

COVID-19 + Social Impacts on Rural Communities

Video Transcript

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Phil Loring: Hello everybody and welcome to our webinar on COVID-19 and the social impacts on rural communities. My name is Philip Loring I'm the Arrell Chair in Food Policy and Society at the University of Guelph and I'm joined today by a number of really fantastic panelists that I'm going to introduce just now. First is Abdul-Raheem Abdulai, he's an Arrell scholar and PhD candidate in the Department of Geography. Next, we have Dr. Ryan Gibson who's an Associate Professor and the Libro Professor in Regional Economic Development, he's in the Rural Planning and Development program at the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development. We're also joined by Dr. Helen Hambly Odame, she's an Associate Professor of Capacity in the Capacity Development and Extension program also in the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development and finally Jacqui Empson Laporte she's an Environmental Specialist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs.

Now to get us started I know we're all watching or participating in this from different parts in our homes in different parts of the world, but I'd like to acknowledge that the University of Guelph resides in the ancestral and treaty lands of several Indigenous peoples including the Attawandaron people and the Mississauga of the Credit and we recognize and honour our Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Métis neighbours.

Next I'd also like to acknowledge that the University of Guelph and OMAFRA have worked together for decades to support Ontario's agri-food and rural sectors and continue to do so with the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance, a collaboration between OMAFRA and the University of Guelph. This collaboration supports the people, places and programs producing Ontario agri-food solutions with global impact.

Now as I said we're here to talk about the impacts of COVID-19 on rural communities so to start an opening question. COVID-19 is no doubt a major disruption for rural communities but rural communities are already dealing with a variety of challenges some of which will no doubt be exacerbated by COVID-19 and others that really increase communities vulnerability. To start, maybe I'll have some of the panelists tell us something about your area and the impacts and challenges that you're seeing, or hearing unfold. I'd like to start with Jacqui.

00:02:20

Jacqui Empson Laporte: Hi, I'm Jackie and I work in a field office of OMAFRA and I work out of the Clinton office. I'm really fortunate to live where I work, and to work where I grew up as well as working with rural communities and organizations in my job and in my personal life. I volunteer also, as a team leader and crisis responder with Victim Services of Huron County. I can speak about Victim Services in Huron only; other counties have similar organizations, but they operate on different models. In both roles I'm seeing the stress in farmers and their families caused by disruptions to supply chains or even the threat of disruptions to supply chains. I see market uncertainty and they've worked really hard to raise their crops or their livestock and then they're not really sure what's going to happen with their markets.

I see small businesses in my town, and restaurants in my town, in these small towns that were already struggling and they're trying to adapt really quickly to new consumer environments and restrictions. While my kids have had sufficient internet access to finish their school work, some of their friends don't, some of my OMAFRA colleagues have encountered similar challenges and using new technology that's been provided, you can see stress in people's social media posts, in the news feeds, when you talk to people you can hear it in their voices and that's going to be an ongoing challenge. In rural Ontario Challenge is always proximity and privacy so in Victim Services many of us are from here and we grew up here and it's always really difficult to respond to calls that end up being someone we know, or someone that were associated with either at work or through our other affiliations. In some ways the adaptation to tele-counselling might be beneficial, because transportation and availability of services is always a challenge for rural Ontario, just making it accessible for people when they need it. Perhaps this is an opportunity for us to provide those services and I'm hopeful that by working from home or telework, we can prove that we can use these skills that we've learned to attract professional jobs to rural Ontario; life in rural Ontario shouldn't be seen as a barrier to advancing your career.

00:04:59

Phil Loring: Super Jacqui thank you for that. Abdul how about next to you.

