SOCIAL COHESION AND THE RURAL COMMUNITY

Presented to the conference *Rural Canada: Moving Forward or Left Behind?*
Regina, November 22-24

P. Diaz, Sociology and Social Studies
R. Widdis, Geography
D. Gauthier, Canadian Plains Research Centre

The process of globalization and its desired and undesired changes are occurring at an unprecedented rate in many regions of the world. In this context, the quality of life of many social groups has been impacted by the dramatic economic changes of globalization. Governments and civil society organizations have found it difficult to ameliorate the impact of these global forces and, even less, to manage the uncertainties of the process. In many cases these governments and organizations have been the main supporters of the integration of the national economy to the global economy without assuming the social and environmental costs of that decision. In this context, public and private organizations have searched for those key dynamics that could bring quality of life to **globalized societies**.

Concerns about social cohesion, defined as one of the key dynamics in the restoration of quality of life, seem to be at the top of the policy agenda for many countries. Policy makers and researchers often use the concept as part of a package that includes related ideas, such as "civil society" and "social capital". Its history reminds us of the history of a similar concept that was also defined as a promoter of quality of life: **sustainable development**. Social cohesion is, however, an ambiguous concept and its use in policy-making is difficult as a result of its vagueness.

This paper is an exercise in clarifying social cohesion and outlining both its limitations and potential as a concept around which policy can be developed and as a research concept. The paper is part of a multidisciplinary research project that focuses on the issue of social cohesion in the rural communities of Saskatchewan. The main goal of this project is to support and enhance multidisciplinary social science research in the area of regional and rural community social cohesion. It addresses broad policy issues concerning social cohesion in the context of human adaptation to environmental, social and economic changes on the Prairies of Saskatchewan.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the development of the concept in the public agenda. After a brief explanation of the historical conditions that gave rise to recent concerns about social cohesion, discussion focuses on problems related to the definition of the concept, its applicability, and the relationship between social cohesion and the neo-liberal strategy of development. The second section deals

with the applicability of the concept to the rural community. Finally, the last section of the paper considers social cohesion and policy in the context of rural Saskatchewan.

1) The Rise of Social Cohesion in the Public Agenda

(a) Historical Considerations: Most experts agree that the current interest in social cohesion is part of a reaction to economic conditions related to the process of globalization. Since the 1970s, the restructuring of the world economy has created social, political and economic turbulence that has brought radical changes to the lives of people. This economic restructuring aimed at macroeconomic stabilization, structural adjustment, and the globalization of production and distribution has followed a strategy of development that is commonly called neo-liberal or neo-conservative. According to Collins (2000: 100), this strategy is characterized, first, by an increasing focus on economic growth in terms of the organization and direction of the path of development; second, a predominance of the free market as the main engine of development and in the allocation of resources; third, an increasing economic globalization achieved by moving barriers to the free flow of commodities in and out of countries and a growing integration to international markets; fourth, a privatization of economic resources, which has moved functions and assets from government to the private sector; and finally, a reduction of state activities, restraining its functions to the provision of infrastructure and law enforcement. In this perspective, **economic success** is defined by and limited to the annual rates of economic growth.

Although these policies have been generally successful in terms of specific economic indicators such as growth and reduction of inflation and account imbalances, they have failed to spread the benefits of economic development. Rather, it seems that the implementation of this neo-liberal strategy of development has resulted in drastic socioeconomic implications for large sectors of national populations. People in many countries have experienced rates of unemployment above historical national rates; a lack of job stability, salary reductions and loss of benefits as a result of the process of restructuration and rationalization of private and public corporations; and a more restricted access to basic services such as health and education as a result of new fiscal policies. They have also experienced the negative consequences of high rates of inflation; a more unequal distribution of income; and, in some cases, the deterioration of institutional forms of resistance, such as labour organizations (Jeannote, 2000).

The neo-liberal strategy of development seems to have repercussions beyond that of the economic well being of individuals. Social dimensions of decay such as the rise of crime, a decline in personal safety, the breakdown of families and communities, the risk of contracting diseases or illness (the mad cow disease is a good example), homelessness, and increasing negative attitudes towards immigrants are prevalent as well. No less relevant is the increasing deterioration of environmental conditions as a result of an over-emphasis on economic growth and the consideration of environmental costs as externalities. To a large extent, the process of globalization has taken us into what Beck

(1992, 1999) calls the **risk society** (1992), i.e., a society characterized by an increasing distribution of social and ecological **bad** rather than **goods**. In the past, industrial or pre-globalized society centered around the production and distribution of goods such as wealth, income, and formal employment (stable and permanent employment), while the present-day risk or globalized society is organized around the distribution of the costs and risks of socio-economic development. Current conditions seem to be characterized by uncertainty, pessimism, and a lack of trust in some of the most important institutions in society. In these terms, the protests against the meetings of the World Trade Organization should be understood in that context and not as a reaction of a few anarchists.

