



# The Social Transformation of Rural Canada: New Insights into Community, Culture and Citizenship

---

## Report

### Purpose

The purpose of this networking event was to convene a workshop of academic researchers from across Canada on the topic of social transformation in rural Canada. Contributors came from many areas of Canada and many fields of study (geography, sociology, political science, anthropology, history, environmental studies, and economics). Academic papers were presented at this workshop and the participants spent a considerable amount of time discussing the idea of social transformation. What does it mean? Who is it similar or different from social change of transition? What insights can we bring to the question of social transformation in rural Canada?

Thematic areas for this workshop included a discussion of (1) social structure, such as the changing economic and social relationship between urban and rural regions, and demographic shifts such as aging, (2) identity, such as the changing context of forestry towns that have lost their mills and are now seeking new ways to define themselves, their livelihoods, and their communities, and (3) collective action, such as groups in rural regions of Newfoundland that are working together in creative ways to address issues of poverty in rural regions.

A key message from this workshop is one of social transformation and how this takes place in different contexts. There was attention to the way in which transformational events are rooted in local history and context, so that change is often dramatic and life altering in certain ways, but it remains rooted in place. A metaphor of sedimentation was used in this context, or layering of history and experience that transformational events are based out of. There was also attention to the way in which transformation represents a shift in the way things work to the extent that one can no longer anticipate what might happen next. For instance, when a mill closes, in previous decades, the mill would re-open as the economy rebounds. Now this level of certainty or predicability is no longer there.

The ultimate purpose of this event was to prepare papers for publication. These papers are currently in development and a book is expected to be published from these proceedings in the next 12 months or so.

### Outcomes

The primary outcome of this networking event is a set of case study reports on the social transformation of rural Canada. Researchers from across the country were able to gain insights from other regions and other researchers.

In particular, there were two Alberta case studies of social transformation, one from Dr. Darin Barney at McGill University who related a case study of the Battle River Rail Cooperative, and one from Dr. Lorelei Hanson at Athabasca university who related a case study of changing land stewardship and land trusts in Alberta. these two case studies helped to raise the provide of rural development issues in Alberta, with one focusing on the impact of technological change as a major driver of transformation, and the other focusing on a history of land use change and land use policy development in Alberta, with implications for stewardship and the sustainability of rural communities. These reports are being prepared for publications as a book with UBC Press and this book will contribute to our collective understanding of social transformation.

### **Benefits**

The primary beneficiaries of this workshop were book chapter authors. Authors were able to workshop their draft chapters, share their understandings of social transformation and gain insights about how their specific chapter topic and case study connected to the broader themes of the book project. Lars Hallstrom provided a guest presentation from the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities, and these researchers from across the country gained more insight into the rural development activities of ARDN and other rural-based researchers in the province.

Future benefits from this networking event will be practitioners, students, leaders, and residents of rural communities across Canada. We are writing this book with academic and non-academic audiences in mind and these ideas and stories will help readers to understand how rural places are changing and how transformational events can be utilized in ways that are constructive and productive for rural communities.

### **Collaboration**

One new partnership has formed between the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities and the Canadian Rural and Northern Research Network. This relationships was strengthened at the workshop and a large partnership development grant proposal is being developed for SSHRC in the new year.