ACSF-Oxfam Rural Resilience Project

Case Study: Claytown, California, USA

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Introduction

This report provides an assessment of rural resilience in a northern California community I am calling “Claytown.” Data were collected between 2012 and 2013 and are comprised of semi-structured interviews with local residents, a focus group with small-scale vegetable farmers in the region, and ethnographic observations at community events and meetings, local government meetings, as well on vegetable and marijuana farms in the region. Interviews were conducted with back to thelanders, vegetable farmers, medical marijuana activists, local business owners, individuals directly involved in the marijuana industry (growers, laborers, doctors, and technical specialists), a homeless advocate, and non-profit executives. A total of 20 interviews were conducted for this report. The report also draws on secondary data from one interview conducted by a local cultural center.

Two processes have been central to social and economic change in northern California, and Claytown in particular. First, that of urban to rural migration. California has experienced multiple waves of migration and migrants from the Gold Rush of the 1800s, to the search for work during the Great Depression; from the Bracero Program (initiated in 1942) to the resettlement of Hmong refugees after the Vietnam War, to name but a few. I focus here on two relatively recent exurban migrations that have been critical to the contemporary development of the Claytown region: 1) the back to the land movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and 2) amenity-driven migrations of the 1990s and early 2000s. The second important process entails the dramatic rise of a quasi-legal marijuana industry in California that began in the 1960s, but expanded considerably in the 1990s following the passage of Proposition 215, which legalized the use, cultivation, possession, and distribution of marijuana for medicinal purposes. As I illustrate below, these two processes have had a lasting impact on the socio-cultural, economic, and political character of northern California and have conditioned the capacities and prospects for resilience in the region.

While medical marijuana use and production is legal in California, it is prohibited at the federal level. Such contradictions render the legal status of medical marijuana patients and producers ambiguous, at best; they are at once legal and illegal in the eyes of the state/State. As such, I have used a pseudonym for the specific location in which I conducted my research. ‘Claytown’ does not represent a single site or location, but rather a combination of sites within northern California that reflect broader trends in the region.¹ In addition to concealing the specific geographic location of my research, all interviewees’ names are kept anonymous.

The report begins with a regional and community profile of northern California, and Claytown in particular. This section focuses on five themes deemed to be critical to building resilience in the region.

¹ I am using Burd-Sharp and Lewis’ (2011) definition of northern California, which includes Butte, Colusa, Del Norte, Glenn, Humboldt, Lake, Lassen, Mendocino, Modoc, Nevada, Pulmas, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Tehama, and Trinity counties (2011: 153).
rural resilience\textsuperscript{2}: 1) effective governance; 2) civic capacity; 3) natural resources; 4) resources for economic exchange; and 5) local knowledge and resources. As is briefly discussed, these five thematic features of the region have been conditioned by the exurban migrations of the 1960s-70s and 1990s, as well as the decline of traditional economic sectors and the expansion of a medical marijuana industry. Next, the report presents three key findings with regard to rural resilience in Claytown:

- Resilience in Claytown is promoted by a highly educated populace (more than 30% of which is college-educated or beyond), considerable institutional capacity, and widespread commitment to the environment;

- Long-term resilience in the region is undermined by a lack of economic diversity and opportunities, gender-based biases in economic and social systems, and an aging demographic;

- Marijuana production contributes to short-term resilience, but is likely a source of long-term vulnerability.

The report concludes with a brief reflection on methodology. While this report is based on data from Claytown, the three processes identified above have had a significant impact on social and economic development in northern California more broadly. Thus the findings presented here are likely to have implications beyond Claytown itself.

**Claytown: A Regional and Community Profile**

Contemporary economic and social conditions in California defy simple generalizations. According to the American Human Development Index, California ranks 12\textsuperscript{th} in the nation overall on a composite of human development indicators. However, this ranking obscures considerable geographic and demographic disparities within the state. For instance, California boasts one of the highest overall life expectancies in the nation, yet at the same time, the lowest rates of high school graduation (Burd-Sharps and Lewis 2011: 4-5).