The implementation of this neo-liberal strategy of development has resulted in an aggravation of inequalities both within and between countries and deterioration in the quality of life of those who cannot profit from the strategy of development. Bessis argues that the globalization of the economy has been accompanied by a globalization of the social crisis, in which "exclusion and poverty have reached such high levels that they cannot be longer considered as simply accidental or residual phenomena" (1995: 11). This crisis could be characterized, in more abstract terms, as a dual process of marginalisation and concentration. Large sectors of the population have been marginalized from the profits generated by the new economic changes and from the certainty of stable occupations. This dual process has resulted in increasing levels of fear and uncertainty, where tolerance and compassion for others have been the losers and social exclusion, isolation and rejection have became predominant.

In these terms, it is not surprising that social cohesion has emerged as a major concern. There is an increasing awareness that development means more than simple economic growth and that the fruits of economic success should be more equally distributed. In this perspective, the issue of quality of life in general, and social cohesion in particular, is a relevant goal for national policy in many countries.

Social cohesion as a social issue has had a long history in the social sciences. A large number of social scientists, concerned with issues related to social order and social stability, have developed an array of explanations of this concept. Emile Durkheim, a classical sociologist, made social cohesion a central element in his explanation of the process of transformation of European societies, arguing that social solidarity is a fundamental issue for social development. Durkheim argued that the problems created by increasing division of labour required an **organic solidarity** based on mutual dependency. He thought that a perfect organic solidarity was difficult to attain since old disparities of wealth and power were incompatible with this organic solidarity, but that with the help of social scientists it was possible to resolve the problems and create the required social order (1964). Since then, the problems of social order and its associated concepts, such as social cohesion, social exclusion, integration and social capital have been major themes in sociology and other social sciences (Alaluf, 1999). Other social scientists, however, have approached the issue of social order from a different perspective. They have been more interested in explaining how societies characterized by tensions and contradictions remain together. For them social cohesion is an ideological phenomenon that promotes a **social order** that is not always just. Gramsci's concept of

hegemony and Althusser's discussion of **ideology** are good examples of this type of approach. The co-existence of these two approaches shows how social integration or cohesion could be analyzed from different perspectives that emphasize distinct consequences.

Social cohesion, as a policy issue and as a policy-oriented research concept, has a shorter history than in the social sciences. Jeannote, in her study about the development of the concept in Europe (2000), indicates that social cohesion became prominent in the policy agenda of several European organizations in the late 1980s. In the case of the European Union concerns about social cohesion emerged as early as 1987 during the elaboration of the *Single European Act.* The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development indicated its interest in social cohesion issues in 1996 and the Council of Europe integrated the concept into its agenda in the late 1990s. Other European organizations, such as the Commissariat general du Plan of the French government and the Club of Rome, have also expressed significant interest in the issue of social cohesion (Jenson: 1998).

(b) The Problem of Definition: One of life's great ironies is that it is often easier to define or identify what something is not as opposed to what something is. Social cohesion is one such thing. At the simplest level, we can say that social cohesion is the opposite of what has interchangeably been called **social deterioration** or **social disintegration,** i.e., a state of being that readily brings to mind notions such as increasing polarization, political disenchantment, social exclusion and institutional collapse. Persistent levels of unemployment, income inequality and deteriorating public health are just three examples of structural fault lines that exist within society despite the optimistic picture painted by those in favour of economic and political policies aimed at encouraging the globalization of production and distribution. Yet focusing on its antithesis still does not enable us to come up with a working definition of social cohesion. And defining social cohesion as "not deterioration" or "not disintegration" is precarious because it may lead us into a functionalist trap which asserts that integration is cohesive but ignores the possibility of diverse, cohesive cultures. Yet it is fundamental for policy-making to develop a systematic understanding of the concept and of the phenomena that the concept addresses.

The ever-increasing body of literature both illuminates and obfuscates the subject. Thought-provoking ideas are presented but their diversity and complexity serve to remind us that there is no agreement about either the definition of social cohesion or its links to a number of related concepts such as sustainable development. A brief review of the literature bears testament to this diversity. Some see social cohesion as an outcome of shared values, activities and conditions that make **collective action** more effective. Others focus more on social cohesion as **perception**, viewing it as a social process that enables individuals to feel they belong to a group with which they share values that emphasize trust and solidarity. Still others connote social cohesion with **social capital**, a concept viewed interchangeably as a set of collective activities in which groups and individuals engage, the embeddedness of individuals and households in social networks, or as investment in institutions that support neighbourhood and community interaction

(Jenson, 1998: 26-27). Cohesiveness, it is argued, increases social capital because it involves collective action. What is common to these different definitions is the idea that social cohesion is a **process** whereby individuals and groups are included or excluded from participation in the wider society.

