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Economic Recession as a Catalyst to Increased Collaboration in Rural Tourism

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Abstract

Purpose: This chapter illustrates the collaborative strategies used by a rural village and community to counteract the rapid decline in economic and social activity in tourism that occurred during and after the recession in Ireland.

Design/methodology/approach: A review of literature focuses on collaborative strategies evident within a rural context, and considers benefits, challenges, inter and intra- relationships including ties, structure and communication. Motivational factors relating to social and economic need are also discussed. The case study is set in context with a brief review of the Irish economic environment, rural policy and rural tourism.

Findings: In a community rich in tourism resources, the economic recession provided an impetus to collaborate, pulling the community and resources together with a view to re-invigorating a tourist destination. Present goals of the collaborative process include the need to regain economic residential value, employment, pride of place and information sharing. These have shifted from the primarily social and altruistic motivations that spurred initial involvement by the community to help each other out of the recession and together contribute to increase rural and community capital.

Research limitations/implications: The short duration of the case study of three years and of the efficient response of the community need to be tested to evaluate whether sustainable transformational collaboration has occurred.

Social implications: In tackling the economic downturn, increased significance should be given to small rural community units to focus on developing internal social capacity which should be established before extraneous links are explored and developed.

Originality/Value: Economic need in developing rural tourism requires social and community engagement.

Key Words: collaboration, co-operation, rural tourism, agri-tourism, recession, Celtic Tiger, supplemental income, values, rural and community capital

Introduction

There is an old saying in the Irish language *Ní neart go cur le chéile* which means *there is no strength without unity*. In order to have unity, working together, co-operation and collaboration are requisites. From the seminal paper by Morgan and Hunt (1994) on co-operating to compete, and the proposition that to compete globally [by tourism businesses] requires local co-operation (Novelli et al 2006), it can be argued that both internal and external collaboration in all its guises is the essence of successful business in tourism. Collaboration has been recognised widely as a conceptual determinant of success and competitiveness of a tourism destination (Baggio 2011).

However, the market driven economic conditions of the mid-noughties that met its demise in 2008 posed an international problem. Economic and political power which had been in the hands of so few during the boom had to be embraced by the grass-roots of individuals and communities in order to create the type of economy and society that would benefit all rather than the few. A new solution had to be found. There was a need to re-consider approaches such as collaboration that helped to build the tourism sector in the first place in Ireland during the nineteen-nineties. And as Himmelmann (1996 in Earles et al (2014)) advised ‘if transformational collaborative strategies are to be considered among the prerequisites for new societies, they must reflect the values and practices of possible new societies’

The recession and consequent challenges gave opportunity for rural enterprise in the tourism sector to evaluate the economic and societal environments within which they operate. In many situations, catalysed by a mix of local and national initiatives, people sought to re-connect and engage for the benefit of both themselves and others. In Ireland since 2008, rural areas in particular, have been decimated by unemployment, youth emigration and increasing levels of economic depression. Tourism to areas outside the main urban destinations, have seen a decline, and in Ireland tourism is now considered one of the sectors that can aid increased local employment, revenue generation and social capital thus lifting local, regional and national economies. The pathway driven by individuals, communities and the public sector is dependent on a collaborative approach, developing rural tourism destinations and activities to be enjoyed by local communities and visitors to the area.

Increasingly rural areas throughout Europe are shifting their focus as they need to supplement agricultural income in order to sustain their communities and tourism is often identified as an alternative development strategy. While there has been considerable research about rural tourism in the literature there is less interest in rural tourism entrepreneurs, and

yet as identified by Kompulla (2014), Ryan et al (2012) and Koh and Hatten (2002), entrepreneurs play a key role in destination development. The nature of rural tourism means that often small rural tourism businesses and entrepreneurs need to work together to create a tourism experience. This chapter considers the collaborative strategies motivated by the economic down-turn that have driven a rural area to re-invigorate itself as a tourist destination. The stakeholders in the community came together in an attempt to develop and sustain their local area as a tourism destination echoing the sentiment of Dinis (2011) that co-operation between all local and extra local stakeholders is essential for successful development of rural tourism and the preservation of rural resources. It explores what prompted such an approach, the challenges that have been and continue to be encountered and key considerations for collaborative practises including post-recessional values and practises. The context of the case study is set by evaluating the economic environment and rural policy and rural tourism in Ireland.

