

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

**Policies to  
support  
sustainable,  
inclusive, and  
digital economic  
development in  
rural and smaller  
communities  
in Canada**

**DECEMBER 2021**

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 **Canada 2020**





With funding from TELUS, Canada 2020 is embarking on a project of research and convening to identify what we can learn from global and local efforts to build more inclusive and sustainable economic well-being and community wealth in smaller and rural communities. Canada 2020 is committed to creating a platform where researchers, stakeholders, and policymakers with expertise in rural and community economic development can engage in policy discussions and identify solutions that can work on the ground in communities across Canada. With a focus on COVID recovery and taking stock of changes that have been produced by the pandemic, our focus will be on how to drive rapid progress on Canada's rural economic development strategy. This discussion paper is meant to animate and support informed public policy conversations.

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# Introduction

As governments increasingly incorporate inclusive growth principles into their economic policies, there is growing recognition of the potential for well-designed place-based economic strategies to bolster the well-being of rural communities across Canada.

For too long, rural policy has looked at small communities through the lens of seemingly inevitable urbanization and the growth of large city-regions. Government policies have often focused on remote and rural communities as places to subsidize instead of places that can thrive and innovate. But these assumptions and narratives are changing.

Fortunately, decision-makers are in a good position to confront conventional paradigms and established approaches in government programs. Some rural policies developed before the COVID-19 pandemic may not be equipped to meet the most pressing challenges rural communities are facing today. The renewed ambition and scope of policymaking prompted by COVID-19 and recovery planning — the need for decision-makers to both respond to and shape “a new normal” — has the potential to benefit Canada’s rural communities in an outsized way.

As part of that shift, we need to focus on the prosperity of rural communities on their own terms — as places of community well-being and economic opportunity — not just as extensions of cities or cities-in-waiting. To be successful, programs must acknowledge the importance of place and how well-being manifests itself in spatial ways in communities.

To improve rural well-being, new approaches cannot be driven by traditional economic indicators alone. Governments and Canadians understand that well-designed policies must pursue economic, social, and environmental objectives together.

Many of the most important issues we face — climate change, economic inclusion, Reconciliation, and building successful Canadian businesses — need to be looked at from a local and community perspective, with local voices and insights. The challenges presented by these issues manifest themselves differently in rural communities.

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The federal government has signalled interest in strengthening its approach to Canada's rural economies through the creation of the Minister of Rural Economic Development portfolio and its *Economic Development Strategy for Rural Canada* in 2019,<sup>1</sup> as well as through commitments in the 2021 Liberal election platform. The strategy has identified priorities, plans and tools, but there remains a lot to do in terms of execution, acceleration and adjustment as we emerge from the pandemic. Inherent to this strategy is a belief in a strengthened social contract between people in different regions and communities of different sizes, where all must have opportunities emerging from the pandemic. Digital connectivity and access in communities of all sizes are pre-requisites to a strengthened social contract.

What would strong, place-based rural policies look like in practice? How do current policies need to be reconsidered in light of shifts that have taken place over the course of the pandemic? How can governments support the acceleration of innovation that is happening in many rural communities, fueled by technological disruption and transition in many of Canada's traditional sectors? How can we drive digital adoption and connectivity so that all communities can access opportunities and services? How can local communities be agents and decision-makers rather than being simply recipients of programs? How can programs be effectively delivered in ways that integrate the diverse perspectives of those in communities who will use these programs?

This discussion paper is meant to spark discussion about the policies, frameworks and programs needed to strengthen the geography of opportunity across Canada.

1 Infrastructure Canada, "Rural Opportunity, National Prosperity: An Economic Development Strategy for Rural Canada," 2019, <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/rural/strat-eng.html>.

# The case for stronger place-based rural policies

## What are place-based economic strategies?

Done right, inclusive, place-based economic strategies offer the potential to bolster the well-being of rural communities across Canada and improve the innovative capacity of the Canadian economy. In contrast to sectoral, programmatic, or issue-defined economic development perspectives, **place-based economic strategies** are “holistic and targeted interventions that seeks to reveal, utilize and enhance the unique natural, physical, and human capacity endowments present within a particular location.”<sup>2</sup>

There is increasing global interest in place-based policies and strategies, complementing a renewed interest in the importance of community. There is an emerging literature on which kinds of place-based policies have worked and which have been less successful.<sup>3</sup> As digital adoption accelerates and high speed internet is available in more and more communities, new opportunities are created for people, businesses, organizations and services in smaller places.

Governments invariably have difficulty executing place-based strategies because governments are organized vertically by ministry around a discrete set of issues. Addressing any complex horizontal policy challenge is challenging for governments; developing integrated policies for “place” are simply an extreme manifestation of this on-going policy challenge. Canada is not alone to face these challenges and other jurisdictions are also exploring how to integrate place and community into program design to support better holistic, horizontal and systems thinking.<sup>4</sup>

The Government of Canada’s Atlantic Growth Strategy was one recent attempt to integrate elements of a place-based and horizontal approach to a set of inter-related policy issues, but these efforts are invariably challenging.<sup>5</sup> Results can be mixed, and it is easy to return to old habits, but these efforts represent a commitment to strengthening the Canadian social contract by acknowledging that the benefits of growth must be widely shared.

2 Sean Markey, “Primer on Place-Based Development,” November 2010, <http://cdnregdev.ruralresilience.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/primerplacebaseddevelopment-markey.pdf>.

3 Jay Shambaugh and Ryan Nunn, “Place-Based Policies for Shared Economic Growth,” 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/place-based-policies-for-shared-economic-growth/>.

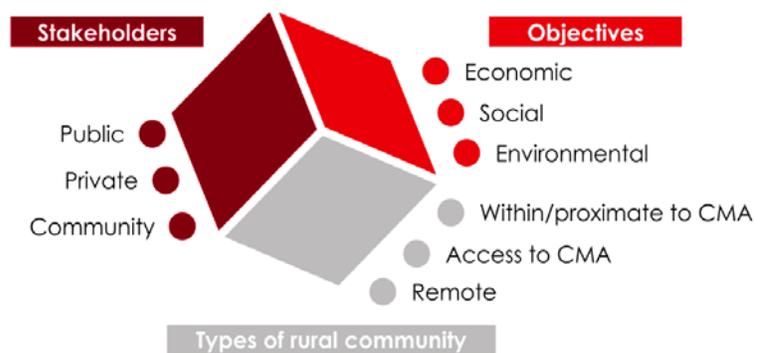
4 Government of Victoria, “A Framework for Place-Based Approaches,” 2020, <https://www.vic.gov.au/framework-place-based-approaches/>.

5 Government of Canada, “Atlantic Growth Strategy,” accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/atlantic-canada-opportunities/atlanticgrowth.html>.

## The OECD framework for rural well-being

While each rural community is unique, many rural communities in peer jurisdictions face common challenges. The newest OECD rural economic development framework — Rural Well-Being: Geography of Opportunities<sup>6</sup> — emphasizes the value of place-based approaches. Unlike previous versions of the Framework, which focused more narrowly on primary industries or attracting business investment, the new approach highlights the importance of local community assets and high-quality public services that support the well-being of rural residents. The goal of the new Framework is to enhance community well-being in all its manifestations, not simply attract investments by global firms that may or may not improve quality of life for rural residents.

### Modified OECD Visualization of the Dimensions of Rural Well-Being Framework<sup>7</sup>



## Why do we need place-based strategies for rural Canada?

There is an inherent value in having a thriving and strong rural Canada. Rural Canada accounts for nearly one-third of Canada's GDP, is home to millions of Canadians and the majority of Indigenous people, powers Canada's goods producing sectors, and, in many ways, is on the front lines of climate change.<sup>8</sup> Adopting a place-based approach can highlight and re-conceptualize the distinct strengths of rural communities, helping policymakers to harness these resources in innovative ways. Many of Canada's rural scholars have argued that place-based approaches are uniquely suited to strengthening and supporting rural communities, by allowing more local knowledge to drive policy processes.<sup>9</sup>

Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic there is a unique opportunity to re-think Canada's approaches to economic development. Communities are now beginning to see the nuanced and varied ways that COVID-19 has impacted their local regions.<sup>10</sup> It is at the level of individual communities, embedded within larger regional ecosystems, that firms and governments can seize transformational opportunities, enabled by data and digital adoption in agriculture,

6 OECD, Rural Well-Being: Geography of Opportunity, OECD Rural Studies (OECD, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1787/D25CEF80-EN>.