00:05:04

Abdul Rahim: Okay. Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this webinar. I'm really happy to contribute my thoughts to this unprecedented time in our lives. As we mentioned earlier I'm a PhD candidate in the Department of Geography and Environmental geomatics. As part of my work I do is actually trying to build a capacity of rural communities, mostly through my interest in food and agricultural development. You ask questions around building the capacity of agriculture through labor development and technological advancement in agriculture. To say the start of the COVID-19, I have seen mostly two main issues that intersecting with the work I do that are unfolding in our rural

communities. As we all know, we've had a lot of issues around labour, agriculture labour at the start of the community in pandemic because we realized that the epidemic actually started at a time when families were actually beginning to go into the fields, which means that as usual, farmers will need the temporary foreign workers who come in, about 60,000 of them each year. They did ask for exceptions, but one interesting thing about it is a fact that even going beyond the temporary workers who come in, the agriculture sector still has labour shortages year in year out. We've seen that there are still more, about 16,000 labour shortages and this year we've seen the numbers are still around 10,000. There were shortages in the sector this has implications for rural communities because for most part most, these farming jobs are in our rural areas and we've seen that the virus has actually worsen the situation as people are reluctant to go out to work which means that we may with may compromise the food that we produce in our rural communities and change some of the dynamics in the rural communities.

Now interesting thing regarding this which interested my work, is actually building on this labour shortages is a fact that we have seen that farmers are beginning to look for solutions, farmers in both rural and urban areas. One area that we have seen that farmers are actually moving towards is trying to use technologies to offsets the labour shortages in our rural communities. We do know that from the labour shortages to disruptions of food chain and the outbreak has occurred, put a strain on rural agri-food sector and supply chains especially for small-scale farmers. We are also seeing in small-scale farmers with the supply chain being disrupted look into internet platforms to actual connect with consumers so that they can sell their food, which means the farmers are actually moving a little bit more towards technology in order to actually recover from this pandemic. We've seen a lot with CICS, like going online which near lot with consumers connecting, so there's a silver lining to it because over years we've seen that rural sector being disconnected with rural communities. Since the pandemic is actually bringing farmers back closer to their consumers through the mediated through technologies there is a silver lining that we may see that a farming community may reconnect with consumers, and more broadly may reconnect with the rural communities as well. So that's – yeah, we really want to see what the dynamics would be but these are some abilities that are actually unfolding it's over a real community agricultural sector.

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Phil Loring: That's really interesting Abdul. Ryan let's talk to you for a minute.

00:08:49

Ryan Gibson: Yeah, it's great to be to be here to be able to join for this really important conversation. There're maybe two elements that I'd like to share that are impacting rural communities that I'm working with. One is around volunteerism, and Jacqui mentioned that right off the hop around those organizations that are providing those frontline services

and throughout rural communities across this country volunteerism has been a really key feature and its part of the fabric of what makes a rural community. Rural communities over the past few years have seen all sorts of ebbs and flows and challenges and opportunities, but at the moment rural communities are challenged in how they respond during the COVID-19 crisis. We have seen all sorts of challenges related to the isolation that sometimes comes during COVID-19, the ability for individuals to volunteer their time whether that's to assist with a Meals on Wheels program or activities for young people or whether that is with the community library or other public spaces, this has all been compromised under the COVID-19 measures. We also have a number of nonprofit organizations that have had to rethink how they do service delivery and how they build on their commitment to the people that live in their communities and this is still unrolling we're still figuring out how this all is going to take place but it's really exciting to see some of the innovation that has emerged from our rural leaders and rural communities around this front.

The second piece I'd maybe mention Phil, is around new comers and Abdul mentioned the seasonal agricultural workers that may be involved in agricultural production in rural areas, but rural communities continue to attract into wealth newcomers, whether that's new immigrants, refugees or maybe it's urban residents that are moving out of the city and into our rural communities. Over the past couple of months, these are really difficult times for newcomers that are moving into smaller communities. This pandemic has caused a disruption in terms of the supports for newcomers it's challenged just the ability to tap into that social fabric to be able to participate and to volunteer, to have your children engaged in extracurricular activities, and this is causing that enhancing that sense of isolation that's taking place in rural communities and these are two of the kind of key things that I've been working on over the past few months with rural communities across the country around newcomers and volunteerism.

00:11:19

Phil Loring: Super, Thank You Ryan, and Helen?

