCH 2007**

## **Rural Development Institute, Brandon University**

Brandon University established the Rural Development Institute in 1989 as an academic research centre and a leading source of information on issues affecting rural communities in Western Canada and elsewhere.



RDI functions as a not-for-profit research and development organization designed to promote, facilitate, coordinate, initiate and conduct multi-disciplinary academic and applied research on rural issues. The Institute provides an interface between academic research efforts and the community by acting as a conduit of rural research information and by facilitating community involvement in rural development. RDI projects are characterized by cooperative and collaborative efforts of multi-stakeholders.

The Institute has diverse research affiliations, and multiple community and government linkages related to its rural development mandate. RDI disseminates information to a variety of constituents and stakeholders and makes research information and results widely available to the public either in printed form or by means of public lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences.

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## **PRESENTATION TO THE STANDING SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY**

**STEINBACH, MB**

**MARCH 2007**

*Submitted to:*

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Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry  
Senate of Canada  
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## Executive Summary

The best solution to address poverty in rural and northern communities is to cultivate vibrant communities. The concepts of equity and justice underpin discussions about poverty, and those implications, in rural and northern communities. It is time to move beyond ‘fix-it’ solutions, toward a fundamental policy shift that reflects historic and systematic inequalities associated with residency in rural and northern communities. Manitoba presents a unique situation in that more than half of the province’s population resides within its capital city, Winnipeg, Manitoba. This creates policy and programming challenges; programmes designed to be implemented within an urban setting do not always translate into appropriate rural and northern policy goals. The health and vitality of rural and northern communities hinges on federal and provincial policy agendas that seek to alleviate inequity stemming from geography, demographic, social and economic differences, while encouraging sustainable community development. This submission speaks to projects undertaken by the Rural Development Institute and its partners related to community and regional development.

### Main Points:

- ❑ Diversity of landscape and demographics and the impact on availability and delivery of basic services in rural and northern communities.
- ❑ Measuring poverty and the use of economic indicators to understand regional variability. Social context is important; many rural and northern people may not describe themselves as residing in poverty.
- ❑ Barriers associated with entry into the work force. How does policy and programming foster the inclusion of Aboriginal people into the workforce? Are individuals able to pursue opportunities to obtain the skills set that will provide entry into the workforce?
- ❑ Educational opportunities, or the lack thereof, in rural and northern communities. Can youth attend high school at home, or do they have to leave their families and communities to pursue an education beyond grade 8? Are there adult educational opportunities available?
- ❑ Building community and regional capacity through community collaboration. The *Community Collaboration Project (CCP) Empowering Communities & Building Capacity* provides highlights of regional work being undertaken across Manitoba to address some of the challenges rural and northern residents face.
- ❑ Dialogue across communities, jurisdictional agencies and service providers, governments, and nongovernmental organizations to increase awareness and understanding, while focusing on generating possible solutions.
- ❑ Gender is an important factor. In all communities gender adds another dimension to the broader understanding of poverty and its implications.

## Recommendations for Action

The following recommendations have been compiled with consideration given to the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry's Interim Report (2006) findings and the Rural Development Institute's activities and projects in rural and northern communities. The concepts of equity and justice underpin the need for a fundamental policy shift in an effort to address poverty. The best solution to address poverty in rural and northern communities is to cultivate vibrant communities by:

1. Creating local employment opportunities, including access to jobs and access to job training, re-training and pre-employment supports, while recognizing the need to respect cultural and physical diversity. This recommendation illustrates the need for government to provide a policy framework that enables communities to generate local solutions and programmes, as well as build the capacity to implement programmes and deliver services locally.
2. Recognize barriers, such as inadequate housing, transportation, health and well-being services, childcare, educational and training opportunities, that inhibit individuals from exiting poverty. Provide a supportive environment, through policy and programme design, that reduces the barriers for those most at risk, reflecting differences associated with gender and personal circumstances.
3. Encouraging a community economic development (CED) approach through a policy framework that seeks to enhance community capacity. Policy formulation must reflect the need to build local organizational capacity; amongst others the Canadian CED Network (CCEDNET) has been a strong advocate for this position. Policy analysts must recognize the diversity that exists in rural and northern communities throughout Canada. To be effective, policy needs to meet the needs of rural and northern communities. Two examples of local capacity building in Manitoba are the Bayline Regional Round Table's Food Security Project and the Canadian Agricultural Skills Service program (CASS) that was adapted from the Parkland Community Futures Experienced Worker Pilot Project.
4. Ensuring federal, provincial and municipal governments work together collaboratively, rather than in isolation or against one another. Collaboration will foster substantive change; substantive change requires a cross-departmental and cross-jurisdictional cooperation. Rural and northern poverty is not solely the responsibility of a single level or department of government. All levels of government have a responsibility to address poverty. Different levels of government or departments may take the lead at different times regarding different issues, but ultimately must work collaboratively to foster change and alleviate poverty in rural and northern communities.

