From the fringe to the mainstream:
Rural Action’s influence on sustainable development in Central Appalachia
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Introduction

On February 10, 2013, the Athens Messenger ran a lead story announcing that the non-profit Rural Action would be moving to new premises, a renovation of the mine office of Johnson Brothers Coal Company, closed in 1948. The significance of this is that Rural Action’s own history in SE Ohio is intricately linked to that of coal mining and its environmental impacts, as well as to the social consequences of the boom and bust cycles of an economy driven by industrial demand for the fossil fuels embedded in Appalachia: first coal, then oil, and now shale gas. Occupying this physical space is symbolic of Rural Action’s persistence as a champion of a different kind of economic development: locally owned, environmentally sustainable, contributing to resilient and “robust” communities. Spanning several decades, this case tells the story of Rural Action’s roots in citizen action, its evolution as a member-based non-profit promoting local community decision-making for rural revitalization, to its more recent alignment with Ford Foundation’s strategies for “wealth creation” for sustainable development. Promoting local food production systems, sustainable forestry, watershed restoration, environmental education, waste management, and education and advocacy on local energy issues, Rural Action has moved from the fringes to a position of influence, a central node in a network of local initiatives that are weaving a revitalized and sustainable economy.

Figure 1. Appalachia. Source: http://www.arc.gov/research/MapsofAppalachia.asp?MAP_ID=64
Located in Athens, Ohio, on the edge of Central Appalachia, Rural Action's geographic area of focus is concentrated in what is described as “one of the most ecologically and socially distressed regions of the country,” (RA 2012) as indicated in Figure 1 above. Despite alleviation of the extreme poverty levels noted in the 1960s, cyclical losses of jobs gained have been a feature of the region’s economic history (Gaventa, 1987). In the last recession beginning in 2008, history repeated itself again: By 2011, the Appalachian region had lost all jobs gained since 2000, with unemployment levels running as high as 11% in Central Appalachia (ARC, 2011)

As outlined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (2011):

> The region’s traditional industries such as mining, manufacturing, textiles, and paper and wood products have faced intense global competition and are in decline. Population outmigration is among the worst in the nation, and there is continuing concern about the decline in Appalachia’s “prime age” workforce—workers between the ages of 25 and 55. The Central Appalachian region in particular still battles economic distress, with concentrated areas of high poverty, unemployment, poor health, and severe educational disparities. (2011, p1)

It is in this context that Rural Action, among several like-minded partners in the region, has written a different economic story for the region’s future, one that builds and preserves, rather than extracts and depletes, the stock of the region’s wealth:

> Rural Action works with our communities to understand the potential of our assets and begin preparing for this new future. We connect informal leaders with innovation, building a stronger region from the grassroots. We create safe places where people from all walks of life can celebrate living here and participate in its renewal. (Strategic Plan, 2013-2017, p1)

**Rural Action’s roots in citizen action**

Citizen action to address poverty in the region is at the root of Rural Action’s history. The Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and resistance to the Vietnam War had fuelled the politicization and activism of a new generation, including the founders of Rural Action. Rallying around demands for social change, civil society organizations sprang up offering practical strategies to address poverty and injustice, the legal pressure points to leverage, and the “bottom-up” organizing that could rally broad coalitions of interest. Significantly, Athens was where President Johnson gave his speech on the “War on Poverty” in 1964, a program that had resulted in new funding for social and legal services as well as grassroots community action. In parallel to the successful overseas volunteer Peace Corps program launched by President Kennedy, a domestic VISTA program had been launched under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, allowing young university graduates to cut their teeth on community development anti-poverty
programs. Many of these young men and women would go on to play an important role in Rural Action’s future.\(^1\)

It was when this funding for social and legal services was cut back under the Reagan administration that 5 individuals, including the future first director of Rural Action, together felt compelled to combat these measures. Jon Sowash and Carol Kuhre describe a “poor people’s” rally held in Athens that mobilized 5000 people by contacting “every food stamp office and anti-poverty program in the region”. At the rally, everyone was asked to drop $1 in a basket, providing the start-up funds for what came to be known as the Appalachian Ohio Public Interest Campaign (AOPIC), an affiliate of the Ohio Public Interest Campaign, but disassociated from what was perceived to be its urban bias. AOPIC began to “fight tooth and nail against the huge roll backs of federal funding of benefits for poor people.” Tapping into expertise in activism elsewhere in urban and rural centres\(^2\), visits were arranged for community members and AOPIC volunteers alike to learn techniques for adult education and community mobilization. What followed was a period of intense activity focusing on economic and social rights as well as confronting the environmental damage wreaked by long wall and strip mining, or by polluting incinerators and landfills. AOPIC’s approach was to support spontaneous citizen organizing that was already taking place. Citizens Organizing Against Long wall mining (COAL), for example, was challenging the use of a new mining technique that caused subsidence and interfered with aquifers on which farms depended for their water supply. AOPIC supported COAL’s bid to change the laws that waived the responsibility of mining companies to provide compensation for this damage. Local leaders– all women – were provided with basic organizing tools to raise public awareness through a public deliberation process recently mandated by the EPA but, until then, rarely implemented. The weakness of government officials in the face of the power of mining interests, and the tenacity of AOPIC to cut through this impasse is illustrated by Sowash:

> The first thing we did was to demand to go down the mine. Government officials didn’t know what to do or what was expected of them. They didn’t even know if they could come with us. The companies disputed whether or not the government had the right to regulate underground at all.

After many protests and meetings, AOPIC had to strategize to turn the state government (under pressure from the Federal government) into an ally and move compromise between AOPIC and the mining company in AOPIC’s favour. The compromise in this case was to permit mining, but to enforce the right to compensation, a decision that eventually spread nationally. In the following years, AOPIC continued to force the state government to take regulations seriously, assisted by those insiders who were ashamed of government’s inaction and passed on information to help AOPIC’s cause. AOPIC’S


\(^2\) Urban activism in major cities provided some inspiration, though the rural context presented unique challenges. Particularly influential during this period was the Highlander Center in Tennessee, which was dealing with similar problems of poverty and environmental degradation.
success in challenging powerful interests in the mining sector, negotiating with different camps in the public sector, and finally influencing national public policy laid the bedrock of credibility on which RA would later build.