00:11:24

Helen Hambly Odame: Hello everyone my name is Helen Hambly Odame and my area of research is primarily in the area of rural research is connectivity, internet connectivity and broadband services into rural areas and regions. During the COVID-19 crisis we can see how essential broadband has become for every single Canadian, urban and rural, and yet we have to acknowledge that even what we're doing here today which is speaking on videoconference with a number of different speakers would actually be quite impossible in many rural areas across the country. We have a digital divide coming into this pandemic, it has made some of the crisis more difficult in terms of adopting livelihoods as we all stay home and for some rural users lacking connectivity basically experiencing even greater

isolation from the rest of society and the economy. We also can see during this COVID-19 crisis very clearly that the internet and broadband is the way forward, so it's also the way to overcome the disruption that we've experienced, overcoming obstacles like this disruption that we see with the pandemic and embrace some of the opportunities that come along with improved connectivity. Literally overnight Canadians had to stay at home, companies had to go online, people lost their jobs or were laid off had to go online, file for benefits, kids who are at home had to start learning online, telehealth services for those not infected with COVID-19 had to go online including mental health services and we can see how essential connectivity is in this pandemic and we have to make it a priority to come out of it.

00:13:24

Phil Loring: Thank you for that Helen and that's actually a really great segue that you raise this this sort of flipside that Internet is simultaneously a challenge a resource challenge but it's also a solution and I'd like to dig in to that question of the resources whatever resources means to you in your particular area; the resources that that folks in rural communities have or need to have in order to effectively respond and move sort of forward out of this pandemic. Ryan maybe I'll start with you because you also mentioned in your response, innovation, and I think there's a relationship there.

00:14:04

Ryan Gibson: Absolutely. I think it's maybe useful to take one step back and just to think for a second that there are over six million Canadians that live in a rural community from coast to coast to coast. Here just in the province of Ontario rural Ontarian's hold about 1.4 million residents which would be about the fifth largest province if rural Ontario was a province unto itself in this country. When we look at all of those communities and the people that make up those communities, we have to be careful that we don't assume that all of our rural areas are equal, they're not a homogenous region, we have different experiences, different capacities, and different resources that are available to each of those communities, whether you're in Tumbler Ridge in northern British Columbia or Blanc-Sablon Quebec or here in Jarvis Ontario. We need to start thinking about why our responses to COVID-19 need to look different in different places. I think we have a tremendous amount of uncertainty and change that are taking place, and we need to differentiate that sometimes from the policies and the strategies that our urban counterparts might be utilizing and recognizing that whether they may or may not be the most appropriate for rural communities as we move forward. Rural communities tend to be smaller in size they tend to have larger distances to other centers. We also see that over years of regionalization efforts a lot of services have moved out of our smaller communities and this compromises our ability to access things from time to time, but at the same time there's a tremendous amount of assets, skills, and resources that are contained within the people that live in rural communities and I think with COVID-19 there's a really interesting opportunity to start thinking about those

innovative strategies. We've got really cool initiatives that are linking local food producers to consumers and new ways that we've not done in the past. We see rural residents building activities and strategies around enhancing social development providing opportunities for young people to continue to learn in a new way and that often embraces the Internet connectivity when those communities have it. At the end of the day I think one of the really important things that we have to think about as we move forward is around how to build place-based strategies how do we build on the assets that are currently within our communities within the people that live there, and how do we use those assets to meet what our local priority is—what people want to achieve. I think during this pandemic we've started to change our notion of what is a priority and where we rank some of our priorities and I think this is an exciting topic now that we're just starting to embrace and starting to figure out how to move forward with, and I suspect my colleagues will have some commentary on that as well.

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Phil Loring: mm-hmm super, and yet you know you there's different problems than there are different solutions in different places and it has me wondering you know underneath a lot of what you guys are already talking about is rural broadband and I wonder, Helen, is-- normally I would be the first person to say there is no one-size-fits-all solution to any problem but it is to some extent perhaps improving and equalizing rural connectivity, is that a start? Is that a one-size-fits-all? Obviously acknowledging that the challenges are different even for that from place to place.