Claytown is situated within northern California (see Figure 1), a region comprised of 42,544 square miles that support a broad range of biomes, including wetlands, riparian zones, coniferous forests, grasslands, oak woodlands, coastal shrub, chaparral, and mountain meadows. Population density is low across the region, with only 25 people per square mile. Northern California is inhabited by just over one million people, 88% of whom are white. Approximately 20% of the population lives in poverty, and the median household income is approximately $43,000 per year (well below the state average of $61,000). Approximately 85% of northern Californians 25 years and older have completed a high school education or higher, compared to 81% across the entire state. However, fewer northern Californians have attained a bachelor’s degree or higher (19% of

\textsuperscript{2} There is a significant body of literature devoted to understandings of resilience. In order to emphasize subjective meanings of well-being and leave the category open to interpretation within the specific contexts in which it was employed, I used a very loose definition of the term in my research. I first sought to understand what meanings local residents made of the term, but in cases where I was pushed to provide some kind of definition I described the term as referring to conditions that allow a community to flourish. Such a definition was intended to provoke further conversation around what ‘flourishing’ meant, and how it could be achieved in Claytown.
Figure 1: A Geographic Profile of Northern California

the population in northern California versus 30% in
the state at large). Northern California ranks
considerably lower in well-being indicators
compared to state and national averages. According
to Burd-Sharps and Lewis, “if Northern California
were a state, it would rank forty-fifth in the
country, between Tennessee and Kentucky” (2011:
18).

In many ways, Claytown reflects the broader
characteristics and trends of northern California,
yet it is unique in several ways as well. Similar to
the rest of northern California, the population in
Claytown is predominantly white (90% of the
population) and is increasingly comprised of an
aging population. Poverty levels – approximately
10% of the population – are lower than state and
national averages (both of which hover around 14%), as well as those of northern California
(Census 2011). As of the 2010 Census, 45% of the population in Claytown was between 45 and
75 years of age, and those 60 years and older represent the fastest growing population in the
region (see Figure 2). The proportion of individuals 65 years and older exceeds both state and
national averages: more than 20% of Claytown’s population is above 65 years of age, compared
to a state-wide average of 12% and a national average of nearly 14% (see Figure 3). While these
shifting demographics reflect a nation-wide pattern of an increasingly aging society, the rate and
scale of change in Claytown is greater than
both state and national averages. Of the three
directors and executives of non-profits in the region,
all expressed concerns over future prospects for the
region as the number of youth and working-age
people continues to decline, accompanied by a
lack of viable economic opportunities.

Figure 2: Claytown Population by Age
(2010)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013

Figure 3: Comparison of Age Distribution in Claytown (2010)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013

Resources for Economic Exchange

Historically, the American West has been characterized by boom-bust economies, and
Claytown is no exception. The gold rush of 1848 brought hundreds of thousands of (settler)
Americans and immigrants to northern California in search for gold. While significant amounts
of wealth were generated, the gold rush also destroyed lives, land, and a host of social and
ecological relations (Holliday 1999). The mining industry gave way to other industries,
including an expansive timber economy that facilitated the construction of mines and railroads

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throughout northern California, as well as ranching operations that provided the mines with livestock for transportation (Momsen 1996). However, all of these industries were relatively short-lived. By the late 1950s the mining industry had virtually collapsed, and by the mid-1980s, the timber industry was all but absent Claytown; livelihoods once dependent on extractive industries and primary commodity production began to be replaced by those of recreation and tourism, consumer services, and high-tech.

Since the decline of “traditional” economies, the service sector has grown to be the most significant source of employment in Claytown, accounting for more than 2/3 of the local economy. Government jobs provide the second largest source of employment, followed by the goods producing sector (see Figure 4). While some jobs located in the service sector pay relatively well and may include benefits (i.e. full-time positions in education and health services, as well as some professional and business services positions), the majority of service jobs in Claytown are characterized by low wages, seasonal or temporary employment, and no benefits.