## Introduction

More than half of Manitoba's population lives within Winnipeg's city limits. The effects of this demographic split are felt throughout the province. Manitoba is the sixth largest province in Canada; the diversity of landscape includes: prairies, Canadian Shield, forest, arctic tundra, and arctic marine (Welsted, Everitt, & Stadel, 1997). Distance and population density compound challenges that exist in rural and northern Manitoba. Culturally and historically Manitoba's residents vary as much, or more, than does its landscape. Respect for autonomy and difference in custom and need is vital.

A review of the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry's Interim Report (2006) provides examples that in many ways are similar to the plight of the rural and isolated poor in Manitoba. The focus of this submission is to provide a Manitoba perspective about those issues and speak to some of the work in which the Rural Development Institute (RDI) has been involved. The Rural Development Institute has not been directly involved in the alleviation of poverty in rural and northern communities, but many activities undertaken by the Rural Development Institute encompass several of the issues confronted by those living in poverty. Much of the work undertaken by the Rural Development Institute directly involves community members and leaders, frequently working collaboratively with other communities, to seek common understanding and goals. This submission acknowledges and concurs with much of the work completed and spoken to in the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry's Interim Report (2006); the focus of this submission shall be to provide illustrative examples of projects that have been ongoing in an effort to build community and regional capacity.

Poverty can be defined in relative and absolute terms. Economic measures can be used to evaluate the cost of survival in absolute terms, but this does not lend itself to understanding what it means to individuals, and perhaps for groups of individuals in communities and regions, to live in poverty. Economic indicators often only reveal

regional disparities, rather than identify those living in poverty. Economic indicators may also fail to take the cost of living particular to an area into consideration (Manitoba Finance, 2005). Setting and social context, such as gender and ethnicity, are important factors in understanding the implications of living in poverty in Manitoba.

The cost of living in Manitoba has remained relatively low; however, many of the jobs available are low paying. Manitoba has the second-highest national rate of two-parent families living below the Low Income Cut-Offs (LICO); this is also the rate for single-parent families and for children living in families that fall below the LICO (Manitoba Finance, 2005). Manitoba officially recognizes that while the unemployment rate is low in the province, a number of issues exist. The workforce is aging and does not equally represent the province's population. Labour shortages exist, but there is a gap between skill levels and job availability. Manitoba's Aboriginal population is younger and faces significant barriers when seeking entry into the workforce (Salée, 2006). Greater inclusion of the Aboriginal population now and in the future is very important. Limited educational and employment opportunities exist outside of urban centres, as do a variety of social services that emotional well-being and health hinge upon, impacting the capacity to engage in the workforce (Salée, 2007; Service Canada, 2006).

According to 2001 census data there were 150,040 Aboriginal people in Manitoba or 13.6% of the total population. The birth rate among Aboriginal people is much higher than it is among non-Aboriginals; the Aboriginal population is very young compared to non-Aboriginals in the province. Manitoba has the lowest rate of school attendance among Aboriginal youth nationally (Service Canada, 2006). Aboriginal youth continue to be at a higher risk of coming into conflict with the justice system. Living conditions and access to necessary services continues to be unacceptable, especially in northern Manitoba.

Today the Government of Manitoba seeks to provide opportunities and incentives to encourage unemployed and under-employed individuals to become more meaningfully

engaged in the workforce. A system of penalizing individuals utilizing income assistance measures ended; social assistance programmes were extended to help ensure that people needing assistance could meet their basic needs, improving quality of life and their ability to seek employment (Manitoba Finance, 2005). However, this is certainly not to say that poverty in Manitoba has been adequately addressed. A holistic analysis should be used to address inequality linked to gender and ethnicity for all programme and policy initiatives as well as from a rural and northern perspective (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative, 2006; deGroot & MacKinnon, 2005; Kelly & Idehen, 2005). Manitoba's poverty rate remains among the highest in the country, but a series of positive steps have been taken. Measures to address poverty require the active support of all levels of government.

