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TAPs and CAPs: Failures of Collaboration In the Effort to Promote Rural Community Development

Roger A. Lohmann¹

One of the aspects of the Community Action Programs (CAPs) of the War on Poverty under the Economic Opportunity Act that was particularly important for rural community development was the establishment of Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs). This paper is a critique of the success of that coordination effort with regard to one particular group: low income farmers in Minnesota. It was written in Fall, 1969 as part of my graduate program in public administration at the University of Minnesota.

During the past decade many governmental efforts have been directed toward the coordination of governmental services. One of the features of the Economic Opportunity Act that convinced officials at the Bureau of the Budget to support the act was its proposed efforts to coordinate government services at the local level (Moynihan, 1969, 77). The Council on Intergovernmental Relations periodically issues reports urging more coordination of public activities. Thus, few were surprised in 1966 when *President* Lyndon Johnson issued an executive order calling for coordination of the efforts of federal departments and agencies in rural areas.

This paper is a critique of the success of that coordination effort with regard to one particular group: low income farmers in Minnesota. The cooperation between the Technical Assistance Panels (TAP) created by Executive Order #11307 and the Community Action Agencies (CAA) created by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 will be explored. This paper will not stop at "telling it as it is," however; suggestions for improved cooperation will also be made.

The Technical Assistance Panels were created when the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture was instructed by the President to take the initiative in identifying problems of rural development. The panels are intended to encourage cooperation between and coordination of all federal departmental and agency efforts in agriculture and rural areas programs. The Technical Assistance Panel is not a single entity, however. There is a national TAP, a state TAP in each of the 50 states, and in the State of Minnesota, district TAPs and county TAPs for all of the 88 counties of the state.

The agencies represented on all state TAPs; are: Farmer's Home Administration, Soil Conservation Service, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service,

¹ This paper was written in October, 1969 for a seminar in Intergovernmental Relations at the School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. The author was previously Executive Director of the Dodge-Steele-Waseca Community Action Agency and a CAA representative on two county-level TAP committees.

State Cooperative Extension Service, the State Office of Economic Opportunity and assorted other agencies whose programs benefit rural people (USDA, 1968). In Minnesota, the State Department of Education, Federal Crop Insurance Agency, Department of Public Welfare, State Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Consumer Marketing Service, Small Business Administration, Department of Employment Security, Rural Electrification Administration, and State Planning Agency also are represented (Reinarz, 1969). The representative of the Farmer's Home Administration serves as chairman of the Minnesota state TAP.

The district TAPs are organized on the basis of the seven original non-metropolitan planning regions in Minnesota. Membership in district TAPs; includes field representatives or other district level personnel of the organizations on the state TAP. The district role in planning has not been very significant thus far, since most of the planning is done at the state and county levels.

County TAPs are composed of representatives of federal departments and agencies serving the rural populations of each particular county. An effort has been made to include private citizens on county TAPs as a means of furthering local, grassroots support for the effort (Reinarz, 1969). The county TAP is charged with the role of identifying local problems facing rural residents and seeking solutions to those problems (Reinarz, 1969). Poverty is one of the identifiable problems faced by many rural residents in Minnesota. The poverty suffered by the rural farmer or small town dweller is often hidden poverty that is not easily detectable. It is often ignored poverty as well because there are not large concentrations of poverty-stricken people such as can be found in the core areas of most metropolitan areas. Therefore, it is understandable that the Office of Economic Opportunity and local multi-county CAP agencies – with their established outreach operations designed to reach out to the rural poor – are involved in the TAP program.

Economic Opportunity Act programs in Minnesota are organized on a state and county and multi-county district basis. The state Economic Opportunity Office (SEOO) primarily provides technical assistance to local Community Action Agencies and advises the Governor on poverty-related matters. In the 80 counties of outstate Minnesota, Community Action Agencies are organized on a multi-county basis with all but six counties having CAA coverage. (Note: In addition, there are approximately a dozen Indian CAAs on the various reservations in the state). The SEOO has a representative on the state TAP and most CAAs have representatives on their respective county TAPs.

One of the difficulties first encountered when trying to evaluate the effectiveness of cooperation between TAPS and CAAs is the sparsity of information on this topic. TAPS are almost entirely an extra-curricular activity for all those involved. The executive secretary of the state TAP is also a rural development specialist for FHA. TAP has no funding and almost no printed materials. For financial support the initiative must rely on contributions by the various participating agencies. Interviews with the State TAP Executive Secretary, Richard Reinarz, and the SEOO representative, Hank Johnson, support the view that very little is being done

with regard to planning for the low-income farmer at the state level. When SEOO submitted a proposed plan for state TAP activities in this area the plan simply died in committee (Johnson, 1969). Both the State Secretary and the SEOO representative commented on the unwillingness of “old line” established agricultural agencies to cooperate. Such lack of cooperation has resulted in old line agencies posturing only for their own agency needs rather than the group effort.