Collaboration in Rural Tourism

Rural Tourism can be defined on the basis of functional, ecological and behavioural approaches (Dinis 2011), or as a totality of activities of individuals who travel to rural areas (Eurostat 1998 in Dinis 2011). 'As such, tourism and its related activities, notably construction, distributive trades, food and beverage services and transport services, can play an important role in rural economies (Eurostat p. 258)'. CEDRA (2014 p. 25) considers rural Ireland to be all areas located beyond the administrative boundaries of the five largest cities, hence taking into account all towns and villages and the countryside. Teagasc (the farm advisory body in Ireland) views rural tourism as destination tourism in rural areas... activities in rural areas and those that have the potential to promote it (Kelly 2014).

While rural tourism has been identified as creating benefits for rural communities (e.g. Roberts and Hall (2001) and Hall et al (2004)), such destinations face significant challenges in terms of issues such as accessibility, sustainability, variety of product and experience available and differing perspectives about the use of what Garrod et al (2006) call 'countryside capital'. From the individual firm perspective benefits can include economic benefits including cash flow and employment opportunities (Nilson, 2002), however weaknesses in terms of a lack of professionalism and experience and a lack of desire to grow the business and be innovative, have also been identified (Getz et al 2004). Sharpley (2002) also notes that expectations of the rural tourism project can be unrealistically high and that in general 'rural tourism does not generate high levels of income' (p.242). Another important

factor in rural tourism is that often the tourism businesses are operated as a method of supplementing family income (Iorio and Corsale 2010; McGhee and Kim 2004) and lifestyle and family-related goals are predominant (Getz and Carlsen, 2000) and this has implications in terms of perspectives and strategies.

Wilson et al (2001) conducted focus groups with local business people and leaders in six rural communities in Illinois, and among the key factors identified as contributing to success were good community leadership, community and government support, funds and cooperation between businesses and local leadership. This reflects the fact that rural tourism businesses are embedded in the rural areas in which they are located and their success is linked to the development of other enterprises in this area and the area itself. Community leadership is seen as one of the key drivers by Kelly (2014) - 'people who can see beyond the benefits... and we need to be able to identify the people that are good at this'.

furthermore, as Cawley and Gillmor (2008) note considerable challenges are posed by the complexity of the rural tourism product and its organizational structure whereby there is a wide range of stakeholders which have multiple interrelationships.

There has been considerable interest in the issue of networks and cooperation in the tourism literature with it being identified often as a necessity for small rural tourism providers in particular. Often the focus is on how networking and cooperation can result in destination development. Collaborative strategies are recognised as a requisite for success in rural tourism development (Wilson, et al 2001) and rural tourism development and associated entrepreneurship cannot work without both direct and indirect collaborative activity between those involved. As Tinsley and Lynch (2001:375) state 'to understand the tourism business destination network fully, it is not possible to consider the businesses in isolation'. The focus shifts from individual entrepreneurs, products or businesses to the space in which they connect, and their collective actions.

Relationships between stakeholders can take many forms: formal or informal (Beritelli, 2011), weak or strong based on ties (Granovetter, 1973), networks can be 'soft' or 'hard' and there can be endogenous and exogenous actors and resources (Saxena and Ilbery, 2007). Tinsley and Lynch (2001) refer to Szarka's (1990) identification of three types of network, exchange where there are commercial transactions, communications where information is exchanged and the social networks which includes the owners personal network of friends and family. While social benefits are sometimes noted it is most usually the economic benefits which are highlighted. (e.g. (Tilsted (2014) and Ramsey and Schaumleffel (2006).

While networks and cooperation are often presented as overwhelmingly positive developments, this is not always the case. Existence of community ties can be both a positive and a negative factor. Parochialism and belonging to a community can create an identity however can also prove exclusive for those outside the community leading to insularity and narrow viewpoints. Saxena and Ilbery (2007) discuss how at local level networks can be socially exclusive and their research 'highlight the difficulty of achieving coordinating actions and strategies even within small geographical areas with low population densities' (p.24). However an integrated approach to rural tourism provision embraces territorial approaches to tourism development based on network relationships independent of physical boundaries. This results in successful cross border destination development as was found by Cawley and Gillmor (2008) in the case of the English/Welsh border.