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Helen Hambly Odame: To some extent, I'd agree Phil, that it is a ubiquitous strategy it's needed everywhere it's not just a basic service objective here in Canada for all Canadians, so the statement is not just for those who live in urban areas it's for all Canadians. The strategies of how to get there and what's actually built and how it's going to be used are going to be very regionalized, and that's also going to create an economy of scope and scale in a rural area that makes that kind of investment in broadband infrastructure affordable for both private sector and public sector investors. The strategies are going to be grassroots and tailor-made for the local context ideally, but not necessarily on a single community level that that could be very expensive, so collaboration as a region tends to be the way that that broadband networks and next-generation connectivity is being developed. It's also very important to make efficient uses of resources in this area, while laying fiber cable is infinitely less expensive than building a highway or a bridge, it's still quite expensive and we have to use resources wisely. Even at the coastal level our data shows how crucial connectivity is to saving Canadians money in rural areas as well as in urban areas. Surprisingly there's about sixty percent of households in rural areas who run a home-based business, business that could be very micro to being a small or medium sized business from home, from the farm, the farm from the residents and these types of economic activities are

quite commercial for the livelihood of rural people and they're often not recognized. We don't collect data necessarily very well we don't understand their needs and we don't necessarily appreciate how seasonal some of these home-based businesses are as well. Let's look at the future going forward as one of the opportunities through improved connectivity and getting services online for those who are isolated because they're on the wrong side of the digital gap.

00:19:48

Phil Loring: Thank You Helen. Jacqui you know we talk a lot during all of this about isolation and I and recognizing that even things like Zoom can only do so much in terms of addressing isolation, and that isolation whether it's from resources whether it's from services whether it's from each other. Do you have any thoughts on what it will really take to sort of solve some of these? What resources are needed to solve some of these challenges?

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Jacqui Empson Laporte: I'd like to touch on some things that Ryan pointed out as well. Victim Services has a staff of three and we have about 50 volunteers that normally respond in person to provide our short-term support. Volunteers cover 365 days a year 24 hours a day, and that takes a huge volunteer base when our volunteer base is you know undergoing stress at the scale that COVID is it's pushing on our communities that really starts to destabilize our establishments and so it's really important for us to recognize the signs of stress within our own volunteer base in our staff as well. We haven't sent out volunteers since the first COVID travel restrictions were put in place, but that increased the burden on staff that we're normally trying to do their own jobs trying to manage their own families at home and then they're doing also the roles that the volunteers used to play. We've since hired a few temporary staff to manage crisis lines and to respond to some of the calls, but we've also had to narrow the scope of the calls that we normally respond to so we're really focusing on incidents involving domestic violence and fatalities and those are the ones that have the most potential to cause a ripple effect in our communities. We're trying to follow the recommendations for PPE as best we can, but at the same time we're trying to keep ourselves healthy, our family's healthy and watch for signs of trauma within our own volunteers. One thing I'd like to point out with this move to online, it's really hard to reach out for help when you're stuck in your home in the same conditions causing the crisis. If there's a challenge with addiction or domestic violence or mental health, people are not only isolated by distance in rural Ontario, but they're isolated because of the travel restrictions and people are working at home they're doing school at home and the levels of stress are just going up. There haven't been shelters or housing available for those at risk of domestic violence unless it's a very severe case, so again people don't have access to the services and that can be a real challenge in rural Ontario at the best of times and it's just sort of been made worse. We are anticipating that there'll be an increase in calls related to domestic violence, mental health crisis, suicide, and addiction as time goes on. We've seen

it with other tragic circumstances in our communities such as the tornado in Goderich so we've been ramping up our services we'll be trying to attract more volunteers to help when that's needed but everybody will be.

