

# **Viability & Sustainability in Rural Agricultural Communities: Residents' Perceptions of Individual, Community and Macro-Level Factors – By Brenda Bacon and Derek Brewin**

This study examined the perceptions of residents in four rural Manitoba communities regarding the links between the overall viability of their communities and factors affecting individual well-being. Focus groups were interviewed in each community. Each group included farm men and women, agri-business managers and other retailers, and elected community leaders.

Research in psychology/sociology links individual stress and coping in rural communities, and individual well-being to social capital, the level of networking, and community cohesion (Gerrard, Kulig, & Nowatski, 2004; Woodhouse, 2006). Economic research has demonstrated income's impact on migration and human capital investments or investments in further education (Deller et al., 2001, Goetz and Hu, 1996). While previous research has examined factors such as economic viability of communities, community cohesiveness, and individual psychosocial factors affecting well-being, no research has attempted to develop an overall picture of the relative importance of these factors from a resident's perspective. The outcome of this study was intended to contribute to an overall picture of factors including economic viability of communities, community cohesiveness, and individual psychosocial factors, and the linkages between. Part of this study's uniqueness comes from the interdisciplinary efforts of social work (the community development stream) and agricultural economics (rural development and risk management streams). More information and a wider view of the factors affecting rural communities is needed to inform policy debates and optimize planning especially in terms of rural development and agriculture support.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Models of community economic growth typically focus on job availability, and population or migration (residential choice) (Carlino & Mills, 1987). This model was expanded to include income and amenities (climate, land, water, winter recreation and recreational infrastructure) offered by particular regions by Deller, Tsai, Marcouiller and English in 2001. Their results indicated that rural areas with a high level of amenities experienced growth; however, some agriculture-dependent areas saw poorer growth, or decline, even with high amenities.

Other studies have linked economic growth to social capital in rural communities (Rupasingha et al., 2005). While individuals can be characterized by their membership in social networks and their levels of available social support, social capital is a property of groups rather than individuals (McKenzie, 2002). One definition of social capital is “the stock of accumulated resources that one can access based on the relationships that can aid or be leveraged in accomplishing an end or furthering a pursuit’ (Tymon & Stumpf, 2002, p. 12). Putnam (2001) differentiated between two forms of social capital, bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding capital refers to relationships among individuals within a group that contribute to local community cohesiveness; while bridging capital refers to the external linkages between groups and other communities including institutions such as government bodies (Diaz & Nelson, 2005; Woodhouse, 2005). The overall concept of social capital acts as a bridge between individuals (the micro level), and societal structures (the macro level) (Diaz & Nelson, 2005). Both theory and research suggest that social capital can facilitate economic development by making other forms of capital more efficient (Woodhouse, 2005).

Much of the research on social capital has focused on horizontal links within communities (bonding capital) rather than on vertical links or the purposeful collective actions that are influenced by government policies at various levels, power relations, and opportunities (bridging capital) (Diaz & Nelson, 2005; McKenzie, 2002). Results from a study on the influence of social capital on economic development in two rural Australian communities found that positive economic development occurs in communities with high levels of BOTH bonding and bridging social capital (Woodhouse, 2005). These results supported the theory that high levels of social capital and economic development were associated. The author argued that policy interventions should target whatever type of social capital is lacking, given that small rural communities may have strong bonding capital but insufficient bridging capital. Tigges, Ziebarth, and Farnham (1998) also argued that the restructuring of rural places needs to take into account non-economic dimensions in addition to assessing job availability, economic diversity, and income.

Social capital has also been linked to stress and depression. Heffernan and Heffernan (1986) found an effect termed ‘collective depression’ in rural communities experiencing economic decline. Individual stress was found to be lower in communities with more interaction among residents and higher participation in community events (Jacob, Bourke & Luloff, 1997; O’Brien, Hassigner & Dersham, 1994). However, in one regression model tested, those who were more concerned about local issues and more attached to their community experienced greater stress (Jacob et al., 1997). These authors

hypothesized that a link between interaction/participation and “local community agency” (p. 287) could result in local problem-solving and enhanced resident well-being.

A number of US studies of the farm crisis there during the 1980’s agreed that rural psychological stress and depression were explained primarily by increased economic pressures (Armstrong & Schulman, 1990; Lorenz, et al., 1993; Ortega, et al., 1994). Perhaps the strongest design in these studies of US farmers’ stress/depression was that of Ortega et al. (1994) who found that depression increased between 1981 and 1986 (the height of the farm crisis in the US), and returned to pre-crisis levels in 1989. These authors noted that a finding about depression among farmers was more noteworthy because the study was based on a sample of ‘survivors’ as almost 30% of farmers left farming between 1981 and 1986, and another 20% between 1986 and 1989 (Ortega et al., 1994). Other studies suggested that it was *perceived* economic hardship, not simply debt to asset ratios or direct effects of economic pressure that was the main determinant of depression, although economic hardship and stress were also highly related to depression (Armstrong & Schulman, 1990; Belyea & Lobao, 1990; Lorenz, et al., 1993). Armstrong and Schulman (1990) noted that farm financial strain is a recurring problem due to cycles in the farm economy, but that persistent economic hardship “leads to feelings of hopelessness, lack of control and consequent depression” (p. 487). Ortega, et al. (1994) suggested that farmers’ depression was not simply a function of individual economic changes, citing community economic climate as one factor: “... the economic context of community of residence, community social structures, or urban/rural cultural differences also [affect] mental health” (p.614).