Access to services in rural and northern areas are far more limited than in urban areas. Many services are simply not available in rural and northern communities because of low population densities. Rural and northern individuals and families often have to travel great distances to access necessary services. In many northern communities, children can attend school only until grade 8. After grade 8 they must leave their home communities; the *Home Placement Program* places students in Thompson, Cranberry Portage, or Winnipeg depending on what the family chooses. The programme is coordinated out of Thompson and efforts are made to monitor and fulfill youth needs; however, youth are forced with making a very tough decision at an extremely young age if they wish to pursue an education. Youth are faced with loneliness, a lack of parental guidance and placement in large schools and communities that are very different from what they are used to (RDI, 2006a).

A key to addressing social problems and empowering individuals, especially women, is through education. However, a barrier confronted by many is limited access to childcare; reliable and affordable childcare will enable women to pursue educational and employment opportunities (Childcare Coalition of Manitoba, 2007; Rural Team Manitoba,



2006; Women's Enterprise Centre of Manitoba, 2005). Providing educational opportunities for youth and adults in rural and northern communities can be challenging. Sometimes access to continuing education is available online, such as through Brandon University's Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP) (Brandon University, 2003/2004; Community Futures Partners of Manitoba, 2007). Smaller scale programmes aimed at providing adult educational opportunities may not be available in all communities, depending on factors such as the availability of teachers, educational assistants and community computer/Internet access. Issues related to childcare services may also factor into the ability to partake in educational opportunities.

Accessing health and social services is complicated because of distance. Rural and northern poverty is often well hidden because of isolation. Services are simply not accessed because of the challenges associated with travel. Many northern communities have only limited transportation networks, and often no all-weather roads. Instead communities rely on rail, air and winter road access when available. It is sometimes impossible to even purchase groceries without leaving one's community. When possible itinerant service providers travel into communities on a limited basis, or services may be delivered electronically if the capacity exists. If the service cannot be brought to the individual in need and that individual does not own a vehicle or have the means to travel out of the community, he or she simply goes without.

Each community, and the challenges it faces, is unique. The diversity of landscape, culture and socio-economic status across rural and northern Manitoba creates policy challenges. Improved service delivery requires a fundamental shift away from traditional top-down mechanisms that determine and deliver basic services to the community. Today a community-driven or regional approach enables residents to become engaged in the process of decision-making and programme design. As Kelly (2006) states "the research clearly shows that the community benefits when its citizens are involved and connecting

with each other.... dialogue about the issues and policies under discussion results in better public policy. It results in policy that is effective, that accomplishes the intended purposes, and is more fully understood in the community" (p. 23). The Canadian Policy Research Networks provides several federal examples of a grass-roots approach encouraging public participation at the community level (CPRN, 2007). Northern and southern residents and communities do not experience poverty in the same ways. They may be similar in what they do without, how visible they are, or if they are accessing needed services, but they will encounter different barriers and challenges.

## **Regional Development**

Over the last number of years communities have recognized the need for local capacity to organize, act and sustain activities that contribute to their social, economic, and environmental well-being. Chaland and Downing (2003) define community economic development (CED) "as action by people locally to create economic opportunities and enhance social conditions in their communities on a sustainable and inclusive basis, particularly with those who are most disadvantaged" (p.13). Regional collaboration implies a fundamental ability of communities to act on their own behalf in networks seeking common goals. Policy and programmes need to be designed to enable communities to act, providing solutions that adequately address needs.

Communities collaborating together in community development processes can increase their capacity to improve quality of life, better manage change and sustain long-term well-being. The *Community Collaboration Project (CCP) Empowering Communities & Building Capacity* project provides opportunities for new forms of collaboration and governance. With access to the appropriate tools, resources and information, individuals living in rural and northern communities can engage in self-sustaining, informed, local decision-making and meaningful dialogue between and among communities, organizations

and governments. The CCP, as it evolved in Manitoba and Nunavut, is an operational example of these participatory processes. Initiated in 1999, the CCP was a collaborative arrangement between communities in four regions of Manitoba and the Kivalliq region of Nunavut, federal, provincial and territorial government departments and agencies, non-government organizations and the Rural Development Institute of Brandon University (RDI, 2006b).