Durkheim argues that "social solidarity" was a moral phenomenon and, to this extent, open to different interpretations. Following the history of the concept in the social sciences, we could argue that social cohesion has the same characteristic. In her review of the literature, Jenson (1998) identifies several theoretical approaches in the social sciences that deal with social cohesion from perspectives that combine different understandings of society and conflict. She argues that some theoretical approaches identify social cohesion as a system of shared values and commitments taking place through institutional processes; while other theoretical traditions such as neoliberalism have emphasized social order as "an unintended but real benefit of the market and other individual transactions…(Thus)… a well functioning society is generated as a byproduct of private behaviours. Individual behaviour, especially in markets and voluntary associations, drives social order" (Ibid; 10). Accordingly, she identifies two broad camps in the literature according to the unit of analysis: one emphasizing a focus at the level of the individuals, and the other concentrating on the whole of society and the roles of structures and institutions. All these approaches tend to emphasize the idea of social order as the consequence of shared values more than group interests, of consensus more than conflict, and of social practices more than political action.

There is also another approach to social cohesion that rests on the argument that conflict is an intrinsic characteristic of society and that there are distinctive definitions of values and justice within its population. In these terms, the important question with regard to social cohesion is who decides what is just and what is fair? In this theoretical stream, social order is a necessity for those in positions of power. To the extent that large sectors of the population accepts as legitimate the unequal distribution of power, social cohesion exists. In these terms social order has the potential to be used to promote the goals and values of one group over those of another, legitimating unjust differences and inequalities. In other words, social cohesion exists in order to ensure social exclusion. Gramsci's argument about hegemony is an example of this approach. For Gramsci, a hegemonic class is one that has been able to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own, creating a unitary worldview that allows for a legitimation process (Hoare, 1971; Mouffe, 1979). He point outs that a process directed to legitimate subordination and domination is a "**bastard"** form of hegemony based on a passive consensus, while an hegemony which seeks to construct a social order based on a fair distribution of power should be seen as an "**expansive"** hegemony (Mouffe, 1979: 182).

Regina Berger-Schmitt, in her analysis of the concept, concludes that social cohesion as a concept should incorporate a double dimension: first, a concern with the reduction of inequalities and social exclusion, and second, a concern with the strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties (2000: 4). This provides the concept with both a prescriptive and a descriptive or analytical character, being both a goal and a concept that could be used in the empirical analysis of social cohesion. However, these two

dimensions could be treated as independent from each other. Emulating Gramsci, we could argue that social cohesion could be used either in its bastard or expansive forms, emphasizing that only the latter brings these two concerns together.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that any definition must take into account the problems of its applicability, i.e., special consideration must be given to the object upon which it is intended to apply the concept. Only a good and systematic understanding of the object of the policy or the research provides a solid ground for the application of the policy.

There is an increasing acceptance that society does not exist as a single, autonomous entity, with an overarching logic (see, for example, Touraine 1998). Rather it is an analytical concept that helps social scientists discuss a set of more or less integrated set of open systems that operate to a large extent within the limits of the nation-state. In these terms, we should think of the educational system or the rural economy as systems that are more or less cohesive, but open to the influences - necessary or contingent - of other institutional systems. If this is the case, any intent to attain social cohesion at the national level requires a profound reflection of the relationships between and among the multiplicity of social groups, institutions, processes and dynamics that exist in a society and operate upon each other fostering or inhibiting social cohesion. The task is difficult since it requires defining how increases and decreases in the level of cohesion in one entity such as the rural community may affect the cohesion of a myriad of other entities. An increment of social cohesion in one group, oil companies for example, could have disastrous consequences for the social cohesion and sustainability of isolated communities. If we are not aware of these dynamics and they way they operate, policies aimed to increase the levels of social cohesion of some entities could have a variety of unintended consequences.

The arguments that societies are characterized by interrelated institutional systems and their complex relationships also have implications for cause-effect arguments about social cohesion. Some believe that social cohesion can contribute to economic growth, or that social cohesion has positive effects upon health and education which in turn produces substantial economic benefits (see Dayton-Johnson: 2001, 67-81). We should be careful, however, to avoid seeing such results as direct effects of social cohesion. Social cohesion affects economic growth, but we could also argue that economic growth affects social cohesion and that the degree of influence that each dimension has on the other depends on specific institutional and political contexts.

Another issue that makes the use of the concept confusing is the relationship between the present strategy of development and social order, trust, social capital, sense of belonging and other dimensions of social cohesion. There is strong agreement that the present is characterized by uncertainty and insecurity that results in a decline of social cohesion and that this is somewhat related to the increasing integration of national economies to the global economy. The debate begins when we try to define the specific relationship between social cohesion and neo-liberalism.