7 "Rural Well-Being Geography of Opportunities: Policy Highlights," OECD, 2020, 5, [https://www.oecd.org/regional/rural-development/PH\\_Rural-Well-Being.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/regional/rural-development/PH_Rural-Well-Being.pdf).

8 "Canada's Rural Economic Development Strategy: Progress Report," Infrastructure Canada, August 2021, <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/rural/cenred-eng.html>.

9 Bill Reimer and Sean Markey, "Place-Based Policy: A Rural Perspective," 2008, [https://www.crcresearch.org/files-crcresearch\\_v2/ReimerMarkeyRuralPlaceBasedPolicySummaryPaper20081107.pdf](https://www.crcresearch.org/files-crcresearch_v2/ReimerMarkeyRuralPlaceBasedPolicySummaryPaper20081107.pdf).

10 "Full Report - State of Rural Canada," Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2021, <https://sorc.crrf.ca/fullreport2021/>.

energy, mining, forestry, or other sectors. It is also a unique opportunity for communities to diversify and explore new opportunities that digital connectivity has enabled and will continue to present themselves as connectivity continues to accelerate.

Furthermore, many of the big national conversations that are emerging as Canadians look to a post-pandemic reality have distinct and often deepened implications for rural communities.

These top-of-agenda issues include the transformational impact of remote work, a lack of affordable housing supply, digital divides, digital delivery of public services, vulnerability of communities to climate events, manufacturing capacity, and Canada's vulnerability to supply chain disruptions.

The disruptions initiated by COVID-19 have national impacts but local variations. Policy solutions without place-based approaches will be less able to meet Canada's most pressing challenges. This is especially true for rural areas in Canada: a "one-sized-fits-all" approach flattens not only rural communities' differences from urban settings, but also their significant differences from one another.

Federal, provincial, territorial, Indigenous, and local governments in Canada have spent almost two years managing the public health and economic impact of COVID-19, but are now looking to pivot programs toward recovery. This is a unique opportunity to influence the shape and form of policies that will influence rural Canada for years to come.

***The disruptions initiated by COVID-19 have national impacts but local variations. Policy solutions without place-based approaches will be less able to meet Canada's most pressing challenges.***

# Rural well-being strategies should target inclusive growth

Place-based strategies for rural economic development should be guided by a well-rounded understanding of well-being. That means measuring success not just in terms of economic growth but in growth that is inclusive and sustainable. **Inclusive economic growth** refers to growth that is distributed fairly across society and creates opportunities for all, where people from different backgrounds can benefit from growth, new technologies, and globalization.<sup>11</sup> Beyond GDP, the inclusive approach measures and appreciates broader societal good that flows from high quality jobs, broadly shared economic security, community wealth and sustainable development. Place-based approaches are well-designed to promote inclusive growth, but how policies and programs are designed and delivered depend on active engagement with the needs of Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQ2S+ people, persons with disabilities and others whose interests have been systematically excluded, which sometimes include rural populations.

The federal government has taken these observations seriously. Budgets now consider the distributional impacts of policy choices more seriously than before, and the impact on quality of life, well-being and climate are systematically considered and reported. Budget 2021 devoted two appendices to the impact on equity, quality of life, inclusion, and other related issues.<sup>12</sup> Less well-known is that the federal government uses an explicit rural lens and analysis framework for many policy and program decisions.

There is a broad recognition that a more integrated and holistic approach to complex policy challenges is required. Economic growth that exacerbates inequality or makes it more difficult to achieve net-zero climate goals is no longer the kind of growth that is celebrated.

Inclusive growth is stronger because it means opportunities for everyone to contribute their talent, expertise, and innovation, with growing empirical evidence that reducing discrimination has enormous positive impacts on economic performance.<sup>13</sup> Sustainable growth is, by definition, more enduring and less precarious. A place-based rural economic development framework for Canada can overcome the limitations of past approaches and take a wider view of well-being, sustainability, and inclusion. However, as Ashleigh Weeden has noted, it is essential that our ambition for inclusive growth in Canada does not “end at the city limits.” A place-based policy approach can help minimize the risk that decision-makers overlook the distinct barriers faced by underserved or marginalized communities in rural Canada.<sup>14</sup>

11 OECD, “Inclusive Growth - Economic Growth That Is Distributed Fairly across Society,” accessed November 1, 2021, <https://www.oecd.org/inclusive-growth/#inequality-puts-our-world-at-risk>; Dani Rodrik and Stefanie Stantcheva, “A Policy Matrix for Inclusive Prosperity,” SSRN, May 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3386/W28736>.

12 Government of Canada, “Government of Canada Budget 2021,” 2021, <https://www.budget.gc.ca/2021/report-rapport/toc-tdm-en.html>.

13 A systematic review by Stanford and University of Chicago economists estimated that between 20 and 40 per cent of economic growth in the past 50 years in the US can be attributed to reduced discrimination, as women and racialized people were no longer fully barred from participating in professions and roles that had been effectively closed to them before. An IMF study suggested that closing the labour force participation gap between men and women with high levels of education in Canada would drive a four per cent increase in real GDP.

14 S. Ashleigh Weeden, “Will Post-COVID Policies Realize the Full Potential of Rural Canada?,” July 2020, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/july-2020/will-post-covid-policies-realize-the-full-potential-of-rural-canada/>.

## What do we mean by rural and remote in the Canadian context?

“Rural communities” in Canada can refer to a wide variety of experiences and contexts. It can span communities like Lions Bay, BC (North of Vancouver), all the way to communities like Taloyoak, NU served only by air and sea transportation. There is no consensus on the definition of “rural” and its definition often depends on the issue or research question being addressed. Valerie du Plessis and Ray Bollman noted these definitional challenges two decades ago and Statistics Canada continues to have a variety of different definitions that are applied for different purposes.<sup>15</sup> Although no definition is perfect for our purposes, conceptual clarity is important.

The new framework on rural well-being launched in 2020 by the OECD<sup>16</sup> offers a helpful categorization of different types of rural areas to capture some of the diversity of rural experience:

> **Rural inside metropolitan areas:**

These rural areas are an integral part of the commuting zone of the urban centre and their development is fully integrated within a functional urban area.<sup>17</sup>

> **Rural close to cities:**

These regions have strong linkages to a nearby urban area but are not part of its labour market. While the economies are not integrated, there are flows of goods and services that make their prospects closely connected.<sup>18</sup>

> **Rural remote:**

These regions are physically and economically distant from urban areas. There is market exchange of goods and services with urban areas, with rural remote regions often geared toward exporting primary outputs. Personal interactions outside the rural region are also generally more limited and infrequent, but there are good connections within the region.<sup>19</sup>

Statistics Canada refers to regional communities with populations less than 100,000 as non-Census Metropolitan Areas (non-CMAs). For the purposes of this discussion paper, we are focused on those non-CMAs with lower population density and with urban populations below 50,000. This definition captures a variety of communities: remote Northern communities, rural communities within the economic zone of cities, rural communities that are virtually a part of a metropolitan area, as well as Indigenous communities of various kinds, from remote fly-in communities to larger communities near a city.

15 Valerie du Plessis et al., “Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin Catalogue No. 21-006-XIE,” Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin 3, no. 3 (2001).

16 OECD, Rural Well-Being: Geography of Opportunity.

17 OECD, “Policy Note: Rural 3.0: A Framework for Rural Development,” 2018, <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/regionaldevelopment/Rural-3.0-Policy-Note.pdf>.