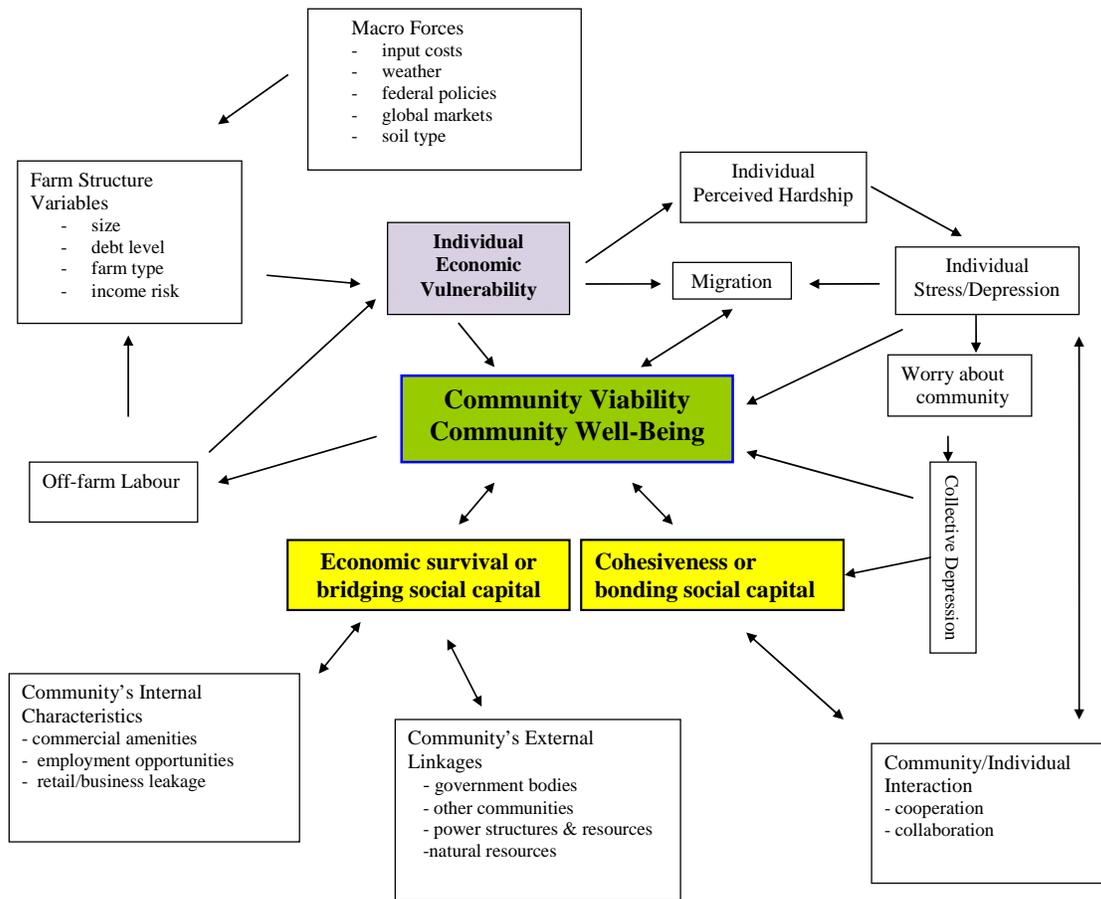
A recent Canadian study (CASA, 2005), found that 20% of farmers described themselves as very stressed and 45% as somewhat stressed. Very high levels of stress were associated with poor harvests/production, farm finances and government policies, weather, the BSE herd health crisis and the pressure to maintain the family farm. In Manitoba, more than half of the farm calls to the farm stress line were BSE-related between May 2003, when the first Canadian case was discovered, until the end of 2004. In 2005, the rate of BSE calls to other calls dropped to 41% (MB. Farm & Rural Stress Line). These results are in contrast to sources of stress identified a decade ago (Senate Standing Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, 1993) where the most significant source of stress was unstable and adverse economic conditions followed by weather, long work hours, lack of information and isolation. The 1993 report noted that most stress factors for farmers are uncontrollable – weather, disease, commodity prices, input costs and government policies. In England and Wales, farmer suicides were found to be related

to social isolation, high debt loads and irregular cash flow (Malmberg, Hawton, & Simkin, 1997).