For the OECD the lack of social cohesion "threatens to undermine both the drive towards greater economic flexibility and the policies that encourage strong competition, globalization and technological development" (Jenson, 1998: 6). Dayton-Johnson echoes these concerns by arguing about the need for social cohesion as a way to avoid a situation where "citizens distressed by the erosion of public-provided services will demand measures … that impede the growth of unfettered capitalism - thus 'shooting themselves in the foot' by impairing their own potential prosperity" (2001: 13). These arguments tend to perceive the lack of social cohesion as an absence of equilibrium between the development of the economy and civil society. The solution requires government **to act upon** society in order to revitalize the levels of social cohesion, so that we are able to balance competitive markets with a strong social fabric.

This view of the relationship between social cohesion and neo-liberalism is just one interpretation. It is also possible to reason, as in the case of Beck's arguments about the risk society, that the specific form of the process of economic development - the neo-liberal path - is the one that has created the problems that we are trying to resolve with policies and programs oriented to increase social cohesion. If this view is correct, we could argue that any serious intent to increase social cohesion would have negative consequences for the existing path of development.

In the context of policy-making, it is essential to clarify the relationship between neo-liberalism and social cohesion. Public agendas have priorities, so policies and programs are organized according to different degrees of importance. Economic growth is clearly a priority for the majority of national governments. There are, of course, different paths to achieve this goal, paths that combine in different ways economic and non-economic objectives. If the second view is correct, i.e., the problem is largely the result of neo-liberalism, then the possibilities for social cohesion are minimal and the only alternative for governments would be the **management** of social exclusion.

It is clear that there is a lack of cohesiveness in the debate about social cohesion. Yet there is a need to operate from a working definition in order to structure investigation. In this context, we have adopted a flexible conceptual approach in our research, paying attention to several dimensions of social cohesion: the strength of social relations, the existence of shared communities of interpretation, the existence of feelings of common identity and of a sense of belonging, forms of collective action, and social trust.

It is also obvious to us that social cohesion should be understood as a **process**, where the distinction suggested by Regina Berger-Schmitt (2000) should be preserved. It is important to describe the actual degree of social cohesion in the rural community, but it is no less important to discuss how far or how close this social cohesion is from a state characterized by a significant decline of all kind of inequalities.

2) Social Cohesion and its applicability to the Prairie Rural Community

a) Cohesion in the Face of Rural Decline: Our fundamental interest is in understanding the processes and dynamics of social cohesion in the rural communities of the Saskatchewan Prairies and its possible effects on the viability or sustainability of these communities. This investigation is framed within the context of decline as outlined in the previous section. The decision to use the rural community affords us a clear advantage: its existence in a clearly defined space and its small population provide us with an empirical and clearly delimited setting where we can analyze the dynamics and processes of social cohesion. Yet because our laboratory is rural Saskatchewan, our inquiry must by necessity deal with questions regarding social cohesion within this particular context. This is difficult because the term **rural**, like cohesion, is not well understood. When we assign the term rural to a geographical area, we not only define that area as rural based on certain accepted criteria, we attempt to understand what it means to be called rural in the face of ongoing and changing conditions. The literature reveals that in terms of definition, three main themes are apparent: 1) rural is synonymous with anything non-urban in character, which by default, suggests that the rural environment has no character or qualities of its own; 2) **rurality**, the distinctive characteristics associated with rural, can be defined in various forms; and 3) user perception of distinctively rural uses (e.g. agriculture, forestry, mining, etc.) is the principle agent of rural definition (Veldman, 1984). An all-embracing definition of rural is difficult to achieve because rural definitions depend on the functions designated to the countryside but these vary over space and time; rural areas are undergoing change due to social, economic and technological developments and thus any definition must be dynamic; and a definition also has to take into account spatial and cultural differences, i.e., what is rural here may not be rural there.

Some believe that we must do away with rural because in today's world it is an irrelevant conception lacking explanatory power. Instead, they argue, we are better off looking at extra-rural structures and processes, notwithstanding that these are moulded by local circumstances (Newby, 1985). Others assert that people make their own sense of the rural reinterpreting dominant images through their own cultural practice. Thus it is necessary for researchers to understand how dominant and local images of rural are reinterpreted through everyday experience. What role this reinterpretation plays in cohesion is worth investigating. However, the literature shows us that there is no strong consensus as to what constitutes rural and so any investigation of social cohesion within a rural context must deal with this lacuna.

If we maintain that social cohesion within the rural context is different than cohesion within the context of society in general, than it is incumbent on us to demonstrate that because rural is distinctive, rural social cohesion is by implication different as well. This is a major task given the fact that there is debate over whether or not rural should be worthy of study in its own right. This is a conceptual problem that cannot be avoided. If rural is connoted with function, then we are subject to the criticism that a definition is better seen as a research tool for the articulation of specific aspects of the rural than as a way of defining the rural. This involves trying to fit a definition to what we already intuitively consider to be rural, in the absence of any other justification as to why these functions should be regarded as representing the rural. In other words, the rural has

already been defined by those doing the classifying. Descriptive methods based on functions only describe the rural; they do not define it themselves. Critics will argue that we are ignoring what it is we are trying to define.