## **The Manitoba/Nunavut Experience**

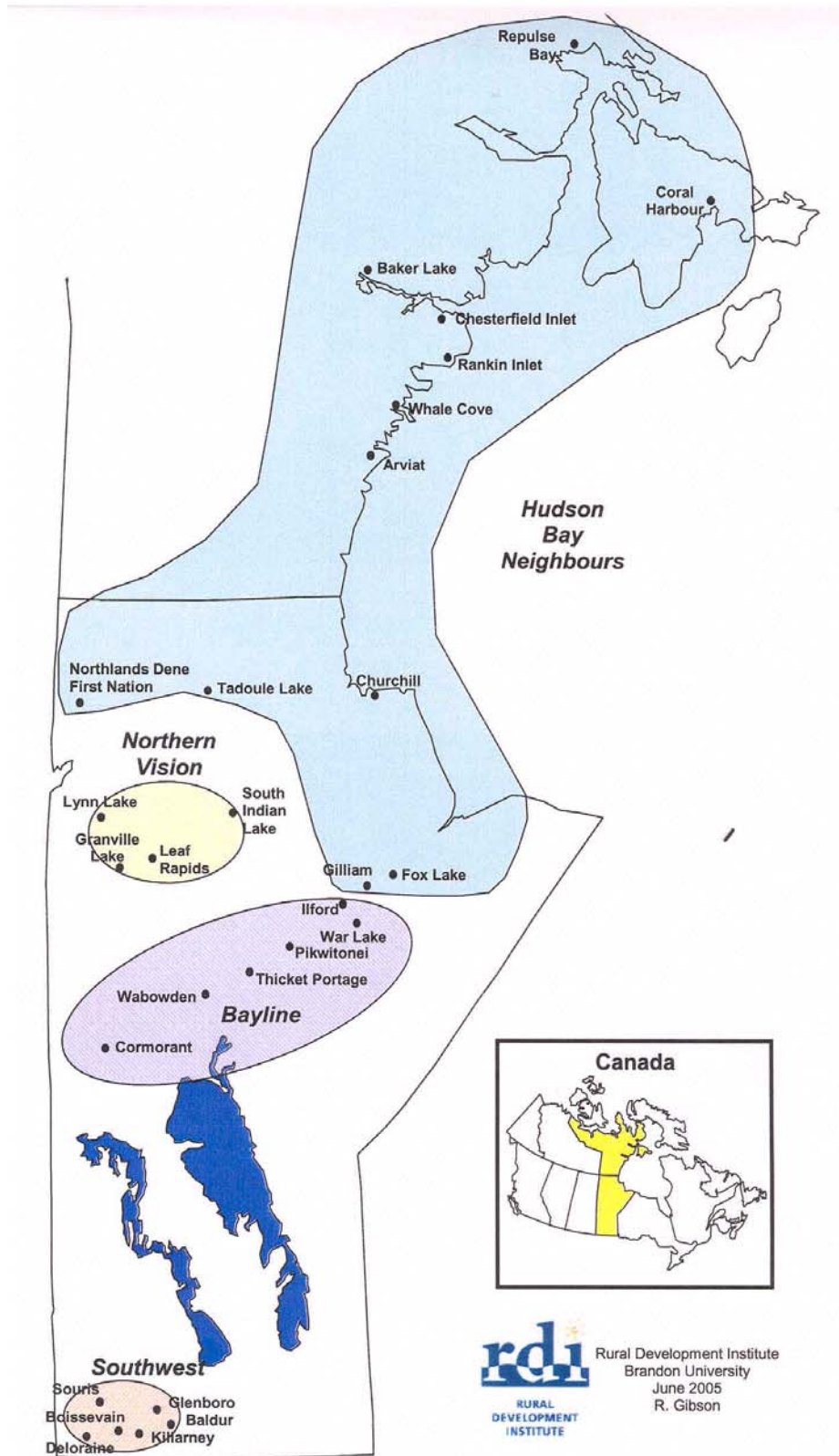
Twenty-six communities have organized into four Regional Round Tables (RRTs), three of which are in northern Manitoba and Nunavut with one in southwestern Manitoba. Nineteen of the communities are in southern and northern Manitoba, while seven communities of Nunavut's Kivalliq region joined the Hudson Bay Neighbours Regional Round Table.

- The *Northern Vision Regional Round Table* includes mining and aboriginal communities in northern Manitoba. The first RRT, they wish to strengthen the region by coordinating and implementing culturally sensitive goals common to all the communities.
- The *Southwest Regional Round Table*, in the agricultural region of southwestern Manitoba, has common goals of communication, community development, regional approaches and partnership building.
- The *Bayline Regional Round Table*, another northern Manitoba RRT that includes Aboriginal and First Nations communities, identified several areas of common concern. Foremost among them was health and access to health services. This RRT is leading a project on food security that includes the other RRTs.