Other community mental health and addiction services have ramped up tele counselling as well, as an attempt to sort of mitigate the potential impacts of the crisis. There are organizations that are as Ryan said, really restructuring and trying hard to reach everyone in rural Ontario so I'll just name a couple there's West for Youth, which is an organization in Walkerton that provides online counseling for youth in rural Ontario. Community Mental Health Services and Choices for Change that organization deals with addiction services they're offering online counseling and group therapy for families. Do more Ag foundation specifically appeals to farmers dealing with mental health issues and their families. In the Know is a mental health program developed for farmers by Dr. Andrea Jones bitten at the University of Guelph and there's also the mental health first aid course offered by CMHA, but rural isolation is and always will be a challenge so while the internet tele counselling offer some opportunities there's also some real barriers.

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Phil Loring: Thank you for that and thank you for noting those resources. I just wanted to mention to you that Dr. Andrea Jones was initially going to join us but wasn't able to, but we will be sure at the end of this webinar to put up those resources for people. Abdul it has me thinking that being a newcomer to Canada rural Canada can be a challenging social environment in a normal year and of course now you know everything we're hearing and that we're talking about now it's an even more, I don't want to say extreme, but challenging environment and Ryan mentioned services for newcomers and I just wonder if you have any thoughts on the newcomers that are coming to Canada the challenges they're facing you mentioned technology if you have any thoughts on that?

00:25:23

Abdul Rahim: Yes. So again, thank you for the question. I've been a newcomer myself and I would say I have gone through a bit of experience all the way from Newfoundland to Ontario here. I've seen my fair bit of like, what it takes for newcomers to settle in in Canada and back in Newfoundland I did a bit of work that looked at newcomers trying to attract newcomers into agricultural sector in rural communities. Now let's speak to some of that work, to just to build on it so some of the change that we actually found for most newcomers like myself has always been finding a community within a community. If you are a newcomer that is going into a remote area, somewhere like Newfoundland or Rural Ontario and you don't find people that you can easily relate to, it becomes how to settle in. We've seen cases where people will want to come in with their families because that provides them the support network they need in order to settle in within the place. Just

moving into a new area by just being an individual by yourself can sometimes be really challenging and of course we are in very challenging times, which that situation might be much more worse than before the COVID-19 period.

Another important thing that I do know for newcomers, has always been issues of food and that ties into culture right. All people have the food they eat, even myself being here in Guelph sometimes I do struggle to find food that is related to me and from certain times I do have to move to Toronto to buy food like just to be able to still remain close to home in terms of the food I eat. In terms of like rural communities, the ability of rural communities to be more or less like diversify what's the kind of food that is available out there, that can actually be a very crucial factor in terms of in terms of attracting new comments post-COVID or like helping newcomers to actually settle in. I do think that and from my personal experience as well. I do know that rural communities have inherent characteristics as Ryan mentioned earlier, there's a lot of features in rural communities that will be very vital in recovering from COVID19 and in terms of long-term sustainability and resilience of rural communities because we do know that even at the middle of this pandemic we've seen a lot of calls in Ontario where the Premier kept on emphasizing that people should not go to their cottages, people should not move to the rural areas. It gets us thinking what is inherent in those rural communities that people actually want to go there. First off people might people might just think about just the scenery and the fact that people go there to relax, but it is more to rural communities. As people are beginning to quote-on-quote flee from the densities in urban areas first covered as people become more skeptical more afraid of like densities. We may see a certain people trying to settle in a rural communities, be it new newcomers or be it just Canadians who actually will want to go to rural communities eager to settle in. Those inherent characteristics by the low densities in rural communities will also be very important factor in actually getting more people into rural communities, or in the ability of local communities to actually recover as well. It would most times it can also be like an appeal to newcomers as well because if you come from a rural area in somewhere of Saharan Africa like myself, if you are coming into an area sometimes I find it very hard certainly into a large community like personally coming to Canada and like entering through Corner Brook in Newfoundland. It was a very important phase in my life because going into a much more smaller community was very instrumental in the way I was able to transition into Canada right. It plays a lot into how we try to put in place institutions post COVID that you'll be able to attract newcomers and try to make more rural communities more attractive.