Other definitions based on size and scale assume that population density and other spatial attributes affect behaviour and attitudes. Somehow properties of the rural, e.g. low density and small absolute numbers, produce a distinctive rural character. Critics argue that this smacks of determinism. The spatial determinism in this kind of definition stands in direct contrast to the spatial indifference inherent in the descriptive functional definition but both demonstrate a mistaken conceptualization of the relationship between space and society. Spatial determinism holds an absolute conception of space, whereby space itself possesses causal powers. Properties inherent in the rural environment are thought to produce a distinctive rural character. Spatial indifference, on the other hand, relegates space, the environment, to the position of being a mere reflection of society, an unimportant detail. This appears unduly deterministic and restrictive of human agency. Also, spatial indifference fails to appreciate the dynamism of space. While this approach sees space as produced, it leaves the matter there: space is merely the residue of social structures and therefore the study of space itself has little merit.

When we consider rural space, we must not only consider the structures producing that space but also the way in which that space is subsequently used to produce other space and to reproduce the original causal structures themselves (Hoggart and Buller, 1987). If we are to develop a conception of rural space and, by implication, a rural environment where distinctive kinds of cohesion processes occur, that are based on the principles that space and spatial expressions are both conditions of underlying structures (i.e., **space is produced**) and a means of producing further spaces (i.e., **space is a resource**), then we have to satisfy two criteria: there are significant structures operating that are associated with the local/community level; and 2) looking at these structures, these parts of society, enables us to distinguish between a rural environment and the larger urban-dominated society. In short, the designation rural would have to identify locations with distinctive causal forces. If these specifications are met, then genuinely local, distinctively rural causal forces that relate to scale, size and function can be said to exist. From this, we could extend our logic to argue that distinctively rural cohesive processes exist as well.

Yet while recognizing the conceptual difficulties inherent in such an exercise, studying social cohesion in a rural community still has its clear advantages. The characteristics of the community, i.e., “the smallness of its scale, the homogeneity of activities and states of minds of members, a self-sufficiency across a broad range of needs and through time, and a consciousness of distinctiveness” (Rapport and Overing, 2000: 60), provide the potential for an almost **natural** presence of social cohesion.

A number of factors have traditionally promoted social cohesion in rural Saskatchewan. In the past, rural community was defined to a large extent by its existence in a circumscribed space that facilitated face-to-face contact and a similarity of contact among its members. Such inter-personal contacts promoted the creation of networks and links among members, although at the same time it also created conflict and tensions among

different groups within the community. Living in the same place allowed for a communion of geographical and social experiences that facilitated people's communications. Indeed, in the pioneer period survival often depended on establishing such links in a context where geographical isolation and limited technology necessitated co-operation among settlers. Over time, accessibility improved and technology reduced the need for such collaboration in activities such as breaking the land and harvesting, but at the same increased the possibilities for people to interact socially in common geographical spaces such as the curling rink and the community hall.

Moreover, the predominance of certain economic activities such as farming involves an increasing similarity of experience in terms of working practices, organizational methods, access to inputs, "experimentation" of new practices and inputs, etc. Stirling (2001) argues that the rural community has been historically sustainable to the extent that it has had a viable economic base and a network of social relations that could be identified as social cohesion. The community, he argues, has been characterized by the predominance of family farms "in which families own all or most of their productive capital - land, building, machinery, and livestock - and do all or most of the productive work themselves. Typically…their farms are not large, and there are many of them…but equally important, family farming must develop a supportive network of social relations, including neighbourly helping patterns and exchanges of advice" (2001: 248). Reimer (1997) also makes a similar argument, indicating that social networks and voluntary associations in rural Canada are the primary base for social cohesion for communities. These networks have positive consequences for the vitality and viability of the communities.

Yet the role of common spaces in ensuring cohesion has diminished in the face of developing transportation and communication technologies that enable rural dwellers to travel greater distances to conduct business and take advantage of basic services. The automobile has served to expand the personal space of rural inhabitants beyond that of local community and e-commerce through the internet, has had a negative impact on local businesses struggling to exist in the face of diminishing population and economic decline. For some, the common space through which they interact with others, is not the coffee shop or rink, but rather **cyberspace**, a medium that enables individuals from both within and from outside the community to converse with each other. Whether or not this can increase social and cultural participation within the community or accelerate the breakdown of community is open to debate.

The role of the family in promoting cohesion has changed over time as well. Women have traditionally played a role in maintaining both family and community, especially during times of economic turmoil. They often worked alongside the men in the fields during the pioneer period and later performed vital roles at home and in the community where they were often the key players in the planning and operation of social events. Recently, however, the customary roles of women have changed as both economic forces and changing social conditions have combined to both push and pull women out of the domestic space and away from traditional social institutions that have proved to be so important in preserving a cohesive community. In addition, the role of inter-generational

transfer in social cohesion has changed. The transfer of the family farm to the next generation ensured persistence in place but increasingly children are choosing to leave rural Saskatchewan, thereby ending that link which served to tie family to community.