![Figure 4: Percent of Population Employed by Industry (2011)](source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013)

While median household incomes in Claytown are comparable to state and national averages ($61,632 for California and $52,762), a significant proportion of income levels can be attributed to the amenity-driven migration of the 1990s, which in addition to attracting telecommuters brought a significant number of retirees to the region. As of 2010, transfer payments in the form of retirement comprised almost one-fifth of all personal income in Claytown, and income from dividends, interest, and rent accounted for more than a quarter; together these comprise more than 40% of personal income in Claytown (Bureau of Economic Analysis 2012).

In addition to economic changes associated with exurban migration and economic restructuring, the region has experienced a significant rise in informal economic relations, largely due to the expansion of medical marijuana production in the region. Although the size of the medical marijuana economy in Claytown is difficult to quantify with any certainty, according to some estimates the industry accounts for as much as one-third of the local economy and serves as an important livelihood strategy for many Claytown residents. While such figures are not accounted for in state and county statistics, anecdotal evidence of such is not hard to come by. The importance of the medical marijuana economy to rural livelihoods (both directly and indirectly) was repeatedly noted during interviews and participant observation, as well as at local governmental and organizational meetings. Several of the farmers present at the focus group described the significance of the industry for small-scale farming operations. As the latter requires considerable labor, often with meager financial returns (particularly for young and

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3 As is common in analyses of informal economies more generally, accurate estimates of the size and scope of the marijuana economy are incredibly difficult to determine. The figures provided here are based on estimates from local residents, policy makers, and economic leaders in local industries. Interviewees estimated the marijuana industry as comprising anywhere from 15-35% of the local economy. A woman who produces medical marijuana in the region and serves as the director of a local medical marijuana advocacy organization, estimated the size of Claytown’s medical marijuana economy as being close to $1 billion.
beginning farmers), seasonal employment in the medical marijuana industry\(^4\) provides many farmers with supplementary income to support themselves through non-farming seasons. In addition, a significant proportion of farmers’ clients (including Community Supported Agriculture members and farmers’ market customers) are medical marijuana growers themselves, providing an indirect link between local farmers and the quasi-legal industry.

Residents of Claytown best reflect what Burd-Sharps and Lewis (2011: 14) categorize as “Main Street California,” or “suburban and ex-urban Californians” who generally experience “high levels of human development… enjoy longer lives, higher levels of educational attainment, and higher earnings than the typical American [but who also] have an increasingly tenuous grip on middle-class life” (32). The lack of economic opportunities, dependence on service sector jobs and a quasi-legal medical marijuana industry, and an increasingly aging population all contribute to the precarity of the middle class in Claytown.

**Governance**

The primary modes of local governance occur at the county and city levels. Counties in California are authorized to make/enforce local ordinances (so long as they do not conflict with state laws), can sue/be sued, purchase and hold title to land, and levy/collect taxes (CSAC 2013). Counties are governed by a Board of Supervisors, each of whom is elected by their respective districts. While local governments vary by county and city, municipal governments may be governed by mayor-council, council manager, or commission (NLC 2013). Cities have a broader range of powers with regard to self-governance, including the ability to generate revenue, set tax rates, and regulate employment.

Claytown is politically divided, with democrats and republicans garnering relatively equal representation in the region, and comprising two-thirds of all registered voters (see Figure 5). Residents are politically active – 79% of eligible voters are registered, a figure higher than the state average of 72% (US Census 2010) – and politics are often divisive in the region. The director of a local non-profit focused on developing socially and environmentally responsible economic development in the region characterized local politics as,

one of the wildest, wackiest, most rough-and-tumble political environments of any place in the western United States. People fight like cats and dogs. They hate each other, they recall each other, they run ballot measures, you know you’ve got this whole undercurrent of – this is the American story, right – rugged individualism versus the national government.