In the study by Gerrard et al. (2004) that examined barriers and contributors to resiliency in rural Saskatchewan towns, barriers to personal well-being included lack of community participation and lack of collective responsibility for the community, especially when residents are under “chronic and severe emotional, economic and social pressures” (p. 61). Depopulation, particularly by youth who leave to find employment, was another big barrier as it leads to a loss of the rural way of life, resulting in fewer people to take up the responsibilities for the community, and undermining “the personal connections required to make communities viable” (p. 63). Gerrard et al. (2004) criticized stress theories as too individualistic, failing to include social context as a critical variable, and made the point that community viability may be different depending on differences in economic advantage or disadvantage. Several authors (Gerrard et al., 2004; Meyer & Lobao, 2003; Philo, Parr & Burns, 2003; Woodhouse, 2005) point out the heterogeneity of rural people and rural places, and emphasize the embedded-ness of individual experiences of stress within a community as a unique entity that affects individual well-being, and local economic viability. Policies focused on sustaining and enhancing the rural way of life need to be based on a clearer understanding of how these factors interact with each other.

Figure 1 is a conceptual map drawing together research factors and tentative relationships that guided this project. In the top left quadrant we suggest the links between the realities of the rural economy as it relates to agriculture. Basic physical and global factors beyond the farmers’ control limit their choices. If there is a lot of variation in income due to these factors or, worse still, a steady erosion over time in farm economic viability, it can cause individual farmers high stress and depression. This can feed into community wide stress levels in the top right hand quadrant. As well, vibrant communities can attract labor from one or both spouses from a farm leading to benefits for both the farm family and the community. This can lower income variation for farmer families compared to income from agriculture only and add to regular use of services in the town.

**Figure 1 - Conceptual Map of Factors Affecting Community Viability**



Individual links to the community are shown in the top right corner of Figure 1. Individual stress levels can compound community stress levels and erode community viability even leading to migration out of the community, which can have its own impact on local businesses.

The processes of social capital discussed above are shown in the bottom of Figure 1. Individual stress levels are mitigated by and impact on cohesive social capital while the bridging social capital has a similar affect to basic amenities. Amenities and bridging social capital provide fertile ground for economic and social activity that fosters community viability.

### **Methodology**

Prior to this project, the two researchers had different interests related to rural residents and rural communities. The agricultural economist was interested in income growth in rural areas and links to income variability and human and social capital investments, while the social worker was interested in mental health issues for farmers,

particularly stress and depression. The negotiated middle place was the focus of this study on the interrelatedness of both areas, and the focus on small town viability. It was agreed that an exploratory approach was best, and that a small sample of four communities would be an adequate starting point.

The four communities in the sample of this study reflect different geographic parts of the province of Manitoba that are varying distances from the major city in the province, Winnipeg. Each community has a somewhat different farming base as well. Boissevain, Manitoba is 286 kilometers (km) southwest of Winnipeg. It is a mixed farming area with large farms (526 hectares (ha) on average). In Canada's 2006 Census, 39% of farms in the region reported that they produced beef cattle primarily and 46% produced crops (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Arborg is 118 km north of Winnipeg. It is primarily a cattle area with a large average farm size (556 ha). In 2006, 55% of farms in the region produced beef cattle primarily and 15% produced crops and a significant number produced hogs (Statistics Canada, 2008a).

Neepawa is also a mixed farming area with medium sized farms (461 ha). It is 186 km northeast of Winnipeg. In 2006, 43% of farms in the region produced beef cattle primarily and 43% produced crops (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Altona is primarily a crop region with smaller farms (339 ha). It is 113 km south of Winnipeg. In 2006, 26% of farms in the region produced beef cattle primarily and 50% produced crops and there were significant numbers of hog and vegetable farms (Statistics Canada, 2008a).

The communities also range in terms of recent population changes. Between 1996 and 2006 the populations of Altona and Arborg increased by 12.9% and 0.8% respectively (Statistics Canada, 2008b). Over the same period the populations of Boissevain and Neepawa decreased by 2.8% and 0.2% respectively. In terms of total population Altona is the largest at 3,710 according to the 2006 census, followed by Neepawa with 3,295, Boissevain with 1,500 and Arborg with a population of 1,020. All four have some retailers specializing in services to farmers.

Focus groups were used in each community with separate groups for farm men, farm women, agri-business people, and elected officials. The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon participants' thoughts, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions to the topic of the research. The recommended number of people per group is usually six to ten. The benefits of focus group research include gaining insights into people's shared understandings of everyday life, and the ways in which individuals' ideas are 'sparked' by hearing others' comments.

One set of questions was developed for the farm men and women, and another slightly different set for the elected officials (town and rural municipality) and local agri-

business people. Following this, the project was submitted to the University of Manitoba Review Board for Research involving human subjects and received approval. See Appendix I for a list of the questions asked.