- The *Hudson Bay Neighbours Regional Round Table* is a unique partnership among five northern Manitoba communities and seven communities in Nunavut. This RRT is dedicated to advancing issues of mutual concern to ensure a strong self-reliant region and self-sufficient communities. Their primary areas of focus include healthy communities, youth and technology, health and transportation.

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) is integral to the RRT evolution and capacity building CCP process. The RRTs used a variety of traditional and Internet-based tools as the process unfolded to meet the various community needs. As a result of the requirements of the community-based collaborative environment, unique knowledge management tools were developed by the Community Information Management Network (CIMnet) for use by the RRTs. Currently, all four RRTs are online with regional and community web sites. Without ICT connectivity individuals are unable to access a whole range of information and services; what occurs naturally in an urban setting, such as access to the Internet, is sometimes only available in rural and northern communities after a particular community has ‘made’ it happen and maintained connectivity (Annis, McNiven, & Curri, 2005; Cameron, Annis, & Everitt, 2005).

Outcomes of the CCP experience in Manitoba/Nunavut included: the building of relationships among CCP stakeholders; the development of trusting relationships and increased communication between the community members and government officials; leadership development with the RRTs and the steering committee; capacity building among the RRTs and steering committee members; exploration into new models of decision-making and governance among communities and governments; and the inclusion and adequate representation of women and youth in the RRT process (RD1b, 2006b).



**Regional Round Tables**

## Addressing Needs Collaboratively

The Rural Development Institute has partnered on a number of projects with the goal of identifying rural and northern needs and facilitating dialogue to encourage change. The following section provides examples of projects undertaken by communities, regional organizations and government departments and agencies as a means to build capacity and foster positive growth and change.

RRT experiences will be used to highlight some of the positive action and efforts undertaken at the community level in northern Manitoba to improve residents' quality of life. A local approach reflects needs and challenges regional in nature and scope. Only two of the six Bayline communities have all-weather road access. This impacts the ability of not only residents seeking needed services, but also for the appropriate agencies to deliver basic, essential services. An ongoing three-year project, *Community Collaboration to Improve Health Care Access of Northern Residents*, funded by the Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) and facilitated by the Rural Development Institute, works closely with the Bayline Regional Round Table partners. This project has involved interviews and focus groups with community members, service providers and government representatives involved in policy and programme design and implementation. Funding for this project also includes partners in Saskatchewan to encourage a comparative perspective not only cross-jurisdictionally within Manitoba, but also beyond the province.

Participants identified several key themes related to accessing health services from their communities, including: broad system-wide concerns; issues related to accessing services within communities; issues related to regional access; issues related to specialized services that are available only in southern, urban centres; and transportation issues. Health services are broadly defined to include a variety of needs encompassing more than medical services. Underpinning the concerns raised are confusion about what is available for

whom; a lack of information; privacy within very small, remote communities; long waiting periods; and the difficulty associated with accessing services because of transportation issues. Data gathered through this project underscores issues related to living in poverty, especially in the sense that large segments of the province's northern population simply do without. It may not be feasible to travel by rail or air to a regional or urban centre to seek services that are unavailable at home. These statistics are next to impossible to gather because you cannot be denied something if you have not asked for it. It could be argued that many residents simply do not seek or receive services and treatment they require. Definitional issues regarding the terminology used to describe health disparities and inequalities result in a lack of clarity that have practical implications on how to measure those differences and therefore seek appropriate policy initiatives (Braveman, 2006).

Collaboratively the Bayline Regional Round Table is seeking dialogue with Regional Health Authority representatives, and federal and provincial government representatives to share their concerns and work towards positive solutions that will enhance access to services and quality of life and care in remote northern communities. The Rural Development Institute will facilitate this dialogue; a series of workshops are planned for May 2007 to encourage change and capacity building.

The Bayline Regional Round Table has identified that food and food security are a primary concern within their member communities (Bayline Regional Round Table, 2007). Access to healthy foods is limited within communities in the North. Many communities only have small general stores with limited selection and hours of operation. Most residents rely on transportation out of their communities to obtain groceries and household products. Four of six Bayline communities cannot access fresh produce within their communities. To address issues related to access to healthy foods within communities, the RRT has promoted 'community gardening' and 'freezer' projects. Gardening tools,

including rototillers, have been purchased by the RRT and supplied to each community to develop community and private gardens.