18 OECD.

19 OECD.

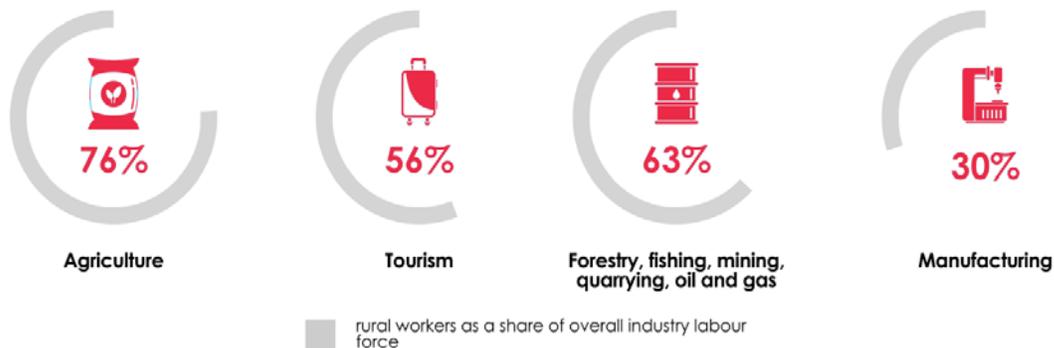
# What are the trends that have been impacting rural Canada?

Rural Canada contributes about a third of Canada’s overall GDP, despite being home to just a fifth of the country’s population<sup>20</sup>



- > **Many of the economic sectors that are important to Canada’s economy are driven by rural workers and communities**, including industries like mining, forestry, agriculture, fisheries, energy production, and manufacturing. For many of these sectors, rural workers occupy a disproportionate share of jobs.<sup>21</sup>
- > **Many rural communities struggle with economic diversification.** In more than 1,800 rural and remote communities in Canada — most of which with populations of 10,000 or less — an average of 30% of the local workforce is employed in the natural resources sector.<sup>22</sup>

Businesses in rural Canada weathered the impact of COVID-19 better than urban counterparts in a few important areas; more rural businesses remained operational during the pandemic and rural businesses reported less severe decreases in year-over-year revenue compared to urban businesses.<sup>23</sup>



20 “Rural Economic Development,” Infrastructure Canada, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/rural/development-eco-developpement-eng.html>.

21 Ray D. Bollman, “Non-Metro Employment in the Months before COVID and after COVID,” Rural Ontario Institute, 2020, [https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/Bollman\\_2020\\_May\\_8\\_Non-metro\\_employment\\_in\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_era\\_to\\_April\\_2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/Bollman_2020_May_8_Non-metro_employment_in_the_COVID-19_era_to_April_2020_FINAL.pdf).

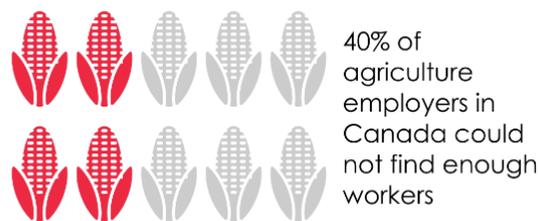
22 K Vodden and Cunsolo, A, “Rural and Remote Communities; Chapter 3 in Canada in a Changing Climate: National Issues Report,” Government of Canada, 2021, [https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/sites/nrcan/files/GNRC/Chapter\\_3\\_Rural\\_and\\_Remote\\_Communities\\_Final\\_EN.pdf](https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/sites/nrcan/files/GNRC/Chapter_3_Rural_and_Remote_Communities_Final_EN.pdf).

23 “Outlook of Rural Businesses and Impacts Related to COVID-19, First Quarter of 2021,” Statistics Canada, accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00015-eng.htm>.

But as Canada looks to chart a path post-pandemic, employers and businesses rooted in rural communities face profound and near-term strains.

> **Potential labour shortages and skills gaps:**

Businesses and even entire industries in rural Canada are facing acute labour shortages. In 2021, about a third of rural businesses reported that they anticipated a near-term labour force shortage.<sup>24</sup> In 2018, primary agriculture had the highest job vacancy rate of any Canadian industry, and a 2020 survey of agriculture employers in Canada found that 40% of them could not find enough employees to fill their vacancies,<sup>25</sup> although some academics have noted that labour shortages could at least in part be filled by offering higher wages.



> **Access to capital:** Rural SMEs face unique barriers in accessing the investment they need to grow. This includes access to financial institutions, many of which are centred in urban communities.<sup>26</sup> Many businesses have maximized available credit to weather the pandemic's economic shocks.

> **Retirements and business succession:**

The future of rural communities will be greatly impacted by changing business ownership and generational shifts. For example, the Rural Ontario Institute estimates that 48% of rural businesses in Ontario will face an ownership and leadership transition in the next 5 years (a figure that represents about 110,000 businesses).<sup>27</sup> Statistics Canada data from early 2021 indicated that in three industries — arts and entertainment, accommodation and food services, and real estate and leasing — more than 20% of rural businesses had plans to sell, close, or transfer their business in the following year, compared to less than 10% of urban businesses in those sectors.<sup>28</sup>



An estimated 48% of rural businesses in Ontario will face a transition in the next 5 years

> **Automation:** A growing body of international research indicates that rural regions across industrialized countries face a comparatively high risk of job automation compared to urban areas; rural areas tend to have more industries with repetitive tasks, less economic

24 "Outlook of Rural Businesses amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, Third Quarter 2021," Statistics Canada, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211018/dq211018c-eng.htm>.

25 "Understanding the Effects of COVID-19 on Canada's Agriculture Workforce," Government of Canada, accessed November 1, 2021, [https://cahrc-crrha.ca/sites/default/files/Impacts of COVID-19 on agriculture\\_Final 30Mar.pdf?utm\\_source=CAHRC+-+CCRHA+Mailing+List&utm\\_campaign=1add241611-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_12\\_14\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_c2d791d1b6-1add241611-513547941&mc\\_cid=1add241611&mc\\_eid=4167a24b00](https://cahrc-crrha.ca/sites/default/files/Impacts%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20agriculture_Final%2030Mar.pdf?utm_source=CAHRC+-+CCRHA+Mailing+List&utm_campaign=1add241611-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_12_14_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c2d791d1b6-1add241611-513547941&mc_cid=1add241611&mc_eid=4167a24b00).

26 Rural Opportunity and Investment Coalition, "Helping Rural Canadian SMEs Access the Capital They Need," 2020, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FINA/Brief/BR10596177/br-external/RuralOpportunityAndInvestmentCoalition-e.pdf>.

27 "Business Ownership Succession," Rural Ontario Institute, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/knowledge-centre/info-briefs/business-ownership-succession>.

28 "Outlook of Rural Businesses and Impacts Related to COVID-19, First Quarter of 2021."

diversification, and more outmigration of skilled workers.<sup>29</sup> A Public Policy Forum report examining place-based workforce trends in the Canadian context indicates that rural communities in Canada will be more susceptible to the impacts of automation and technology-induced disruption.<sup>30</sup>

## Rural communities tend to report a higher life satisfaction score and sense of community belonging than urban areas.<sup>31</sup>

But rural Canadians are also more likely than urban residents to report feeling like the economy is getting worse: many people, especially young people, feel like they need to leave in order to access opportunities.

**Before the pandemic, impacts of ‘brain drain’, outmigration, and a shortage of working-age residents had a profound impact on the vibrancy and future-readiness of rural communities. Many of these same communities are still facing acute labour shortages in the wake of COVID-19.** For several decades, rural Canada’s population has been generally older, less educated, and less employed than urban Canada: these are demographic trends that some anticipate could intensify in years to come.<sup>32</sup>

- > Between 2001 and 2016, the number of potential workers in non-metro Canada decreased by 23%. However, the number of potential retirees continuously increased by 40%.<sup>33</sup>
- > Statistics Canada modelling predicts that by 2036, non-metropolitan areas in Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia will have fewer than two people in the labour force for every person not in the labour force aged 65 and over. In 2017, this ratio was at 2.5 or above for each of these non-metropolitan areas.<sup>34</sup>
- > Rural Canada is growing at a significantly slower rate than urban communities: the number of rural births is about equal to rural deaths, with the notable exception of communities with large Indigenous populations.

### Rural workforce, 2001-2016



### Some rural communities, 2036



29 OECD, Rural Well-Being: Geography of Opportunity. and McKinsey Global Institute, “The Future of Work in America: People and Places, Today and Tomorrow,” 2019, [https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Featured Insights/Future of Organizations/The future of work in America People and places today and tomorrow/The-Future-of-Work-in-America-Full-Report.ashx](https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Future%20of%20Work%20in%20America-Full-Report.ashx).