In 1989, frustrated with the minimal benefits of the relationship with OPIC, the leadership of AOPIC decided to break away, renaming the organization the AOPI Centre. However, an already overstretched staff found the additional burden of fundraising without connection to the OPIC network to be untenable: “We can’t run on bake sales.” Also, by 1990 AOPIC found that the affiliated citizen groups that they had supported in their fledging years or collaborated with were now competing for the same pool of funds or suffering burn-out themselves. It became clear that grassroots organizations fighting social and environmental injustice were – for various reasons – unable to provide a vision for an integrated and sustainable economic future. After lengthy consultations in which the closure of AOPIC was seriously considered, a 4 month planning process was set in motion to give those people deeply entrenched in single issue campaigns a chance to articulate their own ideas about what a sustainable economy would look like. From there groups began to network, forming committees to work out the details of the new vision. These committees were diverse: sustainable agriculture, arts and heritage, economic development, education, energy, forests, health, housing, human needs, recycling and pesticide reform. Committee membership was diverse as well, the idea being to bring together interested parties from local communities, government, and academia to exchange ideas from different vantage points (Rice and Kuhre, 2002).

While these small gatherings shaped and drove the work, larger public forums were organized to bring local citizens, government officials and academics to the table. Rarely, however, did these events attract low income participants. To address this, a series of meetings was launched with the aim of reaching out to low income participants, deliberately demystifying the language about sustainability, and generating ideas from them about what “healthy communities” could look like. In 1991, at the end of this extensive 3 year process of local consultation, an integrated “Strategy for Rural Renewal” was produced. Following the adoption of this new direction, Carol Kuhre and Michelle Decker stepped in, essentially as volunteers, to help launch the new effort. Established now as Rural Action, AOPIC had transformed itself from a resistance organization to a development organization, seeking to articulate, in Thomas Berry’s words, “a new story to live by.”

**Rural Action as development organization: Rural revitalization and community building**

Associated with this shift was a transformation in the strategy for rural revitalization. Influential at this time were the ideas of John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann at North Western University in Chicago and their work on Asset-Based Community Development. These ideas would become the basis for Rural Action’s work during this phase:

Contrary to earlier approaches to rural development in Appalachia, such as the War on Poverty of the 1960s, which were focused on the political, social and economic
An asset-based approach to community development combines three key features that would frame Rural Action’s work going forward. First, it prioritizes community-building by drawing attention to the skills, talents and undervalued assets of all community members, and nurturing the leadership capacity to mobilize these for mutual support and regeneration. In this sense, as Rice and Kuhre (2002) point out, the approach nurtures the deep and strong democracy advocated by political theorist Benjamin Barber, and acknowledges the centrality of community as a driver of positive change as well as an end in itself. Second, considering the full range of assets accessible to a community, an asset-based approach encourages the community to consider appropriate courses of action for livelihoods over which people can achieve some measure of control rather than remaining vulnerable to the swings of a globalized economy, or to an industrial structure in which ownership of the means of production is in the hands of the few. Third, an asset-based approach not only shines the light on undervalued assets, but also requires their protection, renewal, and rebuilding if livelihoods are to be sustained. Taken together, these different features share strong similarities with the different components of Ford Foundation’s “wealth creation framework” adopted in more recent times.

Throughout the 1990s, these features translated into Rural Action’s three signature initiatives under its Rural Renewal Strategy: The Sustainable Communities Initiative, The Sustainable Economies Initiative and the Sustainable Environment Initiative. The Sustainable Communities Initiative concentrated on building local leadership and building community through self-organizing around specific projects. There was training in leadership, in asset based community development skills such as asset mapping and strategic planning, and grant writing skills. There was a focus on creative expression through storytelling and employing art as a starting point for community development activities. In eight different communities, for example, the Community Murals project stimulated a collective remembering of survival through past struggles and of past achievement, and then invited an imagining of what might be:

Community based art has always flourished in situations where people struggle for expression...The people of Appalachia Ohio have similar sentiments: outrage at the industrial pillage of their environment, sadness over the loss of jobs and high poverty rates, pride in their past, and hopes and dreams for the future of their children, schools, communities and region (Kuhre, 2001).

The Sustainable Economies Initiative, departing from the experience of rural Appalachia as a place from which resources were extracted and depleted, encouraged “a new way of looking at the creation of wealth...[with strategies] to keep more local dollars local, use resources sustainably, and increase local ownership” (RA 2001, cited by Rice and Kuhre, 2002). Starting with ReUse industries to transform waste into an economic asset, Rural Action then ventured into “The Good Food Direct project”, an early adopter of the concept of Community Supported Agriculture, and “The Sustainable Forest Economies...
project” focusing on medicinal Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). Finally, the Sustainable Environments Initiative took on the gargantuan task of reclaiming land and streams damaged by subsidence and acidification caused by the coal extraction industry. Since 1994 several watershed restoration schemes have achieved success, undaunted by the skepticism of local authorities (Rice and Kuhre, 2002).

This list of accomplishments warrants explanation because none could have occurred without the determination to overcome the challenges of engaging meaningfully with dispersed rural low-income communities and the confidence to collaborate with sometimes-unlikely partners to get the job done. It took leadership, financial resources, and the mobilization of volunteers and supporters. Consider again, the early years of Rural Action. Carol Kuhre, Rural Action’s first director, had returned from the Philippines where she had witnessed effective community organizing strategies first hand. VISTA provided a dedicated volunteer force to support Rural Action and community initiatives; since 1994, 363 have been employed as VISTAs, and XX as AmeriCorps volunteers in Rural Action’s programs (Rural Action fact sheet, date). An important feature of the early VISTA programs was the requirement that volunteers be enlisted to the program who were local community members themselves, an entry point and knowledge source that facilitated the community organizing work from the outset. Many of these volunteers, either local or from other parts of the USA, went on to support Rural Action’s work in later life as unpaid volunteers, as supporters, or as employees. As another strategy to engage local support, Rural Action encouraged committees to form comprised of local volunteers who would spread the word in their various circles of influence and contribute to Rural Action’s programs. Most significantly, Rural Action had established itself as a membership based organization, a feature that is a source of continued strength and legitimacy today. Describing it as the “Church-congregation” model of citizen organizing, Carol Kuhre explains the importance of face-to-face interaction and relationship building that had been ingrained in her, leading her to insist on a member-based model for Rural Action. Members are required to pay a small subscription, instilling a sense of responsibility for the achievement of RA’s mission. Some of its members are now sufficiently well-established financially to be major donors and to provide links to the kind of partnerships necessary to achieve enduring impact. At the time of writing (2013), RA now has a membership of just under 1000, and an operating budget of $1.8million, 20% of which comes from membership dues and donations.