Recruitment for the focus groups began with a phone call to the local Agricultural Services office of Manitoba Agriculture, Food Rural Initiatives (MAFRI). “MAFRI works with rural and northern communities to accelerate the greater prosperity and capacity of agricultural producers, other entrepreneurs, industry and rural and northern communities ... by providing leadership and a range of information, programs and services in support of vibrant rural and northern communities.” (MAFRI website). One of the priorities of this department is “Increased economic activity and investment to sustain and grow rural communities. ... The GO (Growing Opportunities) Teams Branch focuses on building vibrant rural communities by supporting Manitoba’s agricultural and food sector ... within a sustainable agriculture and community framework.” MAFRI employees in each community assisted in recruitment.

The group meetings were held in the local board rooms or in the MAFRI offices, and all four focus meetings were held within one day in each community. The discussions were recorded both electronically, and through notes by the researchers and assistants. On the whole, community residents were enthusiastic about sharing their views about their communities.

### **Analysis**

The central analysis procedure consisted of going through transcriptions of notes from each focus group and identifying a code for each “speech”. The codes from Svendsen and Sørensen (2007) were used and additional codes were developed as necessary when participants’ ideas did not fit the a priori code set. The next step was to review all communities’ codes to search for common themes and patterns. According to Svendsen and Sørensen (2007), different levels of economic performance in different communities are affected by a number of different factors. The codes from Svendsen and Sørensen (2007) included three forms of tangible capital (physical, natural, economic); three forms of intangible capital (social, organizational, cultural), and seven categories of what does and does not make a local community successful (local solidarity, cooperation, mutual knowledge; maintain or increase number of local citizens; cultural activities including well-functioning associations; maintain or develop the local business life,

establishment of working places; maintain or develop local institutions (school, hospital, other necessary services); maintain or develop local retail shops.

The data broke down roughly into 2 main areas – what has been happening to farmers, and what has been happening to towns. The researchers developed most of the categories referring to farmers, while the categories about what has been happening to towns were borrowed from other research.

### Farmers

**Factors affecting farmers.** The major issue with farmers has been a number of negative influences on farm income over the past 5 – 8 years. Although farmers are used to variation in their incomes due to weather (problems included too much rain and drought), significant events in western Canada included the border closure and subsequent price collapse for cattle caused by a case of BSE. Recent changes in the value of the Canadian dollar in terms of U.S. funds also worked against Cattle producers since a significant share of the beef market is too the U.S.

Cattle producers discussed the stress caused by these multiple negative factors happening simultaneously or sequentially - “never-ending” - have taken a financial toll on farmers. “It’s been like a perfect storm – all of the factors coming together at the right time – or the wrong time – it’s all a negative effect.”

Although grain prices had risen to near record levels at the time of the meetings in the winter of 2007/08, farmers were skeptical of these being sustained and complained about higher input costs. One farmer told a story: “When prices were low in the 70’s, an older farmer said that out of 5 years there will be one bonanza year where we do really well. Well, I’ve been farming for 20 years and haven’t had a bonanza year because inputs keep going up.” Another farmer said “There hasn’t been a year with high prices and high yields – there is always something to offset it.”

With many years of poor incomes, people in every community talked about the necessity for farmers to have other sources of income – another job off the farm, a sideline, or working away during the winter. “Nearly every farmer has a job or a sideline . . . or the wives are working”. “Working wives keep a lot of farms going”. Small towns do not have many jobs to offer – and if farmers are taking jobs, then young people have fewer options: “Maybe that’s why my daughters had to move”.

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents from all communities ranking a list of possible stressors first or second. The stressor was to be considered for “individuals in your community”, not necessarily the respondents. In general commodity prices, government policies, weather and personal finances ranked as major stressors. All of

these could be part of overall income variation, but it was clear across all cohorts that prices were a major stressor. This is what economists often assume – a reduction in welfare from risk itself even if average income is not changing. The focus on prices was not clearly with respect to price variation however. Some respondents felt that there was a long term downward trend in prices. Note that this survey was taken at a time of higher than average grain prices and the majority of producers in all but one of the regions were grain producers. Livestock producers, who see the high grain prices as a negative in terms of feed costs, often felt the grain price increase was permanent. So the concern over price was not consistently about price variation, but often about long term trends in prices.

Table 1. Percentage of respondents ranking a stressor 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>

Possible Stressors	Type of Respondent			
	All*	All Farmers	Male	Female
Personal finances	18.6%	13.7%	17.6%	10.3%
Variability in income	11.0%	11.0%	8.8%	12.8%
Extremes in weather	10.3%	13.7%	14.7%	12.8%
Government policies	23.4%	17.8%	23.5%	12.8%
Commodity prices for grains & oilseeds	25.5%	28.8%	23.5%	33.3%
BSE crisis and border closure	3.4%	5.5%	2.9%	7.7%
Youth migration to larger centers	0.7%	1.4%	2.9%	0.0%
Lack of social support	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Depression	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Lack of sense of belonging to community	6.2%	8.2%	5.9%	10.3%
Loss of optimism	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other (open to respondents)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

\*All respondents including the business people and political leaders.