30 Sean Speer and Weseem Ahmed, “A Place-Based Lens to the Future of Work in Canada,” Public Policy Forum , 2020, <https://ppforum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PlaceBasedLensToTheFutureOfWork-PPF-June2020-EN.pdf>.

31 St John PD et al., “Life Satisfaction in Adults in Rural and Urban Regions of Canada - the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging,” Rural and Remote Health 21, no. 3 (August 1, 2021): 6631, <https://doi.org/10.22605/RRH6631>.

32 Sean Speer and Weseem Ahmed, “A Place-Based Lens to the Future of Work in Canada.”

33 “Rural Challenges, National Opportunity,” Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2018, <https://fcm.ca/sites/default/files/documents/resources/report/rural-challenges-national-opportunities.pdf>.

34 Laurent Martel, “The Labour Force in Canada and Its Regions: Projections to 2036,” Statistics Canada, accessed November 9, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2019001/article/00004-eng.htm>.

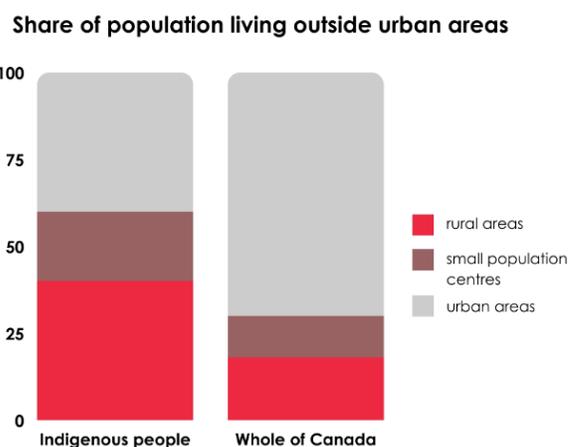
However, disruptions associated with COVID-19 may represent an inflection point for Canada’s rural communities — the increased use of distributed or hybrid working models, the rising costs of housing in urban areas, and Canadians’ renewed appreciation for outdoor space are just some reasons why city-dwellers and suburbanites have renewed interest in rural living.<sup>35</sup>

It is difficult to know the full extent of pandemic-related demographic shifts, in part because of limited data collection outside of major CMAs. However, some early indicators demonstrate that “an escape to rural” phenomenon may be more than anecdotal:

- > Montreal and Toronto posted record numbers of out-migration between July 2019 and July 2020, the last year of available data.<sup>36</sup>
- > 60% of Ontarians agreed or somewhat agreed in a 2020 survey that living in a rural area was more appealing in the wake of the pandemic.<sup>37</sup>
- > U-Haul tracks and compares pick-up and drop-off locations to track migration trends. According to their metrics, the city that experienced the biggest growth (measured by drop-offs and pick-ups of moving vehicles) in 2020 was North Bay, Ontario, a place that wasn’t even in the top 25 the year before. Other communities in U-Haul’s top 20 for growth that year included Barrie (ON), St. Thomas (ON), Lethbridge (AB), and Shawnigan (QC).<sup>38</sup>

## A national conversation about the future of rural Canada cannot be extricated from national conversations about the self-government and wellbeing of Indigenous people.

Nearly 60% of Indigenous people in Canada live in rural areas (38.9%) or small population centres (20.0%).<sup>39</sup> In general, as the rurality of a given area in Canada increases, so too does the relative proportion of residents who are Indigenous.<sup>40</sup>



35 “Full Report - State of Rural Canada.”

36 “The Daily — Canada’s Population Estimates: Subprovincial Areas, July 1, 2020,” Statistics Canada, accessed November 9, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210114/dq210114a-eng.htm?HPA=1>.

37 “Homeownership Seen as Good Investment in COVID-19 Environment- OREA and Nanos,” Ontario Real Estate Association, 2020, <https://www.oreacovid19info.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020-1677-OREA-June-Populated-Report-with-Tabs.pdf>.

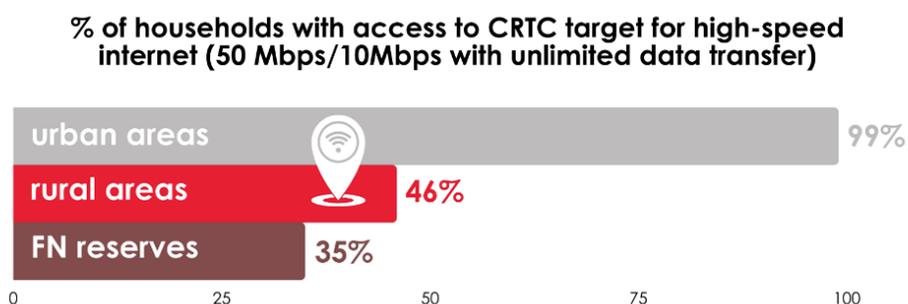
38 “It’s Called ‘out-Migration’ and Canada’s Bigger Cities Are Bearing the Brunt,” National Post, January 2021, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/its-called-out-migration-and-canadas-bigger-cities-are-bearing-the-brunt>.

39 “Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census,” Statistics Canada, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/desc/Facts-desc-ap-pa.cfm?LANG=Eng&GK=CAN&GC=01&TOPIC=9&>.

40 “Census Division - Percentage of the Population with Aboriginal Identity,” Statistics Canada, accessed November 1, 2021, [https://www97.statcan.gc.ca/Geocortex/Essentials/REST/TempFiles/CPDV\\_Export\\_2021\\_10\\_19\\_16\\_29\\_48.pdf?guid=a4161896-2150-40d6-b9a7-3fa6954e9e3d&contentType=application%2Fpdf](https://www97.statcan.gc.ca/Geocortex/Essentials/REST/TempFiles/CPDV_Export_2021_10_19_16_29_48.pdf?guid=a4161896-2150-40d6-b9a7-3fa6954e9e3d&contentType=application%2Fpdf).

**Some key services and infrastructure in rural Canada compare poorly to urban areas, which can make it harder to both attract and retain people and businesses.**

> **Broadband:** While access is improving, and 97.4% of rural Canadians have access to 4G LTE networks,<sup>41</sup> high speed internet in rural Canada still lags far behind urban communities. Only 45.6% of Canadians living in rural communities met benchmarks for high-speed internet access in 2019, compared to 98.6% of urban areas. For First Nations reserves, this number is only 34.8% of households.<sup>42</sup>



> **Health care:** Even though almost one-fifth of Canadians (18%) live in rural communities, these communities are served by only 8% of practising physicians in Canada, and only 2% of specialists.<sup>43</sup>



> **Attainable housing:** In rural Canada, 24% of residents are unable to find affordable, quality rental housing, a figure that represents twice the national average.<sup>44</sup>



> **Infrastructure:** Rural municipalities own up to 49 % of Canada’s infrastructure assets, but frequently lack the personnel or tax base to maintain that infrastructure effectively. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities estimates that 60% of municipalities have 5 staff members or fewer.<sup>45</sup>

41 “Communications Monitoring Report - LTE and Broadband Availability,” CRTC, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/policymonitoring/2020/cmr4.htm>.

42 “Communications Monitoring Report - LTE and Broadband Availability.”

43 “Physician Shortage in Canada: A Review of Contributing Factors,” Global Journal of Health Science, 2017, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318056760\\_Physician\\_Shortage\\_in\\_Canada\\_A\\_Review\\_of\\_Contributing\\_Factors](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318056760_Physician_Shortage_in_Canada_A_Review_of_Contributing_Factors).

44 “Canada’s Rural Economic Development Strategy: Progress Report.”

45 “Rural Opportunity, National Prosperity: An Economic Development Strategy for Rural Canada,” Infrastructure Canada, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/alt-format/pdf/rural/rural-strat-eng.pdf>.