The Monday Creek Restoration project illustrates this confluence of sound strategies well. In Bernard’s (2010) account he describes the challenge the project took on: The 116 mile watershed at the centre of the Hocking Valley’s once prosperous coal field was pockmarked by deep mines and surface operations that finally closed in the 1970s: “Household refuse, mine wastes and tailings, gob piles, rotting structures above and underground and acidic water impoundments bespeak disruptions of a century of mining” (2010:47). Due to the inundation of old mines and resultant acidification, waters ran orange and turquoise with pH levels below 4.5, “a threshold below which no fish species and few macro-

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3 VISTA was brought under the Americorps program in 1993, under the Clinton Administration, and was renamed “Americorps*VISTA”
invertebrates can withstand” (p48). The streams in the watershed were dead, and declared “unrecoverable” by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the mid-1990s. However, the scientific case for restoration advanced by hydrogeologists Mary Stoeurzt and Mary Borch combined with Rural Action’s capacity to raise funds, engage local communities, mobilize volunteers, and collaborate with key strategic partners would prove this statement wrong. By 1997, 3 years into the project, 14 partners were involved including “other non-profits, a university and technical college, and several state and federal agencies, including the US Forest Service which in Wayne National Forest manages 38% of the watershed” (p50). The watershed had been mapped so that progress could be tracked, volunteers had cleared surface debris, trees had been planted, school children had begun to talk of “fishable and swimmable streams,” and proposals had been written to fund the continuation of this work. By 2008, 10 years and $6 million later, the Monday Creek Restoration Project had become a model for other initiatives attempting to clean-up the pollution left in the wake of coal mining in the Eastern Coal Lands. Life has begun to return to the streams, astonishing long-time residents; newly built trails invite tourists to a destination that once repelled them.

To this sweeping summary, Scott Miller, currently a member of Rural Action’s Board and the Director of a research center at Ohio University, adds some of the texture of the real struggles, strategies, and even serendipity that occurred. A VISTA volunteer himself on the Monday Creek Restoration Project, he describes his role as “emissary” to local communities, attending local City Council meetings to persuade local citizens and their elected representatives of the value of this work: “Often they were not interested, or didn’t believe it would work, or thought the money could be better spent.” He describes how the project coordinator, Mike Steinmaus, later spent many years working and living in the local community, establishing the relationships of trust that an outsider has to forge. He hung out with local residents; he became a volunteer fire fighter. At that time -- in the late 90’s -- fortuitously, the Clinton administration was offering federal support for engaging local stakeholders in a discussion about broad-based watershed restoration. Stakeholders included local citizens, local communities, State and Federal agencies, universities, nonprofit organizations, philanthropic organizations, and more. In this work the State and Federal agencies became the enabler of the slow but steady “generative” work of community organizing necessary for technical solutions to be applied, with Rural Action acting as the steward of this participation and collaborative effort. As Scott Miller says, “It’s a mix of science, participatory democracy and passion and commitment.”

The Monday Creek success has since been replicated in other watersheds, and as of 2013 RA has 14 volunteers from an AmeriCorps program dedicated to stream restoration and building local environmental stewardship (RA brochure, 2013) Local engagement can be a challenge in the short term, where people are pre-occupied with finding work, but the persistence has paid off with visible and mapped results. At the core of “rural revitalization” is that spark that lights only after layers of cynicism laid down over years of experience have been lifted. That spark is evident in the email from a longtime resident, saying “In the 1960s the creek was dead, now in 2012 there are blue gill small mouth bass in the river. If you need me to do anything, call me.”
From demonstrating alternatives to influencing the mainstream

Before, we were on the fringe of the mainstream. Now the mainstream comes to us
(Scott Miller, January 17, 2013)

Being “on the fringe of the mainstream” has several connotations. It can suggest “being on the outside looking in”, but more commonly it implies living an alternative lifestyle to the mainstream, working around the edges where one can operate without interference and quietly influence by example. It is by its very nature experimental and innovative, sometimes radically so, or perceived to be so “out there” as to be beyond serious consideration. When the roots of Rural Action and other like-minded organizations were taking hold in the 1970s, ideas about sustainability and alternative economies bordered on that radical edge, often inspired by counter-cultural activism and idealism of people from outside Appalachia who came to settle in and around Athens. Regionally, according to Rural Action’s current director, Michelle Decker, this activism merged with Appalachian resistance, organizing and popular education, stemming from the influence of the Highlander Center in Tennessee: “These outsiders found some special soil I which to grow.”

Over time, this fringe activity has grown and matured into successful social and economic enterprises, and there is now greater receptivity to these ideas in the mainstream. The intractability of poverty, the instability of social inequality, and a growing concern about the effects of climate change have started to raise doubts about the wisdom of solutions tied to the prevailing industrial model. The optimism of post-war growth, refueled in boom periods, has given way to concerns about the limits to growth and to a certain degree of paralysis about what to do to prevent a crisis. To shift direction requires testing new strategies that will localize economies and develop resilience, even as another prospect for boom-and-bust economic growth presents itself in the form of shale gas extraction. The challenge for RA and its allies has been to strengthen innovations for a sustainable economy and expand their reach, in anticipation of a global economy built upon locally sustainable production systems⁴ (Rifkin, 2011; the Economist, 2012).

Building such social and economic resilience is at the heart of Rural Action’s current work with Ford Foundation’s Wealth Creation in Rural Communities Initiative, a partnership that has been running formally since 2010. The premise of this approach is that sustainable development requires attention to growth and synergy among multiple forms of capital. These range from tangible forms of capital such as financial capital, built capital (infrastructure), and natural capital (water, soil, biodiversity) to less tangible forms such as the networks and relationships of trust that constitute “social capital”, the individual capital of skills and talents, creative “intellectual capital”, and the influence inherent in “political capital”. For the growth of locally owned and sustained economies, all these 7 forms of wealth need to be built or protected, even as they are mobilized. The vehicle for building such wealth is the

⁴ Rifkin and the Economist describe this as “The Third Industrial Revolution.”
value chain, adding value locally by stimulating the multiplier effect of local consumption and ensuring that wealth is added when local value is exported. Importantly, the value chain identifies where low income people can become actors taking up new opportunities in production, small business and services. Also, value chains recognize that transactions are not just about money and products but also about transforming relationships in the market place, with producers, traders, aggregators, processors, and consumers relying on mutual solidarity for the system to work. The importance of all seven forms of wealth in these transactional spaces provides the framework for an integrated approach to local development issues. Most importantly, the measurement of outcomes is in terms of the stock of wealth created rather than in terms of flow metrics such as the number of jobs created or dollars of income generated (Ratner and Markley, forthcoming). In many respects, the wealth creation framework complements Rural Action’s asset-based philosophy and builds on existing RA initiatives. Nevertheless, the collaboration with Ford focused RA’s attention on specific value chains, modeling the networks required at local and regional levels to build sustainable wealth over the longer term. Less prominent has been attention to place-based community building in rural areas, although now this is a more deliberate feature of its programs going forward. Demonstrating this, Rural Action’s theory of change for 2013-2017 draws clear links between working with place-based and interest-based communities to build local knowledge of sustainable development practices and opportunities, and the motivation of people in those communities to get engaged with the issues and to take action to protect, and control their assets (RA, January 2013).