Communities exist and function in a larger context. If communities were a closed system, i.e., self-sufficient and closed to foreign influences, the issue of social cohesion would be irrelevant. We would expect that only those communities with a certain degree of social cohesion, leaving aside the problems of inequalities, would survive in the long term and those without that degree of cohesiveness would disappear. Communities, however, are not alone since their fortunes are significantly impacted by forces at the regional, national and international scales.

In these terms, we need to focus our attention on two fundamental factors that affect social cohesion in the rural community. First, the social cohesion of the community is influenced by two sets of processes that should be analysed separately: internal processes of community, i.e., its unique history and the evolution of networks of cooperation and organization; and external processes, such as policies, markets, and relationships with other communities that are related to the dynamics of the society at large. Second, the internal cohesion of the community and its "cohesiveness" with external entities are not always interconnected. Analyzing the rural community as an open system that exists in contact with other open systems necessitates a focus on both the external and the internal facets of the community.

b) Context of Rural Decline: The Saskatchewan Case: Since the 1960s prairie agriculture has been characterized by continuous instability as a result of the process of modernization of the Canadian productive structure (Diaz and Gingrich, 1992). The economic basis of the community has been seriously affected. Commodity prices have fluctuated considerably, creating a recurring climate of insecurity among agricultural producers. Relationships between the farmers and the markets have been characterized by a "cost price squeeze" that works against agricultural producers. Financial hardships and farm bankruptcies have become as familiar as the profile of the elevators in the prairies, or as is ironically evidenced these days, the sight of these iconic structures being demolished. Net farm income has declined in the last decades, impeding many rural families from reaching a minimum standard of living. The economic picture is generally dramatic.

A side effect of these economic upheavals has been a process of differentiation of the traditional family farming. The trend seems to have a dual direction, toward both the creation of larger more heavily capitalized farms and the persistence of small farms. Conway and Stirling (1985: 6)) show that in Saskatchewan larger farms (1,120 acres and more) increased by 17% while the number of small farms (less than 240 acres) went up by 7% during the period 1971-81. On the other side, medium size traditional farms declined by 25%. This process, of course, has been accompanied by both a reduction in the number of farms (from 76, 970 in 1971 to 56,995 in 1996) and by an increase in the average farm size (845 acres in 1971 and 1,152 acres in 1996).

The centralization of goods and services and associated infrastructure has also affected the rural community. The process of centralization has brought a reduction in the infrastructure and number of community outlets in rural areas in the face of increasing concentration of these outlets in a few urban localities. As indicated by Mitchell (1975), the process started in the 1960, when private outlets such as lumberyards, machinery distributors, and retail stores began to close their doors in small communities and expand their services in large urban centers. During the 1970s and 1980s public services such as schools, hospitals, and post offices and both grain elevators and railroads followed the same road.

Finally, and no less important, has been the process of depopulation of the rural sector. The exodus of a predominantly young and single population has adversely affected the economic and social structure of rural Saskatchewan. A 1991 study of high school students in rural communities indicated that a large majority did not include living in the community as part of their plans for the future. Only 29%, predominantly male students with a farm family background, indicated their eagerness to return to the community after pursuing educational opportunities in other places. The same study shows that only 9% of the respondents were eager to seek full employment after finishing high school, while 80% expressed a desire to attend either a university a technical institute. A 1980 survey of the Saskatchewan Education Continuing Program offers an interesting point of comparison. In that year approximately 46% of high schools student wished to enter full employment after high school, while 41% preferred to attend a university or a technical institute (Diaz, forthcoming). The differences between the 1980 and 1991 surveys illustrates the negative perception that young people have of the rural labour market and demonstrates their belief in the potential that higher education offers for social and geographical mobility.

c) Preliminary Research Findings: The process of rural restructuring has been directly affected by the strong "urban bias" (Lipton, 1977) prevalent in development strategies pursued by national and provincial governments since the early 1960s, a bias that has marginalized the "rural" in favour of the "urban". Such policies essentially view rural areas as hinterland appendages to urban centres. Lawrence, Knuttila and Gray (2001) argue that neo-liberalism has brought further economic decline to the rural sector, an intensification of the consumer culture, a removal of social capital, and environmental degradation. Epp and Whitson (2001) point out that globalization has brought a more pronounced rural-urban division of labour "as government retreats both from regulatory roles and from redistribution on behalf of disadvantaged regions", and a loss of the capacity of local communities to decide about their fate, which is increasingly assumed by regional governments and large corporations. Harder (2001), based on a small set of interviews to farmers in an Alberta rural community, indicates that most of the respondents believe that a significant reduction of community cohesion has resulted in increasing competition, a greater diversity of interests among farmers, and the improper use of foreclosures by some members of the community.