\(^4\) The most common form of seasonal employment is that of “trimming.” This refers to the final stage of processing marijuana before it goes to market, which entails removing the stems and leaves from the flowers.
A recent Board of Supervisors’ meeting on the implementation of a new local ordinance to restrict medical marijuana production further revealed political tensions within the region. Hundreds of residents attended the meeting, with discussions at points becoming so tense that the meeting had to be temporarily placed on hold. Public comments were frequently followed either by boos or cheers, depending on the position taken. The majority of the attendees were in opposition to the proposed ordinance – citing its violation of state minimum standards of regulating medical marijuana, hardships it would pose for medical marijuana patients, and the significant tolls it would take on local businesses (some business owners stated that revenue generated from medical marijuana in Claytown contributes to approximately 25% of their annual earnings). Regardless of staunch public opposition, the ordinance was passed.

Despite deep political divisions, strong institutional-governmental partnerships do exist within Claytown. For example, a representative of a local non-profit working on homelessness in the region stated that partnerships between the organization and local law enforcement are “stronger than ever.” He went on to describe,

For instance, let’s say there’s a guy on the street who’s an alcoholic and causing trouble. If he gets arrested and put in jail, that’s going to cost a lot in taxpayers’ dollars. And I’m the last to advocate that we should only use the metric of dollars to measure impact, but that’s what gets people’s attention. So, people have started to realize that it’s not really effective to lock this guy up. They started to realize we need another way to do things. Instead of picking that guy up, the cops call me and I can go meet with that person. I build trust, rapport, and can have a conversation about the situation. I know he doesn’t want to go to jail. He knows he doesn’t want to go to jail. So we figure something out – make a plan. These partnerships really work. And not to eradicate homelessness, but cops can play a healing role.

Indeed, such partnerships facilitate dialogue and encourage a sense of mutual understanding in the community. And, they are even more remarkable in the context of widespread libertarian and anti-government sentiments in Claytown.

**Civic Capacity**

Much of what exists in terms of civic capacity in Claytown emerged from the region’s cultural renaissance in the 1960s. In the midst of economic stagnation, a group of new arrivals to the community (including the back to the landers, as well as a range of other artisans) committed themselves to reviving the community through the preservation of historic buildings and the cultivation of a vibrant arts culture. Within a decade, a small group of individuals (including several wealthy benefactors and with some support from an emergent and small-scale marijuana industry) managed to cultivate strong artistic institutions, support local artists, and establish a number of new local businesses. These features of the community have been central to the overall character of Claytown, and continue to contribute to the region’s tourist industry.

There are literally hundreds of non-profits in the region, many of which are focused on the arts and the environment, as well as a range of social issues. Much of the growth of local non-profits can be attributed to the two aforementioned exurban migrations (and particularly exurban migrants who moved to the region in the 1990s and 2000s). As artists, craftspeople, musicians, and poets (among many others), exurban migrants of the 1960s and 1970s brought a considerable

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5 Importantly, positions on medical marijuana follow few discernable patterns in terms of party preference – the entire political spectrum is represented by both supporters and those in opposition to marijuana.
amount of high quality art to the region. They revitalized local theatres, established cooperatively owned businesses for artists, produced a range of performances and exhibits, established a local cultural center, and refurbished downtown buildings. Likewise, amenity-driven migrants have brought institutional knowledge and experience, as well as financial resources, which together have resulted in the proliferation of non-profits and community-based organizations in the area. Local organizations have had many achievements over the last several decades including successfully blocking dams on a near-by river; the sourcing of locally produced food in schools throughout the region; extensive services for the homeless; robust arts-in-education programs; enhanced business-environmentalist partnerships; and widespread support of a vibrant local food sector, to name but a few.

Despite the richness of civic organizations in Claytown, the proliferation of non-profits has also proved to be challenging, both in terms of competition for state and national resources (particularly grants), as well as competition over residents’ time and energy. Several interviewees described being on multiple Boards in their respective towns, and feeling overextended. Part of this is due to the fact that there is a considerable income gap in the region, thus the number of people able to volunteer their time and resources to community organizations is limited. As a medical marijuana activist told me, “many folks are struggling to make ends meet, and have little time for community action.” She herself was on numerous Boards for a diverse range of organizations.