Once the conversation was opened up to group discussion, respondents did not seem to focus on income variation (due to weather related causes or other factors like prices or policies). These issues did not seem to be a significant issue in terms of the residents' open discussion or their strategies to survive. Although risk was often listed as a major stressor when introduced in the first question of the survey, residents focused much more on what they felt were permanent negative trends and forces like outward migration and falling populations. They were even more focused on their own communities' permanent positive directions like their natural endowments and recent investments.

**Lack of Optimism.** Although not listed as the major stressor as frequently in the opening questions optimism seemed to be a major factor in open discussions. Difficulties in the financial realm affected farmers' psychological perspective on their occupation. Optimism played a big role in this study – this word was offered as an example on a list of factors affecting people in the community for question #1. The word “optimism” seemed to resonate with people, especially farm men and women: “Loss of optimism is a big one –you go to the coffee shop and never hear a positive thing there”. “Few farmers have any sense of optimism”. “It’s the first time I ever saw my husband not want to go out and feed the cattle”. Optimism came up in other categories as well, relating to youth migration, and affecting children’s choices of future occupational choices as they could see the worry in their parents; “need optimism or the kids aren’t going to stay”. Loss of optimism also related to farmers making the decision to leave farming.

**Youth Migration.** The average age of farmers was an issue in several of the communities – so many farmers are leaving farming that only those with larger farms or older farmers with no debt. “Lots of farmers are older – nowhere for them to go – locked in until they reach pension age – or waiting for things to change so they can sell out”. Part of the problem with this is that young families are disappearing from communities and that affects local infrastructure like schools: “Every time you shut off a set of farm lights, it’s fewer kids in the school”. As one farmer put it “At the end of the day, it’s about a body count”.

Youth migration also relates to generational issues: many farmers would like to pass along their farms to their children. However, finances are an issue: “If my sons bought the farm [with debt], it would put them under, so I’m cautious”. Care and concern for children’s futures were another issue: “I want my children to get some training so they can get a job with more security, and so they can have choices in their lives”. Others said they were advising their children to get jobs where there is a retirement pension. And others said they wanted their children to get training so they would have something to fall back on – if farm income is not enough to live on.

There are also lifestyle choices being made by farmers’ children. “A lot of youth are deciding against it [farming] – they don’t want to work 20 hours a day during busy times”. Another farm parent said “Kids see the worry in their parents – and don’t want that life”.

**Diversity.** Diversity was a theme relevant to farmers and their survival in farming. Some of the creative ideas regarding diversification included raising pigeons

and goats, producing kosher foods, and running hunting preserves on private land. This focus on diversification may have been most dominant in Boissevain where they have held the “ Small Farm Challenge”. As one participant aptly phrased it “ The land and livestock producers are good at what they do, but you can’t control the weather and other factors”.

**Farming for future generations.** The issue of passing along the farm to the next generation came up in several communities. One parent said “None of my three kids wants to be a farmer or marry a farmer”. One farmer talked about the costs involved in starting a farm on his/her own, or taking over from a parent. There is a big capital cost to start farming (1.5 million in assets or loans) The only way to accomplish this might be for the parent to step aside from the farm’s cash flow and give approximately half a million in equity to the child. This can be a huge sacrifice for the parent – with little optimism that the child will thrive in the business.

#### Towns

**Effects of Farmer Financial Situation on the Town.** The perceptions of this varied a bit depending on the town, and on who was answering the question. Overall, it seems that centers with a wider economic base are somewhat less affected by the downturns in farming. In towns with larger non-agriculture related employers, they felt less impact: “It used to be more so – that farmers had an effect on the health of retailers”; “The community doesn’t rely on the farm economy as it used to”. However, another leader said “[We] have greater awareness of the role of farmers in the retail sector – business people have more appreciation of farming stresses”. Several towns had retailers with significant services for farm operations. “Farmers matter big time. But Neepawa has diversity so it is less affected by the farm economy.” The town retailers were most affected by discretionary spending. Several residents suggested that the farm implement dealerships went through tough times and some had to lay off staff.

One agri-business person said “Farmers generate so much business, we couldn’t survive without them.” Others said, “Boissevain has all of the other areas, but farming is the life blood [of the town] if/when they have the money” and “when farmers have a good year they spend some money”. Examples of the effects of farm difficulties were loss of several service stations and one or two lumber yards. Business people in several towns talked about a domino effect of poor farm incomes: “When individuals are not doing well, then they are not going out and not getting involved in community events.”

“Business have lower incomes, they refrain from hiring staff, the level of service goes down and then people go out of town to shop”.