Data produced by a survey of four Saskatchewan rural communities show that social cohesion was still present in the communities during the late 1980s, although its form

seems to have experienced some changes (Diaz and Gingrich, 1991: 44-48) The survey provides data for two traditional indicators of social cohesion: networks of solidarity - systems of exchange for goods and services that are important for the reproduction of the household and the community - and participation in organizations. The data, however, indicate some interesting patterns. Networks for mutual support seem to exist only in kinship, not in friendship, which is at odds with the long-standing belief in strong relations among members of the rural community. Does this pattern mean that friendship is no more relevant in the community? Is this a retreat from the community and into the family?

Participation in community activities was also relevant. Just under 30% of the households surveyed indicated that they actively contributed to community decisions, and another 50% said that while they were active in the community, they did not contribute to community decisions. The variety of organizations active at the local level was significant. Church and church related organizations, recreational and sporting clubs and boards, and farm related organizations were frequently mentioned by the respondents. The survey shows an interesting pattern with regard to participation: large farmers, in terms of farm income and farm size, were the most active, while some of the smaller farmers appeared to be left out of community activities. Does this mean that the process of class differentiation is affecting the community?

A positive answer to these questions would make you think that there is a certain degree of dislocation in the everyday life of the community, at least in comparison to historical patterns. It is also relevant to keep in mind that these data were gathered in 1987, a moment that can be arguably viewed as beginning of the neo-liberalization of the Canadian economy.

Is this dislocation a sign of the disappearance of the social cohesion of the rural community? Or is it a sign that a new community is in the process of emerging, with new forms of social cohesion? Let us hope that our research will provide a clear answer to these questions.

3) Social Cohesion and Policy: Some Considerations

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, federal and provincial governments have played a role in the formulation and implementation of rural/community, economic and regional development policies. Earlier on, federal governments were prominent in developing **top-down** development strategies where policy filtered down shift to greater provincial control of rural development in Saskatchewan and a change in philosophy where more emphasis was placed on the **bottom-up** approach, i.e., a strategy where development programs are initiated from the local level. This transfer was based on the belief that traditional development policies did not work very well in various rural contexts. Bottom-up strategies attempted to deliver both resources and decision-making power over to the hands of rural communities in the hope that they would be better able to make efficient use of local resources and more effectively mediate external forces that affect rural hinterland areas.

More recently, a convergence of both approaches has taken place where the efforts of the dominant grassroots **Regional Economic Development Authorities** (REDAs) have been supplemented by various partnership agreements between the provincial and federal governments. This has resulted in the implementation of long-term policies and programs in favour of the short-term, selective problem areas development programs that dominated in the recent past. This, in turn, has resulted in a preference for regional co-operation in rural and economic development rather than single community development. This convergence requires that federal and provincial governments set the program contexts and provide the financial tools that must be accessed at the regional level. It also requires people at the individual community level to network horizontally, i.e., to mobilize the community, and to network vertically, i.e., to engage in intergovernmental management, to make development successful (Radin et al., 1996:207).

Such **regional development** involves multi- and inter-community interaction and has resulted in planning that gives preference to providing rural communities with health centres, schools and shopping centres on a regional basis rather than on an individual community basis. Basically, this strategy is based on the conviction that rural communities cannot develop on their own. This shift from single community development to regional development can be viewed as a response to the barriers and problems (e.g. lack of leadership, relative isolation of small communities, small size of communities, low population density, scarcity of fiscal resources, lack of local entrepreneurial know-how, the inability of individual communities to conduct feasibility studies, and the inability of individual communities to obtain funding and hire economic development experts) perceived to be inherent in the single community development approach.

Regional development policies are designed to provide assistance to larger geographical areas to tackle problems that are too large for single communities. The key to such development is **collaboration** among the participant centres. By such collaboration, it is argued, leadership, tax revenues, political influences, and other factors may be pooled to undertake relatively larger initiatives, both economic and social in nature. Theoretically, the consolidation of services to such areas will provide greater administrative efficiency, achievement of scale economies, improvement of communications, more effective use of limited resources, and development of shared infrastructure.

On the negative side, the regional level approach may create tension between or among individual communities, particularly when it comes to the selection of a centre for the location of a particular social or economic service in question. In many cases, communities in central locations seem to benefit more in the location of services than those in the periphery. As well, those who are critical of the trickle-down effect at the international and national scales may also have doubts about its operation at the smaller regional scale.

What impact this shift to regional development has had on social cohesion and sustaining communities is largely unknown. But it is within this planning and policy context that any assessments have to be made. While the economist may see the regional unit as the

appropriate scale for implementation of policy, the geographer would argue that we need to acknowledge that while rural communities may be located in the same geographical region, they do not necessarily have the same needs or experience the exact same problems. Thus, it may be necessary to adopt policies that are both regional in scale and yet sensitive to the unique characteristics and resources of communities. For instance, some communities can best be developed through small business assistance while others in the same region may benefit more from tourism or small-scale manufacturing. Different strategic plans for different rural communities may be provided under a single regional, long-term master plan. It is also imperative for communities within the region to overcome competitive tensions and strive to build partnerships. This will require education and information dissemination, collaboration and co-ordination within regions and among individual communities.