Researchers and policymakers are just beginning to make sense of the impact that the pandemic has had on these trends. Popular media, dinner-time conversations and some data are pointing to disruptions of some long-term trends. At this time, we do not yet know the answer to many questions and data remains unavailable on some of the issues that are at the forefront of people's minds, like whether Canada will experience a significant and longer-term trend of out-migration *towards* smaller communities. However, it is certainly a possibility that must be considered in policymaking and program design. It is possible that the depth and nature of these trends will become clearer as the country emerges from the pandemic.

***Researchers and policymakers are just beginning to make sense of the impact that the pandemic has had.***

# What would strong, place-based rural policies look like in practice?

As we emerge from the pandemic, what will it really mean to adopt a ‘place-based’ approach to policy — an approach that centres the community as the primary unit of analysis in the design of policy and programs, while at the same time deepening connections between communities of different sizes and strengthening complex regional ecosystems?

## Where we are

In recent years, as the federal government has increasingly embraced principles of inclusive economic growth into its policies and programs, it has taken promising steps towards developing a more comprehensive and thoughtful approach to addressing the challenges of rural Canadians and communities.

After the Rural Secretariat was dismantled in 2013,<sup>46</sup> for a number of years there seemed to be no natural home for rural policies within Canada’s broader economic strategy. Now, the federal government has shown renewed interest in strengthening Canada’s rural economies through the creation of the Minister of Rural Economic Development portfolio and the *Economic Development Strategy for Rural Canada* in 2019.<sup>47</sup> The strategy embraces a “whole of community approach for rural economic development” and outlines investments meant to strengthen places, people, and enable partnerships.<sup>48</sup> The strategy represents an important step, but was developed prior to the pandemic without an appreciation of the significant societal changes that were about to take place in response to COVID-19.

## Key priorities, Canada’s Rural Economic Development Strategy<sup>49</sup>

Places: Building Rural Communities	People: Supporting Rural Canadians	Partnerships: Working Together, Better
Expanding broadband and mobile connectivity	Helping newcomers to rural communities	Integrating rural perspectives into federal policies and decisions
Renewing infrastructure and building climate resilience	Building affordable housing and investing in public transit	Working horizontally to improve access to federal programs and services
Strengthening local economies and supporting businesses impacted by the pandemic	Helping women re-enter the workforce and investing in early learning and childcare	Ensuring that federal investments benefit rural communities

46 Barry Wilson, “Feds Abolish Rural Secretariat,” *The Western Producer*, June 26, 2013, <https://www.producer.com/daily/feds-abolish-rural-secretariat/>.

47 Infrastructure Canada, “Rural Opportunity, National Prosperity: An Economic Development Strategy for Rural Canada.”

48 “Minister of Rural Economic Development Transition Book: Overview of Rural Economic Development,” Infrastructure Canada, October 2019, <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/pd-dp/transition/2019/red-der/3/book-cahier-3-eng.html>.

49 Infrastructure Canada, “Canada’s Rural Economic Development Strategy: Progress Report,” August 2021, <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/rural/centred-eng.html>.

## Where we need to go

Through both the strategy and recent commitments in the Liberal platform,<sup>50</sup> the federal government is moving towards inclusive and place-based approaches. The government has appointed new Ministers for Regional Development Agencies and it is expected that they will take a leadership role on rural and regional economic and community development strategies, alongside a new Minister of Rural Economic Development.

These are important shifts and have been accompanied by some important concrete actions, but how can the government deepen the structural change towards creating regionally-led, place-based strategies, and do so in ways that acknowledge the significant changes that have taken place in the past 20 months? A truly inclusive, place-based approach to rural policies requires a re-think of which specific problems the government needs to confront and which tools and levers the federal government has available to achieve its goals.

***How can the government deepen the structural change towards creating regionally-led, place-based strategies, and do so in ways that acknowledge the significant changes that have taken place in the past 20 months?***

50 Liberal Party of Canada, "Forward. For Everyone. 2021 Liberal Platform," 2021.

# Key themes for discussion

Early roundtables, interviews and other research have highlighted a number of key themes where governments and communities must accelerate and deepen their work in order to deliver an inclusive and sustainable economic future for those living in rural communities. These are well-aligned with the government's rural economic development strategy, but they also highlight areas where the pandemic has revealed new needs or opportunities, and where effective execution of the strategy will be particularly challenging. For many rural communities, it appears that access to people, markets, digital connectivity, public services, and capital has been impacted by COVID-19. How governments and communities respond in the coming year will have a significant impact on well-being and prosperity for years to come.

Five themes have been identified that will be crucial for successful place-based approaches. Accelerating connectivity is an enabling condition to make progress on many of the issues that have been highlighted.

How these issues manifest in rural places must be explicitly considered so as to avoid an implicit urban lens. For each theme, we outline the challenge and context and suggest some central discussion questions and ideas to support work to design and deliver policy solutions.

## **KEY THEMES**

1. Supporting investments in businesses
2. Making the right investments in physical, digital, and social infrastructure
3. Advancing reconciliation
4. Ensuring access to high quality public services
5. How we make decisions: devolution, decision-making, capacity, and governance

## Theme 1: Supporting investment in businesses

Canada has a lot of strong, thriving businesses in rural areas but they have been facing issues for decades. Many family-owned businesses face succession challenges and others have difficulty connecting with large markets and customer bases. The pandemic hit SMEs hard, including in smaller communities. Business support programs, often delivered by regional development agencies, played a key role in helping many survive. But as business activity accelerates, how can programs better support small and medium-sized businesses in rural communities to digitize, scale and export?

### KEY QUESTIONS

How can we enable innovation and investment in smaller communities?

How can we ensure rural SMEs can compete in a digital economy?

How can we get more capital investment into smaller communities?

## Potential approaches to explore

### > **Enable businesses to stay in place through employee ownership**

Canada has an opportunity to build an employee ownership economy by making legal and regulatory changes that make Employee Ownership Trusts easier to create in Canada and remove disincentives to their use.<sup>51</sup> The 2021 federal budget signalled interest in pursuing these vehicles, which are more likely to keep successful businesses in local communities, building community wealth.

### > **Accelerate digitization of rural SMEs**

Digital Mainstreet programs that help traditional SMEs digitize quickly and acquire the digital skills they need to access markets online are being rolled out across the country. These programs can be expanded in concert with the business service programs and infrastructure so that rural SMEs can get access to the same kinds of support services as are available in urban centres. RDAs could help measure digital readiness in different sectors, roll out programs tailored to the community and key sectors, like ag tech or tourism, and track which approaches are having the most positive impact on digital adoption.

### > **Invest more in community development finance institutions**

Community development finance institutions and community development corporations can be part of an ecosystem of local, embedded institutions that can unleash a new progressive wave of rural economic development.<sup>52</sup> Governments should facilitate greater experimentation in this sector. Partnerships with Indigenous community finance and development corporations can strengthen local economic asset building in many communities.

51 "Building an Employee Ownership Economy," accessed November 1, 2021, <https://www.employee-ownership.ca/>.

52 Matthew Mendelsohn and Noah Zon, "An Inclusive Industrial Policy for Canada," Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship, January 2021, <https://brookfieldinstitute.ca/an-inclusive-industrial-policy-for-canada/>.

> **Incentivize local and equitable lending through reporting**

Clearer obligations on the part of Canadian banks, pension funds and others to report where they invest could identify gaps in access to capital, incent local investments, and support other policy tools related to access to capital. This could also take the form of exploring a version of a Community Reinvestment Act for Canada, where lenders have obligations to meet the diverse borrowing needs of local communities in which they operate, including rural communities.<sup>53</sup>

> **Aggressively use local and social procurement to support local businesses**

Public and private sector organizations of all kinds could use their procurement budgets more successfully to support local and rural businesses. While governments have moved slowly but steadily towards more strategic local and social procurement, these processes could be deepened, measured, and expanded beyond governments to the broader public sector and heavily regulated sectors like banking. To leverage this tool to its maximum, we first need to be able to successfully track where procurement dollars are going with respect to local economic, inclusion, and sustainability objectives.