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Phil Loring: Thank you for that and you mentioned, it's really offered a fantastic segue to our third sort of planned question, you mentioned recovery and you mentioned resilience and we really want to sort of have a forward-looking component of this conversation and so

maybe Helen, could I ask you to comment a little bit on the future and resilience in the short term, but then what?

00:30:15

Helen Hambly Odame: We have to have an exit strategy for the pandemic, and our exit strategy in my opinion has to ensure that the way forward is one based on a caring economy and I mean that very intentionally. We have learned through this crisis about the importance of caring, caring for one another caring for the environment, caring for our country as Canadians and caring for newcomers and caring for those who are not well, who are struggling and who are jobless. The exit strategy has to be based on, in my opinion on a caring economy. This caring economy going forward we all have a deep connectivity because these are the connections, these are the things that connect one of us as individuals as families as communities and societies across this big country. Connectivity is absolutely essential should be priority number one, or within the top three in my opinion, because that infrastructure underlies all of the new social practices that we will have to develop going forward and our capacity for adopting to this new context but also all the services all the economic opportunities that improved connectivity can bring about. We need to be very creative and very industrious hardworking to make this happen and what I'm really pleased about is that while attention to rural broadband has sort of gone up and down over time, it has really climbed the awareness that this is really climbed in the last few months and every Canadian is now beginning to recognize that we're paying a big cost because we're not connected with in this country. We also need science, so maybe I'm a scientist not a researcher but I do believe that the evidence and the data, the research initiatives that we need to evolve are very important. I'm so pleased that communities are contacting and reaching out to us at the University of Guelph saying, "we have some data we have some material here could you have a look at it, could you engage with us?" so communities engaging with researchers and scientists will also be an important part of our exit strategy.

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Phil Loring: Thank you for that. Jacqui, Abdul-Rahim shared with us his experiences as a newcomer and he mentioned communities within a community and I wonder, I wanted to get your take on resilience as well and looking forward and what we could really do to foster that for people coping with these challenges.

00:33:05

Jacqui Empson Laporte: Yeah. It is a community within a community even though I've grown up in this area I'd moved to a different village and it was even for myself, it was people learning to meet new people and new traditions and new ways of doing things, so I can only imagine how difficult it is for newcomers. There's a responsibility on us to be welcoming and to try and reach out to people and make them feel comfortable. I think this whole COVID stuff has it has created an environment where we are reaching out a little bit

more. The community drive-bys for birthdays and anniversaries the little, our village did crafts, village wide craft things for people to get engaged on a common level through the through this COVID experience, and those things wouldn't have happened if we weren't made to, so there's a positive in that. I'm hoping that now that we've gotten to know our more local community because we've been stuck here, I'm hoping that that community will continue and will continue to foster those things rather than foster the community that we were doing perhaps over the computer and over social media rather than the people immediately around us. If people aren't comfortable doing in-person counseling I'm hoping that this growth in telehealth counseling and telehealth will help them. It may not be perfect, but it might be an opportunity for people that otherwise wouldn't have been able to attend or wouldn't otherwise get the treatment or help that they actually need. Services like physiotherapy, I don't think that was probably very common in terms of doing it over Zoom but we're doing it and you know what maybe people are getting some of that preventative health care that they wouldn't have otherwise, so how can we make that better for rural Ontario where access to medical services is at a premium?

Someone always wins, and somebody always loses and that's unfortunate so while it's a disadvantage for commercial real estate, I'm really hopeful that new workplaces will see that their employees can work remotely and I'm really hoping that some of those employees choose to work remotely from rural Ontario. That gets that economic driver simply by having people live where they work and having them shop locally rather than stopping at the store in the city on their way home on their commute on the way home. I think another positive we haven't really touched on is people building gardens and learning to grow vegetables. There's been a real increase in that, you see it on social media post we're building people are building raised gardens and talking about planting more plants around their properties. Even if they don't continue to do that after the travel restrictions are lifted and they can freely go to grocery stores and stuff, maybe that's the awareness and education that we never would have got through any sort of government campaign. I'm kind of hoping that you know people will enjoy growing their own vegetables even on a small scale and that they'll appreciate the farmers and commercial agriculture and farmers markets a little bit more when they return to shopping normally. I see some wins and some and some losses, but I think there's some positives if we see them.