Sometimes the message was mixed in one town an agri-business person said “Farming is VERY important to us”. Another business person from the same town said, “The community has not been affected yet – we’ve been lucky. We rely on agriculture but we have 3-4 factories and immigrants coming in”.

### Tangible Factors

Tangible factors in community economic performance include physical, natural, and economic factors. Definitions of these forms of capital are: “Physical capital as productive, tangible assets such as production sites, machines, infrastructure and buildings; natural capital as nature assets; and economic capital as liquid assets such as money, bonds and stocks” (Svendsen and Sørensen, 2007, p.456).

All of the communities had **physical capital** in the form of small manufacturing plants. Altona has Friesen’s book publishing business which employs about 350 people. Altona also has a plant that produces oil from Canola, and employs about 25 people. Boissevain has a plant that produces lumber products and employs about 25 people. Neepawa has a hog processing facility that employs about 250 people, and a lumber treatment facility that employs about 40. Arborg has several small manufacturing plants that employ as many as 100 people each. Several of the communities talked about their industrial parks. For example, Neepawa has just upgraded their sewer system to accommodate a renovated hog plant.

**Natural** capital was not a major topic area that communities identified, other than the local campgrounds; for example, Neepawa and Altona. People in Arborg talked about their proximity to Lake Winnipeg but said that their community did not benefit from the tourist traffic. The people of Boissevain are on the road between Brandon and the Peace Park which they know adds some tourist revenues to the town.

**Economic** capital was discussed by several towns Neepawa identified the volunteer project they have that provides partial funding for the local rink. The town owns a half section of land that is seeded and harvested by several farmers who provide the labour and machinery. Town businesses donate the inputs. The proceeds from the grain sales are given to the local rink for operating costs. Boissevain had a local foundation that contributed to various projects including their medical staff recruitment plan.

### Intangible factors

Less tangible resources refer to informal relations and activities ( Bryden et al., 2000). Svendsen & Sørensen (2007) defined social capital as network cooperation based on regular face-to-face interaction and trust. “A means for building social capital is organizational capital, meaning the organizational structures and everyday practices ... enabling things to be done” (p.456). Cultural capital was defined as “shared local culture and identity, primarily transmitted from parents to children” (p. 456). They also developed a category of ‘positive local development’ that was necessary “to avoid depopulation and to build social capital” (p. 457). Participants in their research were asked “In your view, what is positive local development?” and the authors developed the answers into seven categories that were used to analyze data in the current study. These categories include:

1. local solidarity, cooperation, mutual knowledge
2. maintain or increase number of local citizens
3. cultural activities including well-functioning associations
4. maintain or develop the local business life, establishment of working places
5. maintain or develop local institutions (school, hospital, other necessary services)
6. maintain or develop local retail shops
7. other answers – in the current study this category was used for “local leadership”

Additional categories that were added during the analysis of this current project included: cooperation, competition, quality of life, jobs, effects of downturns on farmers, effects of farming economic distress on local towns, and 2 categories to capture farmers’ feelings about the future of farming and their perceptions of the farm continuing as a family enterprise.

**Local solidarity, and cooperation** was a strong category in this study, perhaps not a surprise in a province that with significant levels of cooperatives in the retail and banking sectors especially in rural areas. Cooperation was necessary for working together to accomplish things for the community such as building a seniors’ housing building in Arborg, or enhancing the quality of life for residents such as the seniors’ van in Boissevain, the palliative care committee in Neepawa, community foundations or family memorial funds. Supporting local fundraisers and Fall suppers was an important element in this category. Another important aspect of local solidarity was ‘buying locally’. Loyalty to local merchants was emphasized. “I go out of my way to shop locally and am willing to pay more.” Altona had an interesting promotion: at Christmas, businesses give

“Chamber Bucks” that can be spent anywhere locally including the gas station. It is one way to get people into stores to look, and hopefully buy.

**Maintaining or increasing the number of local citizens** was a huge issue for all of the towns in this study. One person in Neepawa was very clear that survival of towns depends on the growth within the town, not on the rural population. Towns had two main strategies for increasing their population: attracting retirees, and attracting immigrants. One community had moving incentives for retirees that were shared between the town and local RM's. Immigrants supported local businesses and small industry. The availability and cost of housing are big factors in attracting new residents to a town which means that town councils must deal with issues such as servicing lots. Boissevain had a strategy of selling lots for \$1.00 with the stipulation that owners had to build on the lot within one year. Industry owners in Arborg were buying deserted farmsteads, fixing the houses, and renting or selling these to immigrants who are coming to the community for jobs. Someone in Neepawa had a similar idea but related it to increasing the tax base for the RM.