## **Theme 2: Making the right investments in physical, digital, and social infrastructure**

Inclusive, place-based approaches require investing in traditional and digital infrastructure. These investments need to support economic, social, and environmental outcomes. Connectivity is a key enabling pre-condition for many of the issues discussed in this paper. Canada has done a good job in accelerating investments in connectivity for rural regions through investments in broadband, but these investments are effectively catch-up. How do we ensure that with the next wave of technological change, rural areas won't be left behind? What other much-needed investments does the federal government need to make to ensure quality of life in rural Canada?

### **KEY QUESTIONS**

What are the critical infrastructure investments necessary to support well-being, sustainability and prosperity in rural communities and how can we use alternative mechanisms like the Canada Infrastructure Bank to roll these out more quickly?

How do economic shifts, including digitization and remote/hybrid work change the infrastructure priorities of smaller communities?

How should we invest in transportation networks while avoiding lock-in to today's carbon-intensive technologies?

53 Federal Reserve Board, "Community Reinvestment Act (CRA)," accessed November 30, 2021, [https://www.federalreserve.gov/consumerscommunities/cra\\_about.htm](https://www.federalreserve.gov/consumerscommunities/cra_about.htm).

## Potential approaches to explore

### > **Revisit broadband and spectrum policies and targets**

Development of rural digital infrastructure should be a top priority when formulating spectrum, broadband and digital policy. This goal will sometimes be in conflict with other important policy objectives, but rural priorities, like development of rural broadband infrastructure, is an important enabling condition for many rural goals around well-being and inclusive economic growth. Focusing on a fixed connectivity standard (50/10 Mbps) is likely to leave rural communities in permanent catch-up. New responsive standards that ensure a level playing field will be needed, along with simplified government funds to allow for more rapid delivery of projects that enhance broadband access. Next generation plans should also prioritize partnership with Indigenous communities, including exploring opportunities to leverage spectrum policy to close the digital divide for rural Indigenous communities, as well as ensuring participation on broadband projects that cross Indigenous land.<sup>54</sup> Spectrum policy should require deployment, particularly around 5G, and not allow firms to sit on spectrum as a speculative investment. Canada should follow its peers, releasing large quantities of spectrum rapidly, in order to support rural connectivity.

### > **Address market gaps to rural housing supply that meet the needs of communities**

Housing supply and affordability are increasingly impacting smaller communities in Canada, particularly those more proximate to large and medium-sized cities. There are critical gaps along the spectrum of housing needs, including affordable home purchases and rental options. Governments at all levels can mobilize policy tools, including funding or Crown Corporations to address supply gaps in rural communities, as a component of place-based strategies.

### > **Mobilize flexible space for entrepreneurship, innovation, and communities**

When it comes to community and economic development, some of the hardest working infrastructure in smaller communities is often overlooked as infrastructure at all — church basements, legion halls, and other spaces that function as community hubs, event spaces, and pop-up commercial hubs. Access to multipurpose spaces is critical for a variety of community and economic development needs. Larger communities benefit from a wider variety of market options, as well as institutional spaces; rural communities need creative solutions. These could include exploring distributed models that bring the resources and model of hubs like Communitech and Hub 350 to smaller communities, with service offerings tailored to the economic profile of local communities. RDAs could play a key role in this. Governments and other institutions could also mobilize under-used space to make available for office or retail. Governments should also assess the design of infrastructure funding programs, tax policy, and planning guidelines to ensure dynamic main streets.

<sup>54</sup> Council of Canadian Academies, “Waiting to Connect: The Expert Panel on High-Throughput Networks for Rural and Remote Communities in Canada” (Ottawa, October 2021), [https://cca-reports.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Waiting-to-Connect\\_FINAL-EN\\_digital.pdf](https://cca-reports.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Waiting-to-Connect_FINAL-EN_digital.pdf).

- > **Invest in resilient, sustainable transportation infrastructure to move goods and people**  
To build businesses, connect with family, and reach services, rural residents need access to reliable transportation infrastructure. To meet climate objectives, that infrastructure needs to shift rapidly to low-carbon technologies while remaining affordable and reliable for rural needs. Investments like electric vehicle fast-charging stations or regional rail can accelerate this transition. Remote communities, especially those without connection to the national road network, require different types of infrastructure upgrades, including airport upgrades and support for ice roads to adapt to new needs and impacts of climate change. A full range of options need to be part of any plan that promotes economic inclusion, especially for Indigenous communities.

## EXAMPLE

### Enabling rural innovation

#### US Center on Rural Innovation (CORI)

Many have argued that the age of automation will disproportionately benefit cities.<sup>55</sup> Urban areas are expected to gain people and jobs. But some suspect that these trends may have played themselves out. In the United States, the Center on Rural Innovation is approaching the future with an expectation that rural communities can be places of innovation and wealth creation.<sup>56</sup>

CORI focuses on building scalable tech accelerators focused on rural communities, building tech skills, creating spaces and places of sufficient density to support tech work, access to capital and building a national network of innovative rural communities that create some of the benefits of agglomeration and larger investment opportunities. They approach this work through the lens of inclusion, with a recognition that innovation and technology in rural communities need to be inclusive to be successful.

<sup>55</sup> Oxford Economics, "Global Cities Report," Oxford Economics, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/cities/report>.

<sup>56</sup> "Center on Rural Innovation," accessed November 8, 2021, <https://ruralinnovation.us/>.

## Theme 3: Advancing reconciliation

Place-based economic strategies can align with Canada's commitment to reconciliation, self-government, re-building of Nations and Indigenous economic self-determination. But how do we ensure that Canada's rural policies help deliver on these promises in practice, rather than just in theory?

Discussions of inclusive economic growth and place-based economic strategies for rural Canada cannot be complete without an understanding of how these strategies implicate and intersect with Indigenous self-determination and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which has now been incorporated into Canadian law. For many people, the term "rural" brings up mental images of predominantly white farm towns. But Indigenous people represent a high proportion of the population in rural areas all across Canada.<sup>57</sup> Nearly 60 percent of Indigenous people in Canada live in rural areas or small population centres.<sup>58</sup> That means when decision-makers and policy advocates talk about rural economic development, they are implicating Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities that often live directly alongside them.

Inclusive, place-based economic approaches are in line with the goals of Indigenous economic self-determination and self-government. Place-based approaches emphasize local decision-making and put the economic, social, and environmental well-being of the community at the centre. Many Indigenous communities are proximate to larger urban areas and are integrated in terms of economic development and local and regional labour markets. Others share in the ownership, development, and benefits from natural resource projects. But we can't expect place-based approaches to inevitably produce economic development for Indigenous communities. To actually make progress, positive outcomes for Indigenous peoples must be an intentional outcome, with policy, program design, governance and delivery re-oriented to prioritize it.

### KEY QUESTIONS

How can Canada's rural policies advance the interests of Indigenous peoples?

How can we empower Indigenous businesses and solve lack of capital challenges?

57 Statistics Canada, "Percentage of the Population with Aboriginal Identity, 2016 Census," Statistics Canada, 2016, [https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dv-vd/cpdv-vdpr/index-eng.cfm?configBase=https://www97.statcan.gc.ca/Geocortex/Essentials/REST/sites/CPDV/viewers/CensusProgram\\_gvh/virtualdirectory/Resources/Config/Default&focusGeographyId=2016A000011124&visualizationGeographyLevelId=3&activeIndicatorId=2074&activeThemeld=8&extent=3515573.22105455,1073800.74542706,8745669.69362249,4355429.90468538&comparisonGeographyList](https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dv-vd/cpdv-vdpr/index-eng.cfm?configBase=https://www97.statcan.gc.ca/Geocortex/Essentials/REST/sites/CPDV/viewers/CensusProgram_gvh/virtualdirectory/Resources/Config/Default&focusGeographyId=2016A000011124&visualizationGeographyLevelId=3&activeIndicatorId=2074&activeThemeld=8&extent=3515573.22105455,1073800.74542706,8745669.69362249,4355429.90468538&comparisonGeographyList).

58 "Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census."

## Potential approaches to explore

### > **Make reconciliation a key pillar of Canada's rural policies**

While Indigenous interests and challenges are mentioned throughout Canada's Rural Economic Development Strategy and there are significant promises for Indigenous people in the most recent government platform, Canada's rural policies lack an explicit focus and commitment to advancing reconciliation, rebuilding of Nations and honouring legal obligations under UNDRIP. One option could be to make economic self-determination and reconciliation a key pillar of Canada's rural strategies to ensure accountability and concrete action.