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Phil Loring: Super thank you and we're getting some questions, but before we turn to them I just wanted to ask Ryan you actually wrote, or edited a book on rural resilience do you have any sort of closing thoughts on the matter of resilience before we turn to Q&A?

00:37:09

Ryan Gibson: Yeah there are three things that kind of came up in my mind that we've kind of talked about a little bit so I won't try to go at them in too much length, but I think one is

this exciting part around re-examining our priorities around what we want to see in our communities as we move forward. We've got priorities to kind of survive the current COVID-19 measures, but we also have priorities for thriving in a post COVID-19 reality. At the moment I use often the language of people centered economies which I think as Helen and I are talking about the same things, but maybe different language, but it's very much focused on people as opposed to profit or other motivations that have often guided the economy. In part of doing that I think what we really need to ensure is that rural voices are heard, that they're heard by local governments, they're heard by provincial and federal governments because these are the people that are on the frontlines they're on the main streets they understand the dynamics, they know their neighbours that can provide a kind of a solid roadmap for how to move forward in all of this.

I think there's also a really strong opportunity to mobilize that boots on the ground philosophy, where we can strengthen the role and the importance of voluntary and nonprofit and charitable organizations, but also entities that bridge our community, whether that's a Chamber of Commerce whether that's a regional collaboration initiative. There's an opportunity to really ensure that and we start working together and it reminds me of good old Red Green who said, "we're all in this together", which brings me the third part that I think is really critical as we move forward which is, sharing opportunities that have both worked and have not worked. As communities are trying their community craft initiatives or as they're thinking about new strategies for broadband or how to welcome newcomers, we need to make sure that we're sharing these stories. We need to share them through social media, through our community newspapers and radio stations, through organizations like the Federations of Agriculture and municipal associations, perhaps even groups like the Canadian rural revitalization foundation. We need to share what's working but we also need to share what didn't work, and it's not because we want to announce the failures of what maybe didn't materialize but rather this helps other communities start to think about how they might adapt some of these strategies and these initiatives to their own conditions into the ROMA community which allows us to collectively learn from each other.

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Phil Loring: Thank you for that Ryan. I have a couple of audience questions here that I'll pass along and one of these is pretty practical, I think it's probably going to go first to Helen and that is, who is whose responsibility is it to ensure that farmers have access to broadband or 5G? Would it be governing governmental lobbying or NGOs or industry groups... what... how do you see that sort of the social license?

00:40:06

Helen Hambly Odame: It's everyone's responsibility. that's the quick answer. Let's remember broadband services are privately owned. They're owned by large

telecommunication companies as well as small telecommunication companies that are located locally in Canada. We are always talking about public-private partnerships and the public sector engagement has to be very connected to the communities where the building of this type of infrastructure is involved so that there's always community engagement. That makes it everyone's responsibility. We also have the responsibility as taxpayers in Canada, all of us, to make sure that priorities are set so that we don't keep paying for old legacy technology or technology that just gets them maintained and repaired in rural areas and barely improves data throughput and security issues, so let's make sure that we have the best possible technology at the best possible prices when we make these investment decisions. This is where the public and the private sector have to work very closely together in these efforts. I just want to say that rural areas are used to working hard, people who live in rural areas who are farming, they are used to working hard but I've often seen too that farmers and the agri-food industry doesn't play or doesn't team up with telecommunications very well, why is that? In some of the most successful countries around the world there's actually alliances between agri-food and telecoms. Why? because these two industries know they need each other. The more we can do to build this kind of alliance in Canada, I think it will definitely directly benefit farmers and the agri-food value chains that consumers benefit from. That would be my two cents worth Phil.

00:44:00

Phil Loring: Thank you for that. Now I wonder, does anybody have any sense or experience what one of those questions is about, what rural communities may be doing since they're relying—earlier it came up the matter of folks from urban communities' sort of whether it's flocking or fleeing or whatever it is to rural places. The restrictions are sort of just soft restrictions saying don't do it. Does anybody have any experience with what communities are or might be doing to protect themselves?