The sectors that lent themselves to value chain development were RA’s programs in sustainable forestry, waste and recycling, and local food systems:

1. Wealth from Forests (WFF) incorporating a Green and Regionally Oriented (GRO) program, in which sustainable forest management practices are encouraged for a continuous supply of certified wood products for local manufacture to meet demand in urban markets. Also included are the cultivation and processing of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), such as ginseng.
2. Waste diversion and recycling through infrastructure and systems built in its Zero Waste Economy initiative
3. Sustainable Agriculture through local food systems, linking local food producers to local wholesale and retail markets and institutional consumers.

Complementary to the development of value chains is the development of “networks for wealth creation... webs of organizations that are developing institutions and collective strategies that build local assets and create wealth that stays local” (Castelloe et al., 2011). Rural Action, for example, is a member of the Central Appalachian Forestry Alliance (CAFA), a multi-state collaboration established in 2009 “to increase certified sustainable forest management, strengthen value chains from forest floor to showroom floor, explore new powerful value streams, and build the capacity of key organizations and enterprises in the region (CAFA brochure, n.d.) It is also a member of the Central Appalachian Network (CAN), a collaboration of 6 anchor organizations in the region focused on sustainable development.
These members share ideas of what works, whether it is technical methods of super-insulating local hoop houses to extend the growing season or innovations in financing, aggregation, processing, and distribution. Through research, evaluation, convenings, and technical assistance associated with these innovations, CAN is well placed to form a regional strategy to accelerate the food systems sector and potentially other sectors as well (Castelloe et al; Decker, pers. comm).

These formal networks are built on a base of linkages built between “economically isolated assets, producers and consumers to effective market demand at scale” (Ratner and Markley, 2013:1). These wealth creation programs have therefore complemented Rural Action’s strong local level initiatives to build on local assets, but have streamlined this work into a coherent vision for the regional economy. The context in which this is taking place provides both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, CAN and CAFA claim that despite the economic and environmental distress in much of the Central Appalachian region, “the land still offers Central Appalachians a path towards a diversified, more robust economy owned by the people who live there” (CAN and CAFA, n.d.). Yet the situation in 2013 is highly unpredictable. As Kyle O’Keefe at RA warns:

Shale gas is a tidal wave. Right now, we are watching the tide recede before the tsunami crashes.

The expectation of the shale gas boom has driven land prices up; some people can sell or lease land and pay off a lifetime of debt; some see an opportunity to reinvest in agriculture or forestry; some see taxation of the industry or corporate responsibility “dividends” redirected to Community Foundations and non-profits; some hold out for increased business and employment opportunities in construction and energy sectors. On the other hand, collateral environmental damage remains a threat and a disincentive to invest: Concerns are being raised about forest losses for pipe-line construction, the contamination of water supplies through hydraulic fracturing or “fracking”, noxious wastewater impoundments, and increased truck traffic. All of these concerns have prompted Rural Action’s “Look before you Lease” program that combines the expertise of four organizations to give advice to landowners on the alternatives to leasing land and the possible environmental consequences of doing so.

While Obama has promised “a supply of natural gas that can last America a hundred years” (State of Union address, 2012, quoted in Hond, 2012), more recent detractors suggest that these predictions may be seriously overblown (see Globe and Mail, 2013). In any case, experience of other boom and bust cycles suggest that Rural Action should continue to encourage long-term investment for a robust land-based local economy and for renewable energy solutions at scale. The message being promoted is that a value chain approach to wealth creation offers the thread of resilience that can endure through uncertainties and disparities in the benefits of economic upturns. This message is best illustrated by a brief account of these programs themselves.
Wealth From Forests (WFF): In order to add value to timber products that were historically exported from this region as raw commodities, RA is developing a value chain for locally produced and FSC-certified wood products as illustrated in the Green and Regionally Oriented (GRO) wood products value chain below (Figure 2). Acting as a broker for “green” products, it boosts domestic demand in high-end building markets in major cities in, or adjacent to, the Appalachian region, by providing “education, information, product sourcing, billing and service” to urban buyers willing to pay the premium for such products. On the supply side, Rural Action has focused on Forest Stewardship Council certification assistance for “chain of custody” (an inventory control mechanism that tracks certified wood products from harvest to point of sale) but also promotes non-certified local wood products because these offer a reduced carbon footprint to markets of interest. In the first 2 years of the program, wood products from this program yielded $300,000 in sales, and the program is now ready to be launched as WoodRight Forest Products LLC in early 2013, with an innovative “B corps” structure (RA report to WCIR, 2013).

Figure 2: Green and Regionally Oriented woodproducts (GRO) Value Chain (Source: Rural Action)

Certified B corporations enjoy the tax benefits of a non-profit but operate with a business structure and the liability protection of a Limited Liability Company (LLC). In this hybrid form, they must have a social or environmental mission and commit to a fiduciary responsibility to look after the interests of its workers, the broader community and the environment as well as to its shareholders. They are similar in structure to “Community Interest Companies” in the UK. (The Economist, January 7, 2012)
With more capacity, a strategy for the future is to connect value chain allies across several states through CAFA, building a collaborative regional network that can advance the kind of market development necessary for this green building sector to thrive at scale.

The development of the GRO value chain is complemented by other sustainable forestry initiatives. For example, the supply of timber products requires the promotion of silviculture and better forest management for the long-term sustainability of a quality forest. When only 4% of family forest owners in the state have management plans there is considerable work to be done. The work of Rural Action in this sector combines an imperative to demonstrate some short-term economic gain with encouraging landowners to become active managers of their forest, especially in those forest areas that have suffered neglect. In 2008, Rural Action’s Call before You Cut campaign was an initial step towards active forest management, a campaign that has since been institutionalized by the Division of Forestry in Ohio and five other states. Since the establishment of the WFF program, a carbon offset program has been also been introduced as an incentive for landowners to practice sustainable forest management.