### > **Extend and expand the Indigenous Growth Fund**

The new \$150 million social impact fund meant to provide Indigenous businesses with capital through Aboriginal Financial Institutions is promising,<sup>59</sup> but significant gaps in investment have built up over centuries, rooted in colonial practices and structures. Estimates from almost a decade ago in 2013 showed that “despite the growth of capital in the First Nation and Inuit business community, an additional \$83.3 billion in capital would be needed to fuel a First Nation and Inuit economy operating at the same level as mainstream Canada.”<sup>60</sup> If early results from the fund are promising, it should be scaled quickly.

### > **Develop a comprehensive Indigenous business strategy**

Coming out of the pandemic, Indigenous businesses report a wide range of business challenges that point to a need for greater support. Surveys by the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business show that in the wake of COVID-19 Indigenous businesses self-report challenges with securing capital, talent, access to markets and government procurement. To ensure the needs of Indigenous businesses are being met, other countries such as Australia have developed Indigenous business sector strategies.<sup>61</sup>

### > **Continue to drive resource sharing, community benefits agreements and social procurement from Indigenous-owned businesses**

Governments and private sector firms have put in place a variety of policies to ensure that projects deliver benefits like infrastructure, training, and employment. These benefits now often include ownership, as Indigenous investment funds deploy their capital in ways designed to secure returns and a healthy economic future for their communities. These approaches must continue to be deployed, deepened, and better understood.

59 NACCA National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association, “Indigenous Growth Fund,” April 21, 2021, <https://nacca.ca/igf/>.

60 NACCA, “Improving Access to Capital for Indigenous Peoples in Canada,” 2017, [https://nacca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/NAEDB\\_ImprovingAccessToCapital.pdf](https://nacca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/NAEDB_ImprovingAccessToCapital.pdf).

61 Australian Government, “Indigenous Business Sector Strategy,” 2018.

## Theme 4: Ensuring access to high-quality public services

Access to high-quality health, education, childcare, and social services is crucial for the well-being and quality of life of rural residents and communities. Accessible public services make it easier to live, work and raise families in smaller communities. Ensuring that rural residents can access education, care and other human services in their communities and in a culturally-appropriate fashion matters both for individual well-being and broader economic prosperity because it is more difficult to attract and retain people and capital if services are difficult to access. But many communities face significant gaps. For example, in Nunavut, more than half of mothers have to leave the territory to give birth and young people must leave their communities for most post-secondary training.<sup>62</sup> As governments make significant investments in social infrastructure and roll out investments that will enable the digital delivery of many public services, how can government best support rural regions now and into the future?

### KEY QUESTIONS

How can governments promote access to telemedicine and other digital delivery of public services without undermining local delivery?

What programs can help attract and retain people to deliver high quality public services?

Potential approaches to explore

#### > **Update funding models to encourage innovative service provision to rural communities**

The pandemic has rapidly accelerated innovation in the provision of digital public services, especially in healthcare. These approaches have the potential to significantly improve access to care for people in rural communities. But without proactive policy and funding change, including harmonizing electronic patient records, improving digital skills among patients and clinicians, and revisiting fee schedules, these options may evaporate, stopping far short of their transformative potential. This means overcoming “structural urbanism”<sup>63</sup> where fee schedules favour in person delivery of services, rather than relying on evidence to determine when and how online delivery can be equally effective and more accessible for rural residents.

#### > **Create opportunities for young people to build their lives in rural communities**

This means adopting a rural lens to the roll out of public services.

> **To learn:** Proximity to post-secondary institutions has a strong influence on whether young people from the North of provinces attend, especially for lower- and middle-income

62 Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., “Nunavut’s Infrastructure Gap Report” (Iqaluit, 2020), <https://www.tunngavik.com/publications/nunavuts-infrastructure-gap-executive-summary/>.

63 S. Ashleigh Weeden, “Canadian Election 2021: Why Rural Canada Must Play a Central Role,” The Conversation, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/canadian-election-2021-why-rural-canada-must-play-a-central-role-166086>.

families.<sup>64</sup> Distributed models and online education can expand education opportunities and bring post-secondary institutions to more communities.

- > **To work:** The pandemic has shown that it is possible to deliver some public services without workers showing up to a main office in a large centre every day. Human resource practices should be updated to accommodate the lessons learned from the pandemic. Digital infrastructure and connectivity are necessary pre-conditions to successfully implement more distributed workforce models that benefit rural communities. Other approaches may focus on keeping graduates in rural communities, such as Nova Scotia's recent measure to guarantee jobs for all nursing graduates.<sup>65</sup> Solving workforce housing challenges is also a critical ingredient in talent retention and workforce development.
- > **To raise families:** Rural and smaller communities have distinct challenges to access affordable, quality childcare. The implementation of new federal-provincial childcare agreements should engage rural communities and ensure flexibility to respond to local needs.
- > **Strategically leverage anchor institutions and public sector workforce strategies**  
It has long been recognized that anchor institutions — hospitals, universities, military bases — play an important role in the economic and social life of some smaller communities because they provide employers who are more immune to economic downturns and are a source of stable middle-class employment. They are key to innovation, accelerating digital connectivity, population circulation and establishing new linkages between people and communities. They create a foundational floor that ensures public services are available in communities. Governments could re-examine their real estate footprint and more intentionally place offices in rural communities, and change policies and collective agreements with respect to distributed work models.
- > **Implement innovative strategies to deploy surplus public assets for community delivery of services**  
Finding ways to co-locate services and build community hubs where a full range of health, human and social services can be provided is one way to offer high quality services in rural communities. However, the Ontario Government has documented how sometimes governments' own rules against co-location, which may make sense in some urban contexts, need to be adjusted for rural communities. Ontario developed a model to allow community groups to take over under-used public infrastructure to experiment with alternative models to deliver community services, managed by local residents.<sup>66</sup> The presence of a public school in a community can have important long-term social and economic impact and one way to retain these important pieces of social infrastructure is to allow them to act as community-controlled community hubs.

64 David Zarifa, Darcy Hango, and Roger Pizarro Milian, "Proximity, Prosperity, and Participation: Examining Access to Postsecondary Education among Youth in Canada's Provincial North," *Rural Sociology* 83, no. 2 (June 1, 2018): 270–314, <https://doi.org/10.1111/RUSO.12183>.

65 Carolyn Ray, "Nova Scotia Guaranteeing Jobs for All Nursing Grads over next 5 Years," *CBC News*, October 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/nova-scotia-guaranteeing-jobs-for-all-nursing-grads-for-5-years-1.6228447>.

66 Government of Ontario, "Surplus Property Transition Initiative," accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/surplus-property-transition-initiative>.

## Theme 5: How we make decisions: devolution, decision-making, capacity, and governance

The Government of Canada has been taking governance and decision-making questions seriously in recent years. Amongst some of these initiatives include a new dedicated Minister of Rural Economic Development, a Rural Economic Development Strategy anchored by a Centre for Rural Economic Development, and the expansion of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). The RDAs in particular have played a critical role during COVID-19 economic response and recovery, ensuring that tailored support could reach rural communities.

We know that historically the federal government has had a difficult time engaging communities on their priorities and co-creating approaches or even devolving resources and decision-making authority. But the value of place-based economic strategies lies in their ability to leverage community knowledge from the ground up. The ability to effectively execute rural strategies lies in the ability for higher orders of government to approach issues with humility and trust local stakeholders with resources and power. Yet government programs are often burdened with narrow terms and conditions that presume superior understanding of local needs and are drafted in ways that prevent experimentation, local innovation, or learning from local experiences.

### KEY QUESTIONS

How should place-based economic strategies be governed?

How can we better empower local communities to design their own economic development strategies? What kinds of capacity are needed?

Do RDAs have the right tools at their disposal to support co-creation, local delivery and local innovation and help build capacity?