00:42:46

Ryan Gibson: I'll maybe jump in with a quick response to that Phil. I think one of the challenges is just having that communication between rural communities and their seasonal residents. Often seasonal residents in trying to move out to the rural countryside are not doing it to hinder rural communities, they're doing it because they're attracted to the landscape, to the atmosphere, to the environment that is created within our rural communities. I think what's really necessary and there's been a number of places that are doing this well is having that open dialogue with seasonal residents so that they truly understand why additional pressures might be placed on their seasonal community with their attendance at their cottage. I think when we start to move it away from that kind of tension filled us-versus-them dialogue we start to see urban residents say well “of course, yes, I don't wish to endanger the health care system of rural communities”, they don't want to impact negatively the availability of food within the community. They see themselves,

and they're empowered to see themselves as a contributor to the future of that rural area and I think that's really quite critical in this dialogue.

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Phil Loring: Any other comments on that?

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Jacqui Empson Laporte: Yeah, the other thing I would add is that when the people come to rural Ontario they're not necessarily familiar with the organization's and the services that are offered there. Even the people that live here are to some degree and we try our best through marketing and advertising and social media to let people know, but it's a real challenge for some of the organizations to help people who might come here that aren't normally from here, and those people are in crisis. We need to find a way to communicate and connect with them through other organizations.

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Phil Loring: To leave this on something of a positive note, I'm curious what you all have to think or have to say, we know that there's a number of challenges that people in rural communities are facing but we also know that rural places can be amazing and really great sort of centers of innovation and caring and resilience, and so I wonder what lessons do you think rural communities going through this can offer to urban and suburban communities? In terms of surviving through the lockdown and then emerging perhaps stronger and more resilient than before?

00:45:15

Abdul Rahim: Just to comment on that, speaking from the perspective of the work I do, we do know that for most rural communities over a long period of time we've seen that as I mentioned there's this connection between the family and the community. More importantly, we do know that communities have for most part also have some kind of connection with agriculture which they are food, like we've seen lot of connection between people that consumers were rural areas and the farming industry. If there's anything that COVID-19 has taught us from my perspective, has been the value of food and a value of actually appreciating where our food comes from. This is something that has been very inherent in our rural communities and rural life and I think that for rural areas going forward, I think that is something that urban areas can actually learn to address appreciate food to actually connect with the source of their food, in order to actually make sure that's going forward, we do not hope for something of this sort but once we create our connection between consumers and urban areas and the food source as well, it will be very critical in the way we recover from this.

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Phil Loring: Super, other thoughts?

00:46:37

Helen Hambly Odame: Yeah, I'd like to share something that I've seen from the rural areas that's very encouraging. A lot of the communities in rural areas, when they lost the place that they can go in and shop or maybe their church and other sort of social spaces and they became a little bit more isolated because they as well were on lockdown, one of the things that they built were where networks of communication and an assistance. Taking the food up to people who were house bound who couldn't get out to shop, also creating chat groups

through just basic telephone contacts with one another, keeping tabs on each other, making sure that if someone needed a hand on the farm we could come over and help out. These are examples of rural areas self-reliance and that collective spirit that have always been there. During the pandemic I think those types of actions have become essential for all of us in our lives. Maybe we've become too individually oriented, certainly too much oriented to just the stress of everyday life, and the ability to just be outside and take a breath of fresh air and look at something growing, we're not going to take that for granted anymore I don't think. Let's always remind ourselves what happened when that was taken away and let's make sure that that never happens to us going forward. Especially to young people in Canada, the children and young people deserve everything we can do to make the situation coming of this pandemic a healthy one, and secure one, a safe one.

00:48:28

Phil Loring: I'm seeing a lot of heads nodding and I think that's a really fantastic sentiment to end this webinar on. Helen, Abdul Rahim, Jacqui, and Ryan thank you all very much it's been fantastic to have this conversation with all of you.