More recently, alternative strategies to earn an income from non-timber forest products have been promoted, with outreach to 300 landowners logged so far this year (annual figure required). As Scott Bagley, a consultant on low impact forestry, explains:

> We see economic development around NTFPs as an entry point to promote holistic forest management which combines NTFPs with some timber removal. The income the landowners earn is just extra; it is not a get-rich-quick fix or a full-time income strategy [as it was with intensive and unsustainable timber harvests of the past].

Initial uptake was mainly among “come-from-aways” who settled in the region in the last 30 years, and often had off-farm income. Low-income but land “rich” residents who may have had a history of foraging and “high grading” of relatively low-grade forest for basic survival have been harder to attract, although this is now changing. Also, there is now a noticeable movement back to the land by “two generations removed” from those who migrated to find work elsewhere. These returnees are seeing more opportunity in forest-land, especially given the rise in ginseng prices since the 1990s. An income stream from these and other botanicals, as well as local charcoal and firewood sales, offers a reason to invest and protect, even as the temptation to lease or sell land in anticipation of high land prices for shale gas development becomes a threat. A “Look before you Lease” program by Rural Action is designed to help landowners navigate these choices.

**Zero Waste Initiative:** In 2010, Rural Action’s newest program, the Appalachia Ohio Zero Waste Initiative, was launched. It combines the community development expertise of Rural Action with the

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6 Wild-simulated ginseng, promoted by Rural Action, now fetches between $500-$1000/lb (as compared to $80-$100/lb for woods-cultivated ginseng, at the time of writing, according to Rural Action), and is mostly exported to Asian markets.
7 According to RA staff, land prices in some counties have risen from 500/acre to 2-3,000/acre in 25 years, and in areas where land is being sold to shale gas companies, the price can be as high as $10,000/acre
technical support of Ohio University’s Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs and its experience working with local government. Despite the difference in size, resources and culture of these two organizations, they share fundamental objectives. Says Scott Miller of the Voinovich School (and also an RA Board member):

RA studies an issue like no other organization I have ever seen. It gets into the bowels of legislation...That resonates with the university.

RA’s work with waste grew out of citizen-led pressure to galvanize public sector responsibility in the 1990s, at a time of public sector downsizing and increased expectations for private sector solutions. Now, the Wealth Creation Framework Initiative (WCFI) “creates the umbrella and frames the work” by envisioning waste as integral to a closed loop economy, where waste is fed back into the system as a resource that can generate employment, or a resource that can be reused and recycled.

From the outset, it was local citizens who demanded waste reduction and recovery services, and local citizens whose experience of poverty cast a different light on the value of “waste.” As recounted in one interview:

For them, these were not junk piles, they were resource piles. Many of them were tinkers. There was a value built into the culture in transforming “junk” into something useful. They were children of the depression.

The ZWI initiative can be traced back to a sheltered housing project which had a modest recycling enterprise as an income generating venture. When this closed a few of the organizers got together as a RA committee to establish a county recycling day. Over time this shielded the community from trash handling companies taking over the service and charging higher prices. The 2500 participants in this recycling program, all with influence as “the voting public,” were kept informed through a regular newsletter, and this network became the force behind demand for a public recycling service. Once the public sector responded to pressure and took over this service, there was less citizen engagement in the issue; so the committee started to work on issues at the next level. First in line were the hazardous waste dumps.

At every turn, waste was a contentious issue. Initially there was resistance by local government councilors to address hazardous waste dumping, and frustration on Rural Action’s part. Subsequently an incentive to collaborate was provided when government policy shifted, encouraging local neighbourhood solutions and ideas aimed to “take public ideas to the private sector.” RA secured funding to run a series of Waste to Wealth seminars in three counties, demonstrating the possibilities for creating “economic development out of the wealth stream.” A new vision began to emerge, with the language of “waste sheds” and “resource recovery parks.” With the dumpsters for recycling in place in rural communities, a public utility company provided the recycling service but with high levels of
community support and engagement. Over and over again, dealing with local district authorities revealed how politicized “waste” could be, as private companies vied for trash handling/waste recovery licenses.

For the ZWI partner organizations, a zero waste economy has 3 core elements: public education; improved infrastructure; and viable business ventures. To this end, the ZWI has hosted a public awareness campaign on waste reduction and recycling hosted in every school district; secured investment to upgrade infrastructure, such as balers to replace the 1960s machinery still in operation in Athens; and nurtured innovation in new technologies that can translate into new business ventures. For example, engineering students designed a portable conveyer belt to sort recyclables at big public events which contributed to a 95% waste diversion rate at a recent music festival (Decker, personal communication, June10). Other innovations in the pipeline are viable systems for the collection, aggregation, and resale of recyclables; the promotion of cottage art and craft industries using recyclables; the secondary processing of plastic into pellets; housing deconstruction and materials recovery; aggregating and bagging compost; and the marketing of all these activities.

According to staff at the Voinovitch School, “Ideas aren’t the problem. What is lacking is the ability to turn an idea into a sustainable business.” Demand for creative financing is increasing, especially given the limited supply of equity investment capital for this scale of operation. However, the motivation to invest lies in the potential of this sector to create jobs for both low-skilled and high-skilled labor, in an environment where the demand for services to the shale gas sector is likely to expand, including services for waste recovery and recycling and environmental services, and where stronger regulations about domestic and industrial recycling could generate the raw material for a thriving waste recovery sector. To this end, in the last 3 years, ZWI has worked with 7 businesses and drafted a feasibility plan to expand the infrastructure for enterprises that are using waste in innovative, sustainable ways.

**Sustainable Agriculture:** Rural Action is a core player among many in SE Ohio striving to shake dependence on the global food system and stimulate the local economy by shifting local consumption to locally grown and processed produce.

Current estimates are that approximately 97% of food consumed is derived from the global food system, the remaining 3% being sourced locally. Only when the market share derived from local food increases to 10% will it be viable for full-time, middle-sized farmers to reinvest and for the local food system to be self-sustaining. This may take 20 years to achieve, but is “do-able.” To claim that economic space, the value chain needs strengthening and deepening. Thus far, on the supply side, services have been established to promote and train local growers in this sector, and innovations developed to extend the growing season. There are incubators for local food processing businesses in two locations,
opportunities for direct sales through new farmers markets for retail or through a new produce auction for wholesale, and other mechanisms for aggregation, distribution, and marketing, advertised through RA’s “Ohio Foodshed,” an information service linking consumers to local food producers. Consumer education through initiatives such as Consumer Supported Agriculture subscriptions and the “30 Mile Meal” program promoted by USDA have contributed to stronger public awareness of the value of local food and to higher demand from local restaurants and other local institutions such as the University and the Hocking College’s Culinary Institute. Educational programs in the schools and school food programs guarantee that the shifts in food preferences continue into the next generation. Thus, the un-finished story of the development of a value chain for a local food system in SE Ohio provides insight into the collaborative strategies required to create demand, support a sustainable supply and to influence government policy for the structures necessary for these ventures to thrive.