## Potential approaches to explore

### > **Formal federal-provincial-municipal-Indigenous cooperation arrangements and recovery tables**

Building on lessons from Urban Development Agreements, Recovery Tables could focus on coordination between governments around place-based strategy. These could be struck at the regional level to facilitate recovery planning that integrates rural communities with mid-sized cities in the regional ecosystem.

### > **Scale integrated smart community planning methodology**

The co-creation processes seen in the Smart City Challenge approach can create credible, cooperative place-based processes to agree on common priorities, plans and execution strategies. Guelph and Wellington County mobilized more than 150 partners from community, business and government to develop their plans around food.

> **Develop rural policy capacity**

The federal government has developed dedicated program capacity to help rural communities navigate funding programs. But rural policy capacity is about more than navigating programs. For smaller communities with limited policy capacity of their own, funding of pooled policy resources could support communities themselves to engage on equal footing with federal and provincial governments.

> **More place-based local data**

While the federal government has launched a wide-ranging rural economic development strategy, and has created a Rural Data Hub, the current data to guide decisions or measure results remains sparse. Traditional economic indicators can be difficult to access for those outside government at a community level, while many measures of well-being are not available for individual communities. For a community to meaningfully participate in shaping its economic future, municipalities, community groups and local actors must have access to robust economic and social data outside Canada's CMAs. Specific measures could include:

> **Expand the Statistics Canada Rural Data Hub with new offerings**

The new portal created by Statistics Canada helps to aggregate available data on rural communities. But today that mostly serves to highlight just how little data is actually available; Canadian data is absent from the OECD reporting on rural well-being. We need much more robust economic, social, and environmental data for communities outside of CMAs.<sup>67</sup>

> **Expand the Statistics Canada Telecommunications Data Hub with new data on digital adoption in rural communities**

As with data on rural well-being, Canadian data on digital adoption is missing from OECD reporting, making it difficult for policymakers and stakeholders to best support investment and innovation in rural networks and digital adoption across rural communities.<sup>68</sup>

> **Support communities to track what matters to them at the regional and local levels**

The Canadian Community Economic Development Network manages the Community Data Program to fill gaps and promote access, but these initiatives are limited by the federal government's focus.<sup>69</sup> Engage Nova Scotia is successfully deploying the Community Well-Being Index at a granular level in smaller communities, an approach which can be scaled elsewhere. Communities need support for capacity to effectively work with data and integrate it into programs and decisions.

> **Flexible, low-barrier program design, with devolution of resources and autonomy**

Rules that prevent adapting programs and learning from local experiences are too often in place in economic development programs. Too many programs are still designed in ways that prevent outcomes-based, co-created, or delivery-driven solutions that learn and

67 Hannah Main et al., "State of Rural Canada III: Bridging Rural Data Gaps Integrating Storytelling and Sustainability Indicators for Sustainable Rural Development View Project," October 2019, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336217791>.

68 Statistics Canada, "Telecommunications: Connecting Canadians," 2021, [https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/digital\\_economy\\_and\\_society/telecommunications](https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/digital_economy_and_society/telecommunications).

69 "Community Data Program," CDP, 2021, <https://communitydata.ca/>.

adapt in agile ways to the realities on the ground in communities and evidence as it comes in. Our starting point is that one-size-fits-all programming will lead to disappointment and frustration. Flexible, place-based, low barrier, capacity-building programs that devolve real resources and decision-making authority, perhaps delivered through the RDAs, are necessary.

> **Design for rural realities and get input early**

Developing inclusive processes for community collaboration takes time. But policy and program development often leaves consultations until the latest stage of development, asking for reactions to decisions that are nearly final. This limits the ability to develop a shared vision and direction that reflects the complex needs of rural communities. It also makes it harder to build trust and buy-in for partnership. As much as possible, policymakers should work with communities to get input early and maintain engagement throughout development and implementation (*see example*).

**EXAMPLE**

## Early engagement and community collaboration

### BC's Sea-to-Sky Destination Development Strategy

BC's Sea-to-Sky Destination Development Strategy<sup>70</sup> is one example of a regionally-specific planning process that involved extensive community outreach and engagement to develop a 10-year strategy for tourism throughout the Sea-to-Sky corridor.

From north of Vancouver to Lillooet, BC is home to some of Canada's most iconic tourist destinations but is also a diverse rural region that includes nine incorporated municipalities, 12 Indigenous communities, and a number of unincorporated communities. The 22-month process involved consultations and community meetings with hundreds of community members and partnership with local Indigenous communities to develop a shared vision for responsible tourism development in the region. The region's strategy worked to identify the growth aspirations and priorities of multiple stakeholders to create local strategies, as well as feed into the Provincial Destination Development Strategy.

By engaging from the outset in a community specific-way, rural communities were able to shape the vision of what regional and provincial governments should do and identify key actions, rather than reacting to a finalized policy that did not take their needs into account.

70 Destination British Columbia and Indigenous Tourism BC, "Sea-to-Sky Corridor Destination Development Strategy," 2018, [https://www.destinationbc.ca/content/uploads/2019/09/Sea-to-Sky-Corridor-Destination-Development-Strategy\\_Final.pdf](https://www.destinationbc.ca/content/uploads/2019/09/Sea-to-Sky-Corridor-Destination-Development-Strategy_Final.pdf).

# Seizing the opportunity

Canada’s rural communities are at a pivotal moment. Throughout much of the last half century, there has been compelling evidence that the future belonged to large cities. This is a moment to re-think that narrative and ensure sustainable and inclusive economic growth builds community well-being for people who live in communities of all sizes.

It is possible that the geography of opportunity is being reshaped. In many parts of the country, more Canadians are moving to smaller communities, particularly those adjacent to larger centres. As digital connectivity continues to improve, the possibility of more population growth in smaller communities will only increase. While it remains uncertain how big the shift will be towards a more distributed workforce, there is little doubt that hybrid work-from-home options and digital delivery of some public services will be more prevalent than they were a decade ago. It will only be over the coming few years — and with the collection of updated data — that we will be able to clearly see the depth and stickiness of these trends.

Research over the last half century has consistently documented the economic advantages that come with agglomeration in cities, like economies of scale and the network effects from population density. There is no doubt that some of these advantages still apply. However, there is an opportunity to advance new economic and community development approaches in smaller communities in light of post-pandemic realities. There is also an opportunity to think about agglomeration across larger regions, made up of communities of different sizes, including rural communities, within larger ecosystems. Digital infrastructure, opportunities for distributed work, new connective infrastructure like rail, the opportunities for digital delivery of services, and the cost of housing are all impacting how people and businesses think about where they will work, live and invest in the future.

Together, these create access to people, markets, and services that many communities did not have before. These new facts require policymakers to reflect on the tools they use for economic and community development, and whether the assumptions and goals that underpin many of these tools are still the right ones. They require governments to make sure they have data at the community level that will allow them to understand what is happening and how to respond.

***While it remains uncertain how big the shift will be towards a more distributed workforce, there is little doubt that hybrid work-from-home options and digital delivery of some public services will be more prevalent than they were a decade ago.***

These trends also require policymakers to centre the well-being of communities in program decisions. While opportunities for rural communities are increasing, the changing geography of opportunities also creates new pressures. Many smaller communities are dealing with population growth that they haven't seen in decades, causing housing supply and affordability crises or putting undue pressure on existing public service infrastructure. The unique character of some rural communities is being changed quickly, challenging the experience of rural citizenship and the right to be rural.<sup>71</sup> Over the longer term, climate change may also raise pressures on smaller communities in healthy ecosystems to increase their populations, producing even more change.

But big change is not new for rural communities. The same rural-to-urban-migration that transformed Canada's cities over the past century also transformed Canada's rural areas, even if there was a comparatively smaller audience to witness it. The resilience, dynamism and adaptability that has been built by rural communities in Canada may make these places uniquely equipped to flourish in this new chapter of disruption. To harness new possibilities, however, Canada's decision-makers must come to these issues with humility, trust in the knowledge of local communities, and give greater primacy to rural leaders and local expertise in policymaking processes. It is certain that rural communities are facing another century of tremendous transformation: what is yet to be determined is the agency they will have in shaping the future of their own communities and the broader Canadian story.

71 Weeden, "Will Post-COVID Policies Realize the Full Potential of Rural Canada?"

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