A related issue to the population of the broader community is the number of children in the school. Those in the smaller communities feared that their local school might be closed if the enrollment dropped too low. This was related to the issue of retaining young people in communities. Thus, towns focused on developing recreational facilities that are used by children and young families. A solution for increasing school enrollment in Boissevain was to recruit students from Korea. The School Division benefits from the tuition fees, local families are paid room and board, and enrollment at the school remains high enough that the school is not in danger of being closed.

The issue of **well-functioning associations** was raised in every community – both as a problem, and as a benefit of living in that community. An example of a very innovative community association was in Neepawa where they have a palliative care committee that provides services to residents outside of the mandate of the local Health Region. These services include things like in-home care, regular visits in the hospital, and volunteer drivers for trips to Winnipeg for treatment. Neepawa also have teams of volunteers operating the local movie theatre. Boissevain has a very active senior population who operate the local re-cycling plant.

A problem with some of the service clubs and fraternal organizations is a phasing out due to lack of new younger members. Another problem was the burnout of volunteers due to insufficient numbers of volunteers. Women working and role overload were other contributing factors, as was the matter of fathers leaving communities during the winter months for employment.

**Maintaining or developing the local business life, shops, and establishment of working places** were frequently raised in every community. This category was strongly related to the availability of jobs in the town, especially for farmers in the winter, for farm wives who need to supplement family income, and to help keep young people in the community after graduation. The primary strategies utilized by communities seemed to be sport tournaments and tourism to bring people into the town to shop. Boissevain has the turtle derby and a museum that they bought from a private owner who was retiring and going to close the door to the museum; Neepawa has the lily festival.

**Maintaining or developing local institutions**, particularly the hospital and related **medical services** was a main worry for all communities in terms of avoiding depopulation. Related issues are retaining doctors who are already in the community by purchasing better medical equipment for clinics/hospitals, and improving recreational amenities. Other institutions such as schools, and the veterinary clinic were also discussed as important to the survival of towns. Arborg was attempting to maintain facilities for visiting professionals such as dentists and lawyers. In an attempt to ensure adequate nursing staff at the hospital, Boissevain is sponsoring nursing students at university who have agreed to work in the community to pay off this student load.

**Leadership** was mentioned in all of the communities. Most communities had positive things to say about their local elected leaders: they had ‘vision’ or ‘strong vision’. They had a willingness to take chances, be progressive and make things happen. In addition to leaders, there is also a need for ‘champions’ in the community, that stayed focused on important issues. Several communities commented on the importance of the town officials to work cooperatively with the RM officials.

## **Discussion**

The forces affecting rural communities break down into two major factors or streams – farmer and community factors. This perspective was not surprising, but most participants highlighted the inter-relationship between how farmers are surviving and how the town is thriving.

The major issue with farmers has been a number of negative influences on farm income over the past 5 – 8 years, including too much rain, drought, poor prices and high costs. Multiple negative factors happening simultaneously or sequentially had added more stress recently. Difficulties in the financial realm have also affected farmers’ psychological perspective on their occupation. Optimism played a big role in this study. The word “optimism” seemed to resonate with people, especially farm men and women. Optimism came up in many areas including financial concerns and youth migration, and

children's choices of future occupational choices. If young families are disappearing from communities it affects school survival, retail sectors and the labor supply. "At the end of the day, it's about a body count".

Another common theme in the farmer discussions was the economic scale of farming. The trend in each community was towards larger farms and fewer farmers although there were some efforts to buck that trend.

In addition to farmers' issue/struggles, there are multiple factors affecting communities too. Increased mobility in society means that people travel to other places to get more diverse options in shopping, or better prices. Youth migration was discussed among farmers as well as business people and elected officials, as it was in Gerard's 2004 study in Saskatchewan. It came into discussion in terms of the need to develop and maintain jobs for young people, and maintain recreational facilities.

Quality of life was discussed in every community and relates to the issues of retaining population (young people graduating from high school), or attracting new citizens (retirees or immigrants). Positive factors in a community include clean air, beautiful surroundings, friendly, inclusive people and safety, and are referred to as 'pull' effects. Negative factors or 'push' effects included a lack of "schools, medical care, jobs and entertainment" (Bryden, 2000). High quality of life has a " 'pull' effect on individuals ... and impacts on a region's economic performance" (Bryden et al., 2000, p. 11),

More diverse towns attract visitors and their spending dollars, and maintain needed population to survive. What are communities doing to become more diverse? Developing more "amenities" in their communities – like hiking trails, baseball diamonds, skating/curling rinks, swimming pools, golf courses, campgrounds and museums, seniors' housing, housing for families, water and sewer expansion, maintaining or increasing medical facilities and staff, town events such as tournaments and festivals. "Even the local bar is an amenity". These activities fall under a larger theme of developing or improving consumer infrastructure – health, educational and cultural as well as that for shopping and recreation and tourism (Bryden, Atterton, Courtney, Hart, Munro & Timm , 2000)

### **Interpretation**

What conclusions can be drawn from these results? From a theoretical perspective, it is somewhat surprising that income variation, and uncertainty or variability in crop yields and prices were not discussed a great deal during the discussion groups. These topics came up in relation to the first question when they were specifically

identified by the researchers, but were not raised often later in the discussion. Economic theory would suggest that some risk averse people would be willing to pay some premium to face less variation in their income. Although the first survey of stressors did flag income variation, it was not the focus of the strategies for viability suggested by farmers or townsfolk.