The story of the produce auction at Chesterhill is an example of the essential elements of these collaborative and transactional relationships. In 2003, Rural Action was funded by the Appalachian Rural Commission to explore ways of increasing wholesale farmer sales to institutions. That same year Jean and Marvin Konkle retired to Chesterhill, moving from Bainbridge Ohio where a produce auction was thriving. They met Rural Action business development staff and decided to become members. At the time, Tom Redfern at Rural Action was working on how to aggregate produce to supply potential institutional buyers. After introducing the Konkles to OU extension, he soon became the glue that supported and connected the Konkles to RA networks as they started enlisting support for the idea of a produce auction in Chesterhill for and with local producers, especially the local Amish community. By 2005 an auction property had been purchased and the first auction held. By 2007 Ohio University dining services began to purchase produce, and by 2009 the local foods website linking producers to consumers was launched (The Voinovitch School, 2012; Tom Redfern interview).

Produce auctions are not new to Ohio, but since 2004 they have doubled in number (from 6 to 12) and have become significant economic drivers in their respective regions. What is interesting about Chesterhill is that 60-70% of the produce is from the Amish community (they represent 30-40% of the producers selling at auction). Their reluctance to travel to retail markets means they rely on the market coming to them. At auction, the biggest consumers are entrepreneurs who use the auction to build up their own supplies for retail sale at both informal and formal farmers markets settings. As Tom Redfern points out “It’s an easy entry entrepreneurship opportunity, especially in food desert areas. They can buy and resell”. For large institutional buyers, the range, quality, and volume of produce make it worth their while to purchase directly at auction. In the last 3 years, the uptake of these opportunities at Chesterhill has resulted in a 40% growth in sales.

To increase supply, local producers have tapped into training and educational opportunities offered through the CAN network which in the case of South East Ohio has been provided by Rural Action and AceNet. Innovative technologies such as plastic hoop houses to extend the growing season have been rapidly adopted, for example; and some established producers have been provided with grants to train a
new generation of producers. One of these, Green Edge Farms, will soon become a worker-owned business, starting with 12-14 employees. Peer-to-peer learning opportunities have also been promoted as well as membership in associations that can influence policy at state levels (The Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, for example). Partners in the value chain see the cumulative benefits of these activities:

All these are pieces of wealth. We have earned a lot of social capital at the State level, we have contributed to physical capital in the form of the produce auction, and the peer-to-peer learning has enhanced our intellectual capital.

It’s not just wealth creation, but health creation.

The question now is how to achieve that 10% slice of local food consumption. According to Tom Redfern, the pattern in Ohio has been the expansion in the number of small “hobby” farms and large farms. To sustain the growth of a local food system, middle-sized farmers (grossing $500,000-1 million) are needed to seed a local economy through taxation, savings, and consumption. As one resident pointed out: “50 years ago, this was dairy country. People could send kids to college with a 500-acre farm or 50 cows.” With horticulture, more production can be done with less acreage. However, while the self-insured Amish are a special case, for other producers a major obstacle to the expansion of production is health insurance. Many farmers are supported by a spouse with health insurance coverage from their off-farm employment. Universal coverage as urged under the Obama administration or a cooperative insurance scheme are possible solutions going forward, but have as yet to come to fruition. According to the director of ACEnet, without such changes, the danger is that local food systems will operate as a “parallel universe” rather than hit the mainstream, and food produced (by farmers for sale, or by gardeners for domestic consumption) will be one of several strategies for “income patching,” rather than a viable livelihood by itself.

If local food consumption is 3% of total food consumption then, according to Redfern, this is an indication of the degree to which people understand the value chain. The goal of 10% is as much about the degree to which people value others in the value chain and help each other grow, and the degree to which the general public values the local food system. The more inclusive the system, the denser the network, and the more exponentially it can grow.

A network of collaborative action

Understanding the value chain as a collaborative venture among market partners complements the principles of network theory behind the cross-sector collaboration that has expanded over the past 30 years, in which Rural Action is a primary node. A pioneering collaboration of multiple institutional partners and volunteers was the mobilization of support for the Monday Creek Watershed restoration project in the early 1990s. In this case and the other collaborations that followed, “web-weaving” has
been tight in some places and looser in others for historical and practical reasons, but the basis of these relationships is mutuality – “organizations not only reference each other but showcase each other.” By way of illustration, Rural Action’s work in sustainable agriculture is tightly woven with the work of The Appalachian Centre for Economic Networks (ACEnet), an incubator for small-scale food processing enterprises in two locations (Athens and Nelsonville) and a core player in the development of a local food system. Like the early leadership of Rural Action, ACEnet’s program director was involved in AOPIC in the 1980s, specifically addressing the environmental consequences of the “wild cat” oil and gas boom of the period. She was involved in the formation of the early working groups and committees addressing sustainability at the time when asset-based approaches to community economic development were coming to the fore, spearheaded by RA’s leadership. She was a founding member of CASA, a worker-owned restaurant and bar, still a vibrant fixture in downtown Athens. Since the early 1990s she has been on the Rural Action board and both organizations became the anchors of CAN when it was formed in 1992. The original founder of ACEnet, June Holley, was herself a champion of “network weaving” and has since become a national thought leader in network development (see Krebs and Holley, 2002-6). These origins have played out in a dense network that permits synergy rather than competition between network partners whether at points of aggregation, processing, and distribution in the “inner circle” of the local foods value chain itself or in its “outer circle” of facilitators and supporters. The complexity and fluidity of this network is remarkable. As ACEnet’s director points out, “We work with hundreds of partners. Networks are not tidy!”