Corte and Aria (2014) examine why strategic networks often fail. They identify the importance of previous experience and the partner's awareness of the importance of interfirm cooperation. They also highlight the important role of a leader mirroring the work of Wilson et al (2001) and Lemmwtynen and Go (2009). Novelli et al (2006) argue that a threshold of critical mass of interaction has to take place in order to make networks effective i.e. a greater sharing of information and resources. More recently information technology has helped to overcome the low density of population and lack of spatial proximity that is typical of rural areas. According to Kelly (2014) there is a low skill base when it comes to the knowledge of information technology in the farming community in Ireland, though this is changing and mobile technologies and apps are being quickly adopted by the sector.

The importance of trust is also a recurring theme in terms of successful cooperation. Mykletun and Gyimothy (2010) also note the importance of mutual goals, common interests and altruism while Czernek (2013:87) observes that 'social and cultural determinants' are also fundamental to success. Why is it that entrepreneurs engage in cooperative behaviour or become part of a network? The key driving force is economic, with the focus on generating additional income, customers or tourists, or creating employment. But as noted above, Sharpley (2002) finds that returns in terms of economic factors are often disappointing. From a social perspective some stakeholders cooperate as a result of 'social interactions in networks of personal relations' (Nee, 1998:87). A third reason is not embedded in the individual perspective at all but is focussed on the destination whereby entrepreneurs engage in this type of activity as it will help the development of the destination as a whole (Mottiar et al, 2012, Bosworth and Farrell, 2011).

The discussion to date revolves around the idea that individual entrepreneurs make decisions which influence their strategy. But much of the development of rural tourism is as a reaction to the external economic environment. It is the fact that in the present global economy many farms are no longer economically viable and this has pushed many to establish rural tourism enterprises. The fact that employment opportunities are primarily located in urban areas has provided an incentive for those who wish to live in rural areas to establish their own businesses to facilitate this. So when we analyse and understand much of what happened in rural tourism we must set it in this context. This case study looks at a rural area in Ireland which has developed a range of collaborative strategies to ensure their long term viability at a time when economic recession was putting the destination under pressure. Collaboration is seen as an engagement that transcends networking, coordination and co-operation (Huxham 1996). It is argued that this drive to collaborate was the reaction by the local stakeholders to the external environment and that the foresight of a number of key individuals resulted in a group response and a change in attitudes among the local stakeholders.

The Irish Economic environment

Following the economic boom when the country had full employment, and spending by visitors to Ireland amounted to €3.920 billion in 2007 (CSO 2013) Ireland experienced a significant recession with unemployment as high as 15.1% in 2012, falling wages, a banking crisis and EU-IMF bailout. In addition to declining numbers of tourists another issue that has emerged is the regional spread of tourism. Tourism to cities, most especially Dublin has increased exponentially with a decline in visitor numbers to other parts of Ireland. In 2012, the Midlands-East region which comprises of rural and commuter economies and in which the case study is conducted, only attracted 18.8% of tourist visitors to Dublin and 17.4% of visitor generated revenue (Failte Ireland 2013). This rose close to 20% and 21% respectively according to preliminary figures for 2013 (Failte Ireland 2014). In combatting the problem in the West of Ireland, the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation (ITIC) commissioned a report 'New Direction for Tourism in the West' which encouraged key events, clustering, visitor engagement and creativity amongst its recommendations. To date a number of key developments involving destination focused collaborative strategies have taken place namely 'The Wild Atlantic Way' and the Mayo Greenway' and due to their initial success, similar developments are planned.

Rural Policy and Rural Tourism in Ireland

Rural Tourism in Ireland began in earnest in the 1960's when farmers were urged to look at alternative approaches to developing an income and encouraged to develop and make available farmhouse accommodation to visitors. Between the 1970's and mid 1980's, there were considerable price supports in agriculture and there was gradual state disengagement for land structure and reform. However, although initiatives were developed in the non-state sectors, there was no real integration between agriculture and other economic sectors. From the mid 1980's and during the 1990's, reform of CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) took place with the introduction of milk quotas. This led to a change in expectations and a greater emphasis on developing supplemental incomes such as those emanating from rural tourism provision. Grant aid for tourism development in a rural context has been from a number of direct and indirect sources. The Operational Programmes for Development (1 and 2), the more specific Agritourism Grant Scheme and more recently the Leader programme (1, 2 and Leader Plus) have helped to identify, develop and market rural tourism activities. Achieving the balance between demand and supply has always been problematic (Gorman 2005).