Despite the lack of optimism regarding farming and the future prospects for farmers, people in communities were up-beat about their communities. There was a great deal of enthusiasm from participants in identifying the positive aspects of their communities. Overall, participants rated experiential social capital as very important for the survival of their community. This kind of capital is a measure of actual activity by members in a community rather than the simple existence of a social institution. All of the communities interviewed felt the success of their community (and the appeal of their community) relied on the level of activity of the citizens – in terms of volunteering for charity, local governance and even in terms of making the most of local services.

Although farmers were a bit optimistic about recent improvements in grain prices, there was not a great deal of optimism about future economic viability in farming. It was generally agreed that current trend will lead to fewer farmers and the remaining viable farms will be bigger. Thus, the viability of the town will rest on maintaining current population levels and increasing the population within the town boundaries through other means. All of the communities appeared to be using similar strategies regarding maintenance and growth. These strategies included: attracting retirees, working to keep the hospital open and retain medical staff, improving tourism infrastructure, supporting local businesses, and town beautification. Successful strategies were to focus more on in-migration: by developing agriculture related businesses (for example, slaughter house or grain processing plants), retirement services and more housing to support workers who move to take jobs or young people who want to stay in the community and work.

Participants in this study also identified bonding social capital (between members of the community) as a strong force in their communities, but they were not always confident of high levels of bridging capital to facilitate building social networks among or between currently well bonded groups. As towns and their farm neighbors evolve over the next decades researchers like Woodhouse (2006) suggest high levels of both types of social capital are key to community viability, including economic viability. Several examples of rural municipalities and towns working together were identified in this research. Tourism and development boards made up of members from various communities were trying to work together to identify regional strategies that helped all survive. Both farmers and townsfolk recognized the importance of the other community.

In terms of bonding capital it was often identified in each community, to some extent, as a major reason for living in smaller, rural communities. People said that the physical and the experiential capital were both necessary, concurrently, but that without the experiential, you don't have much "spirit" of community. At the end of the day, it is the involvement with others in the community that makes it an appealing place to live.

Each visit to these rural communities revealed some very keen local leaders who were aware of the future challenges they faced and were willing to discuss plans to address these challenges. Despite their historical reliance on agriculture, all four communities saw lower farm numbers coming and thus were considering other ways to attract residents. They all realized the stress levels in the farm community were contributing to the community stress level and long term viability. Simple variation in income, sometimes thought to be a major stressor, was not as identified as a major concern. Longer term trends like larger farms and falling farm numbers, macro economic trends and migration of the youth, were more dominant in open discussions.

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## Appendix I

### Focus Group Questions

1. Of the factors that may have had negative impacts on agriculture in the past few years, what are the factors that have **most** affected individuals in your community in terms of personal sense of well-being? What would you rank as the three factors that have most affected **individuals** in your community?
  - \_\_\_ personal finances,
  - \_\_\_ variability in income,
  - \_\_\_ extremes in weather,
  - \_\_\_ government policies,
  - \_\_\_ commodity prices for grains & oilseeds
  - \_\_\_ BSE crisis and border closure,
  - \_\_\_ youth migration to larger centers,
  - \_\_\_ lack of social support ,
  - \_\_\_ depression,
  - \_\_\_ lack of sense of belonging to community
  - \_\_\_ loss of optimism
2. How has your **community** been affected by these changes?
3. FARMERS – Does survival of your local community matter to you; that is, is the town itself as important as the opportunities such as off-farm employment?

BUSINESS PEOPLE AND POLICTICIANS – Is the sustainability of farming important to small businesses in your community; or, as others have found, the farm economy contributions are not as important as things such as old age pensions, manufacturing, tourism, oil/mining which contribute more to community viability than farming?

4. What, from your perspective constitutes community viability or community sustainability? That is, what is a healthy community? E.g. economic growth, maintenance and stability of the community, quality of life? Which comes first?
5. Would you link social capital to community viability? If so, how would you describe the linkages – what is the connection between viability/sustainability and social capital? What aspects of social capital are most linked or make the greatest contribution?
6. How healthy is your community? How closely does your community compare with your definition of a healthy community?
7. How would you describe the social and personal links among members in your community?
8. What kinds of links does your community have with other communities and/or political or interest groups that assist you to access resources for sustaining your community?
9. What solution/strategies have been used in this community over the past 5 – 10 years toward ensuring the sustainability/viability of the community?
10. Have you tried anything that hasn't worked?
11. What other strategies or plans do you have for things you think might work?