Natural Resources

One of the most significant changes in the region has been the shift from an extractive resource base premised on primary commodities to a service-based industry. Timber and precious metals and minerals are no longer central to the local economy. While land remains a critical resource for local agriculturalists – Claytown has a vibrant small-scale farm movement and regularly attracts young people seeking agricultural education and training – changes in land use associated with exurban migration have put constraints on traditional agricultural practices, thus changing the meanings and uses of land in the region. As increasing numbers of people migrated to Claytown, fences proliferated, thus prohibiting more than a century of migratory ranching practices. A long-term resident-rancher described the challenges he now faces in his business due to the sub-dividing and fencing in of private land,

Even on my side, these places, people bought them to split them up. Well during the log days, when it was used for logging, cows could run on it or anything and there was nothing said… [And] if this were left open range then they couldn’t say, ‘if you don’t want the cows, fence them out.’ And that’s where the trouble come in. When they split up these sections of grounds into a whole bunch, there’s where your problems are going to arrive. And if one does it the other one does it, and just down the road complaining and complaining. And of course that’s where your trouble’s coming [with regard to] the livestock.

Instead of being viewed as a natural resource, land is now predominantly valued as an amenity – for its natural beauty, recreational potential, and ecosystem services. Indeed, the local tourist industry is dependent upon environmental conservation efforts, and business owners within the industry have lobbied forcefully for increased state and local environmental protections. Local residents (largely coming out of the back to the land movement) have been highly successful in opposing the reestablishment of mining operations in the region, and have
thwarted a number of attempts to open old mines and/or establish new mining projects. Such successes are highly contested, however, by those who argue that the mines would serve as a much-needed source of local employment. In practice, the latter have been far less organized than the former, and as of now all proposed mining projects are on hold.

**Opportunities for Learning and Sharing Knowledge**

Despite an aging population, Claytown has numerous opportunities for primary and secondary education, including a variety of public and charter schools – several of which have received state and national recognition – as well as proximity to a regional community college. Residents are highly educated, with nearly 95% of the population over 25 years of age with a high school degree or higher, and greater than 30% of those above 25 years and older having attained a bachelor’s degree or higher (see Figure 6 for state and national comparisons).

In addition to educational institutions, there is a wealth of agricultural, ecological, geographic, and historical expertise in the region. Claytown has a long history of agriculture and ranching, and farmers in the region are highly knowledgeable of regional climates, soil types, topography, and appropriate crops. Farmer-to-farmer training networks are also strong in Claytown. These have cultivated and supported a new generation of farmers and through frequent knowledge sharing (i.e. at potlucks, farm tours, and collective work days) enhanced region-specific agricultural knowledge and practices.

There are also numerous ecological experts in Claytown specializing in an array of fields from sustainable forestry management to herpetology. Local organizations frequently hold informational workshops and interactive classes on topics as diverse as local fungi identification, community-based land management, how to compost effectively, cooking with native plants, Native American and gold rush histories, and guided tours through the local towns and backcountry. A number of local residents are well-versed in alternative forms of housing and energy. Classes on how to build cob houses and ovens are offered regularly within the community, as are workshops on alternative residential energy systems that employ solar technologies and other forms of passive energy. Local knowledges are codified in the numerous non-profit organizations in the region and expanded and reproduced through both formal and informal interactions within the community.

**Rural Resilience in Claytown: Key Themes and Findings**

This section highlights key themes and findings regarding rural resilience in Claytown. It begins by describing community-based notions of resilience. The subsequent sections identify key strengths and resources within the community, followed by contemporary challenges and threats that may compromise the region’s long-term resilience.
Community Conceptions of Resilience

While community conceptions of resilience all embodied a notion of well-being, the emphasis on what kind of well-being, or what well-being meant varied depending on the positionality and experiences of the interviewee. For instance, an advocate for homeless people in Claytown described resilience in the following way,

When I think of resilience, I think of survival. Just being able to make it through another day. [Resilience also] has to incorporate the ability to live a purposeful and dignified life, whether or not this conforms to social norms and standards.