Barriers and problems within the rural tourism sector include the fragmented nature of its offering with a number of national and regional organisations focusing on different aspects of the rural economy with little evident co-ordination. Rural tourism [development] is considered activities, landscape, environment and landscape and is not viewed as a niche in its own right. This is the case at European, national, and local levels where it straddles a number of different sectors. This lack of consolidation evident in terms of rural tourism is exhibited in Ireland by the number of government departments which have a partial input into rural tourism. These include the four departments which have remits for tourism, environment, agriculture and heritage. However, policy proposed as part of the draft National Tourism Policy for Ireland 2014-2025 indicates that the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport will monitor more closely development in EU rural development funding to ensure contribution to the potential of tourism to facilitate rural development (p. 30). It is proposed that increased responsibility be given to local authorities for rural and local development (including rural tourism). The lack of year round business provides irregular profit margins though activity based pursuits have helped to overcome this for some businesses. Both infrastructure, and support deficits prove a challenge and there is overall little vision or image for the sector save that it is part of and is integrated with the rural economy as a whole.

Huge changes are predicted in the next ten years in the agricultural sector with over 40% of farmers retiring and many farms changing hands through inheritance. An increase in part-time farming is expected with supplementary income from employment in both on-farm and off-farm enterprises (Kelly 2014). According to Boyle (2009), a growth in multi-functional agriculture which includes tourism is being addressed under the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The Rural Development Programme (2014-2020) draft consultation paper advocates as one of the key six priorities the promotion of economic development in rural areas. And rural tourism is recognised as being a catalyst to achieve this. However Teagasc take a cautionary attitude towards new the tourism scheme in RDP2014-2020... mainly due to the fact farmers are fearful of inviting people on to farms and hence some of the farming organisations are negative about tourism (Kelly 2014).

In 2012, the Government established a Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA). A report was launched in April 2014. The report recognised that rural tourism has the potential to reverse negative economic trends bringing in visitors, creating new jobs and the development of local business centres for rural residents. <http://www.ruralireland.ie/>. The vision of rural Ireland offered by CEDRA focuses on dynamism, diversity and sustainability utilising an outward look approach by a multi-sectoral economy (CEDRA 2014:13) Three key recommendations are made and focus on national planning that incorporates a rural context, building on existing initiatives and the development of local and regional tourist destinations to complement national destinations. The descriptor on tourism and recreation in rural areas uses terms such as ‘ a cooperative approach’ ‘effective industry –led partnerships’ ‘cross sectoral supports’ and emphasises that continued niche and subsector development can lead to fragmentation, thus the need for clearly defined objectives and vision (CEDRA: 67-69).

Research undertaken by O’Donaghue et al. (2014) found the small and medium sized towns had been hit harder by the economic downturn than cities. This chapter discusses the case of a small rural village in North County Meath, where the community sought to address the economic and social decline that was evident in the area and reverse the downward economic and social trends.

Slane is a planned manorial village and is home to just over 1,000 people (Slane Local Area Plan 2009). Much of the architecture in the village dates back to the 18th Century with four Georgian houses dominating the centre cross-roads. Close-by, Slane Castle is an

internationally known venue for rock concerts. There are two hotels, one in the village and another resort hotel Tankardstown house located 5km away. There are also a great number of sites of interest around the village which span centuries in terms of heritage. An ecclesiastic site and archaeological dig is located at the Hill of Slane above the village (www.hillofslane.wordpress.com). A cottage, now a museum is dedicated to the First World War poet, Francis Ledwidge, several well preserved shops and pubs, Slane Mill and the old bridge spanning the River Boyne all contribute to the characteristic of the village. The Battle of the Boyne site is located 12km away and this is a significant draw for the N. Irish tourist market due to historical connections. Rock Farm, the other side of the river provides an ecotourism experience. Just outside the village Slane Farm Hostel has been in operation for over 30 years. Slane Local Area Plan (2009-2015) adopted in 2009, advocates the development of sustainable tourism with a particular focus on the natural and built heritage of the area (p.117).