Such policy considerations within the context of rural Saskatchewan will be guided by questions that relate to the concept of social cohesion as we have defined it in the hope that they stimulate further reflection on the role of social cohesion in the sustainability of rural communities within this region.

Bibliography:

Alaluf, Mateo, 1999, Final Report to the Seminar *Demographic Trends and the role of Social Protection: the Idea of Social Cohesion*, Centre de sociologie de travail, de l'emploi et de la formation, Universite libre de Bruxelles.

Beck, Ulrich, 1992, *Risk Society*, Sage: London

Beck, Ulrich, 1999, *World Risk Society*, Polity Press: Cambridge

Berger-Smith, Regina, 2000, "Social Cohesion as an Aspect of the Quality of Societies: Concept and Measurement", *EuroReporting paper*, No. 14, Centre for Survey Research and Methodology, Manheim.

Bessis, Sophie, 1995, "From Social Exclusion to Social Cohesion: Towards a Policy Agenda" Management of Social Transformation – UNESCO, Policy Paper 2.

Conway, John and Robert Stirling, 1985, "Fractions Among Prairie Farmers", paper presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Montreal.

Dayton-Johnson, Jeff (2001), *Social Cohesion and Economic Prosperity*, James Lorimer and Company: Toronto.

Diaz, Polo (Forthcoming). "School, Knowledge and Skills in the Farm Community", in R. Stirling, H. Diaz, and J. Jaffe (eds.), *Farm Communities at the Crossroads: the Challenge and Resistance*, Canadian Plains Research Center, Regina.

Diaz, Polo and Paul Gingrich, 1992, "Crisis and Community in Rural Saskatchewan", in David Hay and Gurcharn Basran (eds.), *Rural Sociology in Canada*, Oxford University Press: Toronto.

Durkheim, Emile, 1964, *The Division of Labor in Society*, The Free Press: N.Y.

Epp, Roger and Dave Whitson, 2001, "Introduction: Writing off Rural Communities" in Roger Epp and Dave Whitson (eds.), *Writing Off the Rural West*, The University of Alberta Press/ Parkland Institute: Edmonton.

Harder, Cameron, 2001, "Overcoming Cultural and Spiritual Obstacles to Rural Revitalization", in Roger Epp and Dave Whitson (eds.), *Writing Off the Rural West*, The University of Alberta Press/ Parkland Institute: Edmonton.

Hoare, Quintin (ed.) , 1971, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, International Publishers; N.Y.

Jeannotte, Sharon (2000), "Social Cohesion Around the World: An International Comparison of Definitions and Issues", Strategic Research Analysis, Department of Canadian Heritage: Ottawa.

Jenson, Jane (1998), Mapping Social Cohesion. The State of Canadian Research, *CPRN Study*, F/03, Canadian Policy Research Network: Ottawa.

Lawrence, Geoffrey, Murray Knuttila and Ian Gray, 2001, "Globalization, Neo-Liberalism and Rural Decline in Australia and Canada", in Roger Epp and Dave Whitson (eds.), *Writing Off the Rural West*, The University of Alberta Press/ Parkland Institute: Edmonton.

Lipton, Michael, 1977, *Why Poor People Stay Poor. Urban Bias in World Development*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge.

Michell, Don, 1975, *The Politics of Food*, James Lorimer: Toronto.
`

Mouffe, Chantal (ed.), 1979, *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, Routledge and Kegan: London.

Newby, Howard, 1985, "Locality and Rurality: The Restructuring of Social Relations," *Regional Studies*, Vol. 20, 3: 209-15.

Rapport, Nigel and Joanna Overing, 2000, *Social and Cultural Anthropology. Key Concepts*, Routledge: London

Redfield, Robert, 1960, *The Little Society, and Peasant Society and Culture*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

Reimer, Bill, "Informal Social Networks and Voluntary Associations in Non-Metropolitan Canada", in Richard Rounds (ed.), *Changing Rural Institutions. A Canadian Perspective*, Canadian Rural Restructuting Foundation: Brandon.

Robbins, Richard (1999), *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*, Allyn and Bacon: Boston.

Stirling, Robert, 2001, "Work, Knowledge, and the Direction of Farm Life", in R. Epp and D. Whitson (eds.), *Writing Off the Rural West*, The University of Alberta Press/ Parkland Institute: Edmonton.

Touraine, Alain, 1998, "Society Without Society" *Current Sociology*, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 119-143.

Veldman, J., 1984, "Proposal for a changing theoretical basis for the human geography of rural areas," in G. Clark, G. Groenendijk and F. Thissen, eds., *The Changing Countryside* (Norwich: Geobooks).