This notion of resilience is grounded in particular experiences of social marginalization. As the interviewee explained, homeless people have to achieve “a restoration of dignity and self-respect. They don’t have all of the material things that typically give people an identity and meaning – they don’t have a house, lots of clothes, a car, etc. They don’t have the same kind of purposeful place in society to feel dignified.” He went on,

Just because people possess something, it doesn’t necessarily mean they are empowered by those possessions. I really wish people would welcome/accept the challenge of practicing acceptance. There’s almost always some element of misfortune for people who are homeless – it’s not something people should get angry about. I think [to achieve resilience] on the community level, but really in our culture more broadly, we have to get past the arrogant self-sensitivity people have of wanting everything their own way. People need to get over that idea that just because we have something others don’t have, that we’re living a better life than them. We need to think, be patient, slow down, understand the connection between poverty and wealth. They’re really two sides of the same coin – capitalism generates wealth and poverty simultaneously. Lots of people get left behind in the treadmill of consumerism. What’s our culpability in all that? We really have to assess the relationship between the two [wealth and poverty] and understand each of our own places in it all.

This conceptualization of resilience shifts the focus from solving the “problem” of homelessness, to a focus on social understandings of homelessness. In making this shift, the interviewee is signaling the need to redirect intervention efforts from the individual level to a broader social level. The focus group with small-scale farmers reinforced the importance of shifting focus from the micro to the macro level. As one community supported agriculture (CSA) farmer described,

Resilience, to me, would involve, on the one hand, an understanding of our food system – how it affects our environment and our societies. On the other hand, it would mean that the work of small-scale farmers – the people who grow healthy food and are stewards of the land – is valued. Since becoming a farmer, I’ve never worked as hard in my life for as little pay.

In this case, the farmer is referring to the structural limitations of a food system that produces cheap food through practices that degrade both the environment and human labor. While participants in the focus group acknowledged the importance of affordable food, particularly for the poor, they critiqued the structural conditions through which corporate agriculture is supported and subsidized by the state, instead of farmers who are committed to socially and
ecologically sustainable means of food production. This perspective serves as both a critique of
global food systems, as well as an attempt to valorize the knowledge and labor associated with
small-scale farming. However, the two women farmers in the focus group noted that in addition
to challenging the economic structure of the food system, it was also necessary to transform
gender relations within systems of food production, at all scales. As one of the women described,

I often feel like people don’t take me as seriously as they do the male farmers. When we
worked with two other men [in forming an farm-based non-profit], the men were
perceived as the face of the organization… the four of us supposedly had equal power,
but weekly if not daily, they were perceived as the ones who did it all. So, the four of us
would be doing equal amounts of work, but that work wasn’t equally valued. It was
challenging to constantly feel like we needed to assert ourselves, and that’s not
necessarily where I wanted to put my energy. Like, people would say, “Oh, do you work
for [the men who were in the organization]?” Or I’d tell people that I was running the
CSA [community supported agriculture] within the organization and they’d say, “oh, you
do the books and phone calls?” Within our group we all worked together and
collaborated and shared responsibilities well, but it was that continued sense of… that
cultural view of who was in power, and who was doing things. The biggest challenge for
me was that I didn’t feel like my most intimate co-workers [the men] understood how
challenging that was for us [the two women].

The two women also described important differences in how they ran their business, in
contrast to businesses they were involved with that were primarily directed by men.

It’s been so great for me to work with [her female business partner]. And I respect the way we
run our business. It’s much different from a lot of farms in that we allow for emotional stuff to
come up, check in with each other, we talk about things that are going on. If we’re feeling sick,
we can rest. You know, we allow for things to occur besides just the business of the farm. And
then I feel so passionate about inspiring other women. I really want more women to be farming,
running businesses, to trust themselves.