According to Joanne Macken who has chaired the Slane Community Forum a number of times, identifying the challenges to the village was the initial step. The recession, traffic problems and attracting the visitors from Bru Na Boinne to the village were the key issues. Slane is located in the Boyne Valley, County Meath close to the UNESCO world heritage site of Bru Na Boinne. Despite its proximity to such a site, it benefits little from the significant visitor numbers, as the site is on the other side of the river and so many access the heritage site from Dublin and the motorway without ever visiting Slane. In January 2012 Slane Local Heroes was established as a way of encouraging interest in the redevelopment of Slane, subsequently new groups were formed, older groups revamped, events undertaken and commercial interests addressed. Starting with six people involved in the community forum in 2011, by 2014 this had grown to thirty-two groups with the majority of the parish population involved to some degree or another. Joanne stresses the importance of tangible benefits being evident to everyone in the village and this is one way of motivating local people to engage and become involved. Several new shops were developed including the craft co-operative which has 12 businesses working together and showcasing their work. A new patisserie has opened and existing shops have made an effort to present their premises in keeping with the appearance of the village. New events, whose main focus is bringing the local people together, include the Flame of Slane linking into the historical significance of the area, the Easter Egg Hunt, the Gourmet Food festival and a business to business (B2B) networking event. They have all developed a greater awareness and appreciation of the village.

According to Joanne 'the benefits of developing rural tourism is that it is a better way of life, brings people into the countryside; they appreciate it and meet more people' It also helps farmers to supplement family income and is an alternative through which everyone benefits. The approach adopted is inclusive rather than exclusive. Expectations can be high, and there needs to be a realistic view that there is a lot of hard work involved. Increased unemployment in the area actually provided an opportunity for the village. It allowed people the time to engage with the community and consider alternative forms of work. A good example of this has been the opening of an ancestral office which encourages visitors to trace their roots. There are two people manning this office and within a few weeks of opening, it had attracted a number of enquires and visitors to the area. However other challenges include accessibility to the area and trying to get visitor to leave the cities'. The focus by the tourist is on marketing city breaks with their cheap accommodation and this impacts negatively on rural tourism.

Within Slane village there are a number of groups working together. It is important to note that despite internal collaboration, many of them are linked to regional or National bodies so are outward looking. For example the Walking group is linked to Walking Ireland; the craft group is linked to the Craft Council of Ireland. External to the village, Slane works with the Boyne Valley Group, Meath Partnership, Meath County Enterprise Board, and Meath County Council. The village is presently twinning with Downpatrick (again reinforcing historical links) in Northern Ireland with the intention of increasing visitor numbers. This will also complement the existing interest from the Northern Irish population in the Battle of the Boyne site located 12km way. Nationally, Slane collaborates with Failte Ireland (the tourism board) and the educational institutes such as Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology and Dublin City University. One of the key success factors to developing the area is the ability to identify leads and expertise that would be useful in the future. One such lead led to the involvement of 120 students from the Dublin Institute of Technology as part of the '*Students in Action*' initiative using Slane as a basis for their assignments in tourism, enterprise development, marketing, information technology and policy.

After three years of collaboration amongst the stakeholders in the parish of Slane, Joanne considers the relationships between stakeholders is strong, soft and is moving from endogenous where they have built confidence internally to a more externally linked collaborative process. Conflict has arisen, for example getting the older, more traditional

community to buy into the process, however once the benefits were evident, they have come on board.

Considering the village of Slane as a network of relationships, Joanne surmises that a socially driven agenda initially motivated the community to collaborate with a view to helping each other through the economic recession. However over the past three years; this agenda has changed from being primarily social to a more commercial approach with 'people within the village now involved for business reasons'. An exchange or commercial focus is enhanced by an information and communication network. The hub (information office) plays an important role in this and there are now two people working there seven days a week. Motivation to be part of the collaborative process is destination focused corroborating research undertaken by Mottiar et al (2012) and Bosworth and Farrell (2011) followed by social engagement and then economic requirement. It is anticipated that economic influence will become stronger. Some of the new residents paid high prices for their houses during the economic boom and their collaborative involvement is motivated by the fact they want to see an increase in the value of their properties after the recessional downturn. The motivation to create a better environment, a better place to live, which in turn will increase the attractiveness of the village and impact on house prices, has acted as an incentive (Macken 2014).

