

COVID-19 accelerated many changes impacting rural communities, and we need to support their resilience

November 18 2021, by Kyle Rich, Grace Nelson, Heather Hall



Rural Canada has and will continue to play an essential role in the social, economic and cultural fabric of this country. Credit: Brian Holdsworth/Unsplash

Rural Canada is vital to the socio-economic fabric of this country.

Rural communities are places of employment, food production, energy generation, [resource extraction](#), environmental stewardship, cultural production and leisure. They are also home to millions of people. The

COVID-19 pandemic, however, has illuminated many new and existing inequities, which are shaping the realities of life in rural Canada.

In our work with the [Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation](#), we co-edited the 2021 [State of Rural Canada Report](#). The report provides a snapshot of key rural issues while also highlighting opportunities, recovery and resiliency in each province and territory.

Rural resilience in changing times

Rural communities across Canada are facing unprecedented changes—from [demographic shifts](#) and [economic restructuring](#) to the [impacts of climate change](#) and weak [rural development policies and programs](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated many changes impacting [rural communities](#). For example, [communities without reliable broadband](#) could not easily shift to remote work and education.

However, the researchers who authored chapters in our report illustrate the many ways rural people and organizations have demonstrated resilience to challenges and change.

[Understanding resilience](#), or the processes through which community members use existing assets and resources to manage change and build strong, inclusive and sustainable communities, is important for community well-being.

For example, in response to the pandemic, [Farmer's Markets of Nova Scotia](#) quickly coordinated a shift to online markets and pick-up hubs. [In Labrador](#), the NunatuKavut Community Council implemented a number of programs including food and heat vouchers.

Other examples of resiliency include [Coronach, Sask.](#), which has embarked on a journey to discover a new identity to mitigate the anticipated closure of the coal industry. As part of this revisioning, Coronach created the [South Saskatchewan Regional Economic Partnership](#). And [Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation](#), in partnership with Yukon College, developed the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Teaching and Working Farm to address food security on their traditional territory.

These examples and others provided throughout the report, highlight the importance of collaboration, capacity and support for rural people and organizations. In fact, supporting rural resilience is key for rural people and organizations in continuing to shape their own stories of success.

Supporting rural resilience

Many communities did not have appropriate capacity and resources—such as [staff or budgets for economic development](#)— to respond to changes related to the pandemic. These examples highlight the importance of strong [policy](#) frameworks in supporting rural communities.

Here are five recommendations on how we can support rural resilience through policy and practice.

- 1. Invest in rural policy & development:**Senior governments should invest in robust rural policy and development frameworks that recognize the diversity of rural communities. This should include [applying a rural and northern lens](#) when developing or adapting policies, programs, legislation or other government practices to ensure rural voices are engaged and heard. Federal and [provincial governments](#) should help fund, collect and analyze data on rural communities to ensure evidence-based policy development, program design and evaluation.

2. **Support rural capacity to plan for resilience:** Governments should invest in rural capacity to plan for rural resilience. The ability of local governments and organizations to respond and facilitate processes of resiliency largely relies on the capacity they have to adapt to changes. This could include supporting staff and community development initiatives as well as creating alternative program delivery models and applications.
3. **Enhance regional collaboration:** Rethinking how rural governments and organizations work together is an important strategy to address shortcomings in policy development and service provision. This requires support from senior governments and efforts by local governments and organizations. Regional approaches can be effective ways to understand the assets, resources and gaps that communities—and regions—collectively possess.
4. **Take decisive action on truth & reconciliation:** The resilience of rural places is largely intertwined with and dependent on relationships with Indigenous Peoples. Rural communities and policy-makers must engage in discussions of the history and ongoing impacts of colonization. Rural leaders at all levels of government should incorporate the [Calls to Action](#) and [Calls for Justice](#) into their policy and programming initiatives.
5. **Plan for sustainable rural futures:** Rural communities, leaders and policy-makers need to leverage their intimate knowledge of rural places to actively plan for a range of changes and challenges. We need to consider possibilities that will be faced in the short and long-term future. Anticipating and planning for environmental, demographic, technological and socio-economic changes will be key factors in whether rural communities survive and thrive in increasingly uncertain times.

The pandemic helped highlight the issues faced by rural Canadians. Rural Canada has and will continue to play an essential role in the social,

economic and cultural fabric of this country.

All Canadians must be invested in the sustainability and [resilience](#) of rural communities through critical reflection, political action and continued creativity in policy development.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: COVID-19 accelerated many changes impacting rural communities, and we need to support their resilience (2021, November 18) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-11-covid-impacting-rural-resilience.html>

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