These women described resilience as having to incorporate gender equity and empowerment,
not only in the global food system, but also within community-based food systems and society
more generally. Importantly, these women signaled the subtle, cultural ways in which gender
biases are reproduced on a daily basis. Rather than being blatant or explicitly malicious, forms
of gender inequality were manifest in everyday interactions, often without conscious intent. This
was true not only in the agricultural community, but also in terms of local leadership within the
region more broadly. The majority of political leaders in Claytown are men, as are most non-
profit executives and directors in the area.

Another understanding of resilience, this time by a local business owner/non-profit director,
emphasized the importance of diverse economic opportunities to the community’s overall well-
being. “The single greatest threat to our local economy,” he stated, “is a lack of economic
diversity.”

In an economy, diversity creates resilience, and resilience increases your ability to adapt
and thrive in new conditions. Dependence on traditional sectors, such as construction,
real estate, and industrial scale tourism, lead to an unhealthy boom and bust cycle in our
local economy, and leaves us poorly prepared to weather national business cycles. These
sectors have an important place, but they cannot be the only game in town.
The emphasis on economic diversity is one that emerged continually in conversations with community members, as will be discussed further below. Importantly, interviewees noted the need for not just any jobs, but jobs that are sufficient to sustain a middle class lifestyle, and that are supportive of women and families. To this extent, resilience is not simply surviving, but creating the conditions for individuals and communities to flourish. These three definitions are highlighted to illustrate the importance of positionality and experience in understanding community conceptions of resilience. Resilience does not necessarily mean the same thing to everyone, and is, at least in part, contingent upon one’s place in society, values, and personal experiences.

**Strengths and Resources within the Community**

A number of resilience-promoting factors are present in Claytown. First, the region is inhabited by a well-educated populace. More than 30% of the population is college-educated or beyond. This figure is greater than both state and national averages and is comparable to educational attainment levels in urban regions. Second, the region boasts considerable institutional capacity, as illustrated by the hundreds of non-profit organizations in the region. These organizations provide much needed social services to the community, and serve as sites where resources and experience can be mobilized to address pressing issues within the community. Third, there is a widespread commitment to the promotion of environmental conservation and sustainability. While these values do not always promote social well being, as some residents noted, they have contributed to the overall beauty of the landscape and have been instrumental in protecting local natural resources. Fourth, with more than 50 years of committed investment in the arts, Claytown supports a vibrant artistic community and continues to provide an array of multi-media performances and exhibits in the region. Finally, Claytown is a relatively wealthy region. However, and as will be described below, much of the area’s wealth is generated outside the region, and a significant proportion of local incomes are derived from transfer payments based on retirement as well as dividends and interest. In the absence of sufficient economic opportunities for young people, current levels of wealth in the region are likely tenuous and temporary.

**Challenges and Threats Posed to Long-Term Resilience**

By and large, the most significant threats to long-term resilience identified by Claytown residents were economic. As noted above, the low-wage service sector dominates the local economy. Such jobs provide little economic security in terms of wages, benefits, and occupational longevity – particularly in the context of rising housing costs. As a result, many young people who grew up in the region are unable to return. As one respondent noted,

The lack of jobs is pretty critical. Because there’s a brain drain. Young people graduate from [local high schools] and go off to college and can’t come back. I mean one of the saddest things to me about [Claytown] is that because of people like us – coming out of the Bay Area or Los Angeles who are able to cash out when the market was high and were able to buy here – [now] … many middle class and lower middle class children who grew up in this region can’t afford to live here, much less buy here. That’s a terrible social problem… And it’s pretty serious. And terribly depressing, particularly for kids coming up.
One of the non-profit leaders interviewed echoed this point. Although environmental valuation has improved, he said, there hasn’t been a comparable valuation of people and economic and social equity. As he described,

We finally started to turn the cultural corner on pollution – like, we all hate pollution now right? Now we’ve got to start turning the cultural corner on fairness in economics. And the Occupy movement was not enough to do it… It’s got to be more than an angry reaction. It’s got to be building the ethic that it’s unfair to exploit people, you know?! We finally got people to understand that it’s not fair to exploit the planet, and I think we’re beginning to turn the corner on that. But, you know, we’ve got to get them to start thinking that way about people, too. That’s going to be a big challenge.