A further reason why state level TAP and OEO cooperation is not better is the lack of support from the Governor’s office. One source doubted if the Governor even knew what TAP meant. The State Planning Agency was deemed to be too involved in the delineation of planning regions for the state to pay much attention to substantive issues like TAPs. As a result, the established old line agencies were neither being pushed by the Governor’s Office nor pulled by the State Planning Agency to cooperate in the TAP effort.

The cooperative efforts of county-level TAPs to plan for low income farmers are not highly successful either. Although both the state TAP secretary and the SEOO representative assured the author that some local TAPs and CAAs were cooperating, neither could cite a specific instance of such cooperation. The minutes of selected meetings of county TAPs also revealed no projects designed to benefit low-income farmers. A summary of the TAP projects published by the Minnesota *TAP Newsletter* reveals only two proposed projects that were designed to aid low income farmers (STAP, April 14, 1969). One county was surveying interest in a Manpower Development Training Act (MDTA) General Agricultural Course and a second county was setting up a Volunteer Task Force to work on problems of poverty in the county.

It would appear that low income farmers are not an area of concern and planning for the TAP effort at any level. This lack of concern demonstrates itself in other ways as well. In some counties, local CAA representatives are not even informed of the meetings of the county TAPs (Johnson, 1969). In other counties, the old line agency representatives have made no effort to familiarize themselves with the local CAA or community action programs (Johnson, 1969). Reading of a sample of county TAP minutes suggests that most county TAPs are more concerned with the conservation and development of natural resources than with the development of human resources in their areas, which places any concern for low-income farmers as a very low priority from the beginning.

There is some informal cooperation at the county level between CAA personnel and other TAP representatives. One former CAA director (the author) recalls his efforts to get the advice of county Agricultural Extension agents and others when establishing a Farm Management Program for low-income farmers. It is difficult to estimate how much of this type of informal cooperation (which is, in many respects, typical of rural communities) is actually going on. However worthwhile such informal cooperation may be, it does not overcome the criticism of TAPs – both at the state level and the county level – deserve because of their failure to perform their assigned function.

At the start of this paper, it was indicated that suggestions for improvement of the coordination of TAPs and CAAs would be offered. The first such suggestion is intended to provide an improved foundation for the TAP program in the State of Minnesota. Someone in the appropriate position of authority and responsibility (either in the Governor's Office or the State Planning Agency) should determine what role the Technical Action Panels should play in state development planning. Preferably, that someone would be the Governor, however, the State Planning Agency might also make this a priority. It would appear that TAPs could be an important potential resource for state planning because through the organization of the TAP effort, one could gain access not only to the representatives of the state agencies represented, but also to the local and federal representatives. The theoretical possibilities for coordination and cooperation between these various levels of government in attacking problems of rural poverty are exceptional.

If it is decided that TAPs are worthy of greater state attention more financial resources must also be found for the TAP effort. Money is necessary if TAP is ever to develop beyond the "extra-curricular" effort that it now is.

TAPS must also become more active in setting priorities for the programs they are going to support. We do not have agreement on national priorities, nor have we established state priorities. It is not suggested that TAPs usurp the legislative prerogatives of establishing state goals. However, within certain parameters, TAPs do have the power, resources and responsibility to set priorities. At the present time, it would appear that both the state and county TAPs have established priorities of default of reinforcing the position of established, old line agencies only. Rather than planning their respective agencies' roles in a coordinated group effort in line with Executive Order # 11307 they are reacting in a way designed to reinforce the status quo.

If TAPs are ever to have a meaningful role to play, they must decide which programs are of the greatest importance in the effort to fight rural poverty. The formal establishment of priorities will, hopefully, overcome the present tendency to merely support the development of natural resources in the state, while ignoring comparable concern for human resources.

The TAP initiative would appear to have tremendous potential for coordinating governmental activities in rural areas. Thus far, in Minnesota this potential remains unfulfilled. TAPs and CAPs are not cooperating on programs for low-income farmers and thus low-income farmers are not having their needs met. TAP, it would seem, has failed to fulfill its charge of identifying and solving problems of rural development.

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