As an “entrepreneurial non-profit,” ACEnet has forged partnerships with the public sector, with private philanthropy, and with private investment to develop its capital infrastructure, its programs, and its market partnerships. With respect to the public sector, the cultural divide between the idea of “sustainable agriculture” and the industrial models of the 1990s (tobacco, for example) has been bridged to the point where ACEnet is now hired to run training courses for extension staff across the state on best practices in the local food value chain to support its “Know Your Farmer, Know your Food” and “30 mile meal” programs. Private sector assistance in the form of in-kind services such as technical assistance and equipment donation for its business incubators has been acquired, and there is increased recognition by grocery stores of the role of ACEnet as an intermediary, educating and preparing producers to enter their wholesale food systems. With its primary market partners, including institutions such as Hocking College and Ohio State University and local restaurants, ACEnet provides the business counseling or “brokerage” to help them identify long-term sources of supply, and primes the market through consumer education and branding, such as its “Food We Love.”

With the support of the Ford Foundation in the last four years, CAN has been able to strengthen its capacity as a vehicle by which partners in the network can align their roles, avoid duplication, and leverage funding. Within the subregion of SE Ohio, ACEnet and Rural Action are the “connective tissue,” animating the systemic change by developing a culture of cooperation -- the “social capital” in wealth creation terms.
A language for rethinking the economy

Ford Foundation’s wealth creation framework has provided a language for the component parts of a sustainable economy, and has placed importance on elements that are not typically considered in conventional economic development models. Thus, there are conversations about place-based assets, about unlocking individual capital and generating the intellectual capital for family-friendly farming to pass down from one generation to the next, or for new models of worker-owned farming to take off. Social capital in the networks and value chains has resulted from a focus on relationship building among market partners. Natural assets for a land based economy are discussed in terms of the ability to continuously restore and generate productivity and reduce dependence on the global food system. New equipment for producers, buyers and distributors in the value chain are the “built capital” and the degree to which as a coordinated group the market partners have been able to influence at policy level represents “political capital”.

Challenges

The challenges that RA is currently facing are not intractable, but will test the innovative capacity of local partners in the SE Ohio subregion and external champions. For example, there is uncertainty about the next Farm Bill and whether it will continue to support sustainable agriculture initiatives through USDA. Similarly, while the previous state administration actively supported small and micro-business development, farm to school funding and the development of farmers markets, the current administration could do much more to reassure this sector of ongoing support. Financial investment at all stages of the value chain is needed, but particularly for small enterprises who are ineligible for most private equity investment and therefore require innovative equity financing rather than more loan products. As another form of investment, public health care or publicly supported health insurance would lower the financial risk of full-time self-employment. Without it, some creative local solutions must be found.

Moving onwards, outwards, and upwards: Innovating, consolidating experience, and breaking the systems barrier

As outlined earlier in this case, the impetus to construct a different story for Central Appalachia can be traced back to citizen activism of the 1970s. Reaction to the social and environmental damage wreaked by the mining industry has since evolved into an elaborate strategy to garner support for a very different economic paradigm: a locally sustainable economy. Whether consciously or not, this strategy has followed a time honored process:

In a nutshell, you keep pointing at the anomalies and failures of the old paradigm; you keep speaking louder and with assurance from the new paradigm in places of public

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9 More challenges to be inserted here
visibility and power. You don’t waste time with reactionaries; rather you work with active change agents and with the vast middle ground of people who are open-minded. (Meadows, 1999)

“Speaking louder and with assurance...in places of public visibility and power”, Rural Action has been forthright in its commitment to social and economic change, with action directed at institutions of power in government and in the private sector. This can be described as “vertical citizenship” where citizens demand accountability from state institutions. At the same time, “working with active change agents and with the vast middle ground of people who are open minded,” Rural Action has generated “horizontal citizenship”, in the sense of a culture of collaboration to work in the public’s best interests, first in the community-building work of the 1990s and 2000s, and then in the nurturing of solidarity in the network of partners constructing local food and sustainable forestry value chains, or a zero waste economy. RA addresses the systemic changes required now through regulatory, legislative and policy change while also ensuring sustained support for such changes through education. For example, RA has worked with school children on environmental education, a program that has earned RA recognition for its impact on the science grades of Grade 8 students in the Trimble area but has also encouraged a responsibility for ecological stewardship into the next generation. Similarly, tastes and preferences for local foods are being shaped in its “food to schools” program, supported by Hocking College whose culinary arts students use schools as a lab for food preparation work so that local foods can be prepared more cost-effectively. These synergies – promoting local foods in schools, providing real world experience of culinary arts students, enlarging market share of local foods – are a testament to the strength of networks and to the links in the value chain.

Holding the basic values of Rural Action and its allies intact over the years is what its current director, Michelle Decker, describes as an “arc of continuity” in its leadership and membership. The energy dedicated to face-to-face relationships in order to build such a movement is one of the important insights of this story, as well as the deliberate effort to nurture a culture of broad-based leadership. Several examples serve to illustrate this point. First, many of the active citizen leaders of the 1980s went on to take leadership roles in the non-profit sector, or were early innovators and adopters of sustainable development practices. They have continued to support each other’s work through ever-deepening networks. In turn, these leaders have nurtured a new generation of leaders, and this has been made possible by federally supported volunteer programs. For example, the current director worked with the founding director in the early 1990s, then built experience and expertise elsewhere before returning to take the helm. At the same time, the volunteer programs (VISTA, followed by AmeriCorps) have attracted a cadre of talent, developing leadership skills at a young age, with many volunteers going on to take leadership roles in RA or in partner organizations. Another brand of volunteer leadership has been nurtured through the membership of Rural Action. With close to 1000 members, RA potentially reaches 650 households directly. With membership (and the sense of ownership that comes with a small subscription) comes an expectation that members will activate their own communities towards the
goals of sustainable development, whether this is through fundraising, communication, volunteering, or creating projects in their own communities.

Leadership of RA has been highly entrepreneurial, matching core values with opportunities, seeing the potential of innovative ideas even before the implementation of existing ideas is by no means exhausted. In recent years, the opportunity to work with Ford on the wealth creation framework, for example, was a perfect fit in many respects, but putting these ideas into practice meant letting go of some previous work, streamlining the organization to channel energy effectively, and attracting funding to this innovative work as a “venture” rather than a project, with the risks that that entails.

To maintain broad-based support, however, requires leadership that can steer a consistent course amidst diverse and sometimes shifting opinion. There is no question that there are tough choices to be made. Rural Action, for example, has to reconcile its commitment to poverty alleviation with the controversy over job opportunities and economic gains promised by the shale gas boom. From an environmental standpoint, some members would prefer a policy against shale gas to be articulated, while others see prospects for shaping the new economy through ensuring that the supply, construction, and waste/recycling sectors, and employment in environmental monitoring are locally designed and owned. While a new language of local entrepreneurship is replacing that of resistance, at what point does that push the boundaries of tolerance and compromise too far? At what point are the long-term goals of an environmentally sustainable economy at odds with the immediate imperative of alleviating poverty through job creation and the redistributive potential of taxes raised from the next boom?