In one Bayline community, partners worked closely with the local school to engage youth in the production of fresh produce; children started their own gardens at home. Volunteers visited the children and their garden weekly during the summer of 2006. This project fostered awareness not only among students, but also within families and throughout the community. The garden project provided benefits to not only the children, who learn valuable skills, but also to the families, who were provided healthy foods that may otherwise have been unavailable. In addition to gardening projects, a neighbouring community raised chickens as a means to locally provide the community with fresh poultry.

An additional component related to food security in the north as identified by the Bayline Regional Round Table is the capacity to properly store food. When transportation and access to health foods is limited, it becomes imperative to have the ability to shop in bulk and store food long-term. Many issues related to ‘bulk buying’ in regional centres have been addressed by the Bayline Regional Round Table, specifically related to transporting purchased goods. The BRRT worked with Via Rail to enable residents to transport their goods on the train even when their number of packages exceeds a passenger’s allocated amount. The freezer project helps residents in need purchase freezers to store foods, either purchased in bulk or obtained through hunting and gardening. The Northern Healthy Foods Initiative funded project research and administration, but the BRRT makes the purchases and necessary transportation arrangements. Payment plans are arranged with Social Assistance and Band payroll. So far twenty-two freezers have been placed with recipients. The project was highly valued by partners and residents as a mechanism to improve food security and quality of life. This project is ongoing, and funding and administrative mechanisms are being developed. At this time the BRRT is



lobbying Social Assistance to designate freezers as an ‘essential appliance’ so that appropriate provisions can be made so individuals can pay for their freezers, continuously re-investing in and expanding the project so that more northern residents may benefit.

Multiple groups have facilitated community and multi-community collaborations to address many of the issues evident in rural and northern communities. Community Futures Manitoba (formerly known as Community Futures Partners of Manitoba) provides a broad flexible mandate making priorities for action that reflect the needs of communities: such as training or educational opportunities and small business micro-loans (Community Futures Manitoba, 2007). The Canadian Agricultural Skills Service programme (CASS) was adapted from the Parkland Community Futures Experienced Worker Pilot Project that won the 2003 Ministers Award for Excellence and Innovation. This programme helps individuals remain connected to their communities and farms by providing employment training, counselling, assistance with farm transition, and small business development. This programme receives support from provincial and federal governments (Manitoba Agriculture Food and Rural Initiatives, 2007). Rural Team Manitoba is another example of cooperation of federal and provincial departments/agencies working together to address rural and northern community priorities (Rural Team Manitoba, 2007).

## Recommendations for Action

The following recommendations have been compiled with consideration given to the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry's Interim Report (2006) findings and the Rural Development Institute's activities and projects in rural and northern communities. The concepts of equity and justice underpin the need for a fundamental policy shift in an effort to address poverty. The best solution to address poverty in rural and northern communities is to cultivate vibrant communities by:

1. Creating local employment opportunities, including access to jobs and access to job training, re-training and pre-employment supports, while recognizing the need to respect cultural and physical diversity. This recommendation illustrates the need for government to provide a policy framework that enables communities to generate local solutions and programmes, as well as build the capacity to implement programmes and deliver services locally.
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Canadian Agricultural Skills Service program (CASS) that was adapted from the Parkland Community Futures Experienced Worker Pilot Project.

4. Ensuring federal, provincial and municipal governments work together collaboratively, rather than in isolation or against one another. Collaboration will foster substantive change; substantive change requires a cross-departmental and cross-jurisdictional cooperation. Rural and northern poverty is not solely the responsibility of a single level or department of government. All levels of government have a responsibility to address poverty. Different levels of government or departments may take the lead at different times regarding different issues, but ultimately must work collaboratively to foster change and alleviate poverty in rural and northern communities.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The needs of rural and northern residents are complex and multi-faceted. Regional disparities, distance and demographics compound issues related to access and the delivery of services. As noted in the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry's Interim Report (2006) definitional issues related to 'rural' and 'poverty' do not lend to clarity of the issues or potential solutions. The experiences of the 'rural poor' are not well understood universally because of the diversity associated with rural and northern communities. There is no one-size-fits-all policy or programme. Instead we should continue to seek local and regional understanding of the issues and encourage tailor-made policies and programmes as creative solutions to addressing the needs of the rural poor. Efforts to build regional organizational capacity and foster grass-roots community development requires local involvement and knowledge.

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The role of the RDI Advisory Committee is to provide general advice and direction to the Institute on matters of rural concern. On a semi-annual basis the Committee meets to share information about issues of mutual interest in rural Manitoba and foster linkages with the constituencies they represent.