One of the biggest challenges has been to get people to trust each other, to share information and getting them to buy into the process. As Joanne states 'you need to keep reminding them of the benefits'. And sometimes groups do tend to go off on their own, focus on their own markets rather than seeing it as a collaborative process working for the village as a whole. Everyone has to act as ambassadors for Slane. Sharing of knowledge is crucial in order to progress and at the community forum which meets every six weeks information is widely disseminated. 'We have a strong leadership – and would not have got anywhere without it'.

According to Joanne, collaborative practise in rural destinations should involve bringing the group together, undertaking a needs analysis, internal consideration of the ideas and expertise that exists and then once a strong cohort has been established, look externally. The availability of supports such as community schemes and expertise is important. Joanne cites that it is important to have a 'working' community. At the stage at which Slane presently

sits, marketing and identity are becoming more important. Up until now the focus has been on the community dynamic. Now it is time to focus on external image.

It is believed that one of the reasons that so much has happened in such a short time, is that the local community were able to build on their involvement in the Local Heroes project. She thinks that if had been solely commercial sector involvement it would not have worked as well. There is a need for the community dynamic. Slane and its parish have been the recipients of several awards. These mark the progress of tourism community work motivating continued involvement.

The Recession as a Motivation to Collaborate?

Citing Lambe (2008) in O'Donaghue et al (2014) community development is economic development and is guided by a broadly held vision. In the case of Slane, it is the vision of a few that has and is the driving force behind their success to date. O'Donaghue et al (ibid) advocates a Small Towns Stimulus Programme containing an initiative that would help to develop capacity for them to serve as a rural tourism hub. Slane through 'The Hub' seeks to do this, and has achieved official tourist office status which is recognition of their work.

Strong leadership, so important to successful collaboration (Corte and Aria 2014) is evident in Slane. According to Kelly (2014) champions and leaders are required, however it does take a certain type of person to provide leadership, and Teagasc are presently involved in trying to develop leaders in a pilot project elsewhere [Gort, County Clare] in Ireland. Slane provides an example of where hard work, strong leadership and the negative impact of the economic recession in Ireland pushed the community to use collaborative strategies.

Nationally due to the lack of national vision and fragmented structures, relationships between the stakeholders operating in rural tourism tend to be weak and under developed. However there is positive evidence of successful collaboration in a small number of destination-specific areas such as Slane. A level of trust is being developed though it has taken time with the need to demonstrate tangible benefit with the opening of shops, running of events and the recognition of progress important to driving the momentum.

And what about transformational collaboration? Can the approach undertaken by the community in Slane transform the community and contribute to a set of values and a standard of living embraced by all? The values demonstrated by the village now echo the needs of it's

people. According to Joanne people appreciate it more, people socialize more and this creates the economic benefit. 'We have people bringing the visitors on our local walks with everyone else integrating them into the place and there is a high level of repeat visitors. The objective is to make Slane a better place for the people who are living in it, make other people more aware, people are in it for the long haul.'

The economic recession acted as a driver to work together, as a catalyst for a collaborative approach, not just in Slane but elsewhere within the rural community. The motivation to collaborate is the recognition that they [the farming community] cannot manage on their own [during the recession] ... if they could they would (Kelly 2014). In Slane, initial social engagement and concern has now a more economic focus and together with the rural tourism resources contribute to greater rural and community capita

Summary and Conclusion

This case has shown how a small rural town community reacted to the catastrophic national economic circumstances of the country by working together and focusing on developing their local community and the rural tourism product, as a way of combating declining economic fortunes. Central to their success has been a few influential leaders who have built on campaigns such as the Local Heroes to encourage others in the community to become involved. As a result of the recession it was recognised that the only route to success was via collaboration and so the focus became the village and the destination rather than just individual businesses or projects. The end result is a much more unified community both in terms of individual members of the community and business owners. Thus the recession impacted perceptions, and also strategies, of the stakeholders in this area and the consequence is a stronger rural economy and society.

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