He added that most of the wealth in Claytown is generated outside of rather than within the region – a condition that he said threatens the long-term resilience of the region,

So you’ve got this really weird thing going on in [Claytown] where… there’s definitely built into the system… the ability to flex and change and adapt, but it’s really because wealth is pouring in from outside the region. We’re not actually creating any of that wealth or prosperity here. So, now [we might say] we are more resilient, because we know we’re dependent on all these systems being able to flex and move and adapt to change and take a shock and all the rest of that stuff, and then the question becomes, does it actually hold together in the face of, you know… change and challenges? And, I’m not so sure it does. Largely because we actually don’t create our own wealth here. And, you know, that’s a problem. That’s really a problem. What we have is a lot of transfer payments, a lot of older people, we have an underground economy that we can’t really track, we have a tourism-dependent economy, which is low-wage… So think about delivering some earth-shattering body blow to that like Tuolumne County just got with the Rim Fire, you know, or let’s pretend we really do raise 6 degrees Celsius with climate change… people aren’t going to be bringing that money to [Claytown] anymore, you know? And [referring to the probability of marijuana legalization in California] people probably aren’t going to be buying dope anymore either. So, I’m not so sure that we’re really that much better off than we were 30 years ago. We might be temporarily a little wealthier.

While economic opportunities were certainly a concern amongst all of the residents interviewed, the gendered character of the economic system was also raised (echoing the comments made by the women farmers noted above). In addition to low wages, many of the jobs available in Claytown do not provide adequate support to parents, particularly mothers. One woman who works for a local non-profit in the area described being satisfied with the kind of work she is doing, but that the wages she receives were insufficient to cover all of her expenses (including thousands of dollars of debt incurred while she was a student). In order to stay in the area, she and her young son moved into a mobile home to reduce her housing costs. “It’s small,” she said, “but it allows me to stay in the area and not have to commute.” Although her wages are low, her flexible work schedule allows her to drop off and pick up her son from school – a 24-mile drive that she repeats twice daily. She just turned 50 this year and is seriously considering trying to go back to work for the local government – if she just puts in 16 more years, she said, she could be in a better position financially when she is older. However, that makes things more difficult in terms of caring for her 11-year old son. “There is always a trade-off,” she described,
“if I am able to find a better paying job, I have to sacrifice the kind of care I want to give my son.”

As most of the non-profit and business leaders in the region were men, it was not surprising that they did not address gender-related challenges in the workplace during our interviews. The key issues, for them, were related to economic diversity and expanding the number of job opportunities in the region. One local non-profit director stated that one of the ways to address the economic challenges in Claytown was through the creation of “business clusters,” or the promotion of clusters of similar kinds of businesses that emphasized collaboration rather than competition. As he described,

So, there’s a company that I’d categorize as an engineering company, and they need a chemist, and they can’t find a qualified chemist here. And the chemist that you find that may be able to move here, they’re like, ‘yah, what happens if your company goes belly up, and you’re the only chemist?’ But if there’s a ton of companies, then they can feel more confident in moving here. So clusters could work in a lot of different ways. And then it’s like, then if you work at a video company and you see collaboration and interaction between all these other companies, and then you might say, ‘oh yah, I’ve got this idea,’ and then Fred over there would be perfect, and Mary would be perfect, I’ll contact them. But if everyone’s working in silos, then you don’t get that cooperation. So I see part of the job [of the non-profit he directs] is to help create a culture of collaboration and networks.

This to the regions’ economic challenges would likely attract younger professionals to the area, and is important in terms of its emphasis on building relationships between companies. However, it is unclear whether this approach would adequately address questions of gender inequality and the lack of support for families, and mothers in particular.

Lastly, reliance on the medical marijuana industry was identified as having a positive economic impact in Claytown, yet potentially compromising the long-term resilience of the region. Five of the six farmers who participated in the focus group relied on seasonal work in the marijuana industry to sustain themselves through the winter and spring months. They also benefitted indirectly from the industry, as many of their CSA