Modeling an alternative economic paradigm is RA’s innovation: Testing new forms of economic production through value chains that pass the test of broad-based wealth creation. This means not only demonstrating economic viability but also showing the economic wealth building proceeds in tandem with increasing the stock of social, natural, intellectual, and other capitals. The generative community-building work in areas of economic and environmental distress, on which its earlier successes and legitimacy were built, is an integral part of this innovation, though perhaps more challenging given the decline in donor interest in supporting this kind of cost-intensive work. In the 1990s, Rural Action was able to access funding to stimulate community-initiated activity using asset-based community development (ABCD) philosophy and tools. The VISTA volunteer program augmented this work. Nevertheless the intention is for the ABCD fundamentals to carry through into current work in a “marriage” with Ford Foundation’s wealth creation initiative “working with local people in communities of place (towns, villages and townships) and interest (forestry, food systems, recycling, environmental education, watershed restoration, energy.” (Strategic Plan, 2013-7: 6) as illustrated below:
As indicated earlier, the “do-able” time frame for achieving the shift to 10% local food consumption in the SA program is estimated at 20 years. Developing sustainable forestry may take longer. All programs will be impacted directly in this period by the shale gas industry and also by the pace of climate change impacts already being felt “frequent and intense storms, droughts, floods, and migrating pests and diseases” (SP, 2013-7).

Shale gas development is our region’s newest extractive practice, echoing in many ways the extraction of the past but also operating at an unprecedented scale...There are many unknowns about the long terms effects...and it requires new information, broad coalitions, new organizing, and new policies. So far, communities have little voice in the process and its rapid rollout has given people, governments and institutions little time to prepare (SP, 2013-17: 4).

Given this new reality, offering a sustainable development pathway for development in the region means that Rural Action has to keep chipping away at strategies for systemic change through creating consumer demand for a different economic paradigm and the institutional uptake of these ideas. Consumer demand ranges from the purchasing preferences for fresh produce by all income groups to eating in restaurants serving local produce, through to the value placed on having clean streams in the back yard, recognizing the potential of growing ginseng within a long term low impact forest
management plan, and demanding waste recycling and effective waste disposal options that spin off employment opportunities. A significant step is the institutional uptake of these ideas in partnerships with Ohio University, Hocking College, government agencies, and institutional buyers of FSC-certified products. In many respects it is at these intersections that systemic change takes place, where the different cultures, values, and missions of organizations of differing levels of power and influence have to be reconciled.

A hard nut to crack will be systemic change at policy and regulatory levels, especially given the different state jurisdictions in the region. In some areas of across-state government policy, “asset-based” language is built in, especially in reference to the potential of the land-based economy. For continued policy impact, the ability of the CAN and CAFA networks to shift policy will depend on the ability of their members, including RA, to continue to use political capital to optimum effect, a capital that will grow as its networks deepen and consumer demand for the relocalization of the economy and environmental protection take hold. RA’s capacity to leverage funds once Ford Foundation support ends, and access to investment funds by local producers and entrepreneurs will rely not only on favourable federal and state policies but also on a shift from grant making to social investment as “the language of resistance gives way to the language of business.” Innovative financing strategies, such as crowdsourcing, for providing equity investment to small-scale operations are beginning to emerge, and the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) is currently working on the regulation of such on-line equity investing (Cortese, 2013). Similarly, health insurance would make a significant difference in mitigating the risks of entrepreneurs as well as indirectly raising income levels of those uninsured who are paying for health care. Obamacare’s promise to ensure that no one will be excluded from getting insurance, and everyone will have to get insurance is a new story unfolding (Hamblin, 2013).

Conclusion

Rural Action began as a citizen-led movement, challenging the power of large-scale industry to expropriate resources and leave poverty and environmental damage in its wake. Now members of Rural Action are juggling the possibilities of economic benefits from shale gas while simultaneously making the shift to an economy that is locally owned, environmentally sustainable, and “healthy” in every sense of the word. Here the master narrative is “opportunity in a new type of economy,” while maintaining “resilience” in the event of the collapse of extractive economic systems. Walking this fine line is seen as the best course of action in an uncertain world.

Given the importance of building networks that constitute broad coalitions for change, Rural Action’s roots and reputation in citizen action have been able to continue to spread and deepen, evolving into concrete strategies for fundamental economic change. Collaboration with organizations that together have shared the risk of innovation has been the hallmark of its success. As Kania and Kramer (2011) argue, “Large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination...[not] the isolated intervention of individual organizations.” Rural Action has demonstrated this, not only in the value
chains in which it plays a key brokering role but also in the networks in which it links to public and private sector allies, as illustrated in Figure below.

(Illustration: Rural Action in a network of SD organizations)

Undoubtedly, the arrival of the shale gas industry presents new challenges. The question for the coming years is how the history of organizing in these rural communities will feed public debate about the costs and benefits of deep fracturing for shale gas, and how to sustain a viable and economy that ensures environmental protection whether shale gas extraction continues or not.

Rural Action is conscious of its role as a lead innovator, while recognizing that people most affected by economic constraints may be the least able to grasp new opportunities. As Rural Action’s director, Michelle Decker, writes in an introduction to the Strategic Plan 2013-2018:

We believe in development that starts with the people most affected. We believe many solutions exist to our problems, but many communities are not prepared to take advantage of them and the business models and investment strategies we need for the future have not yet been built. But we have an amazing opportunity to do things differently and to create access to new opportunities.

In its membership there is energy and excitement to meet these new opportunities and sense of hard won legitimacy and credibility, as evident in a recent annual meeting

There was … strong community presence, very much the activist community but also Appalachian community. The superintendent of Trimble Schools .. talked about growing up in the community (Jacksonville, the town just below Trimble) and playing on coal slag piles and in orange creeks and not realizing those were not natural landforms until she was entering high school. She thanked us for working in the watershed... Then fracking came out ..a story by one of our speakers about being a child when the coal came and 26 wells went dry on his farm, and the lessons he learned (policy matters, place matters). What it did was to put the topic on the table and have us agree that we have to get together-- this is coming, our response can shape corporate behavior but just resisting won’t move the needle. (Pers.comm)

Resisting won’t move the needle. Rural Action will move the needle by demonstrating a pathway that offers local communities a stake in the ownership of local production systems; that protects and enhances the local environment; and builds a citizenry that can shape its economy and shape public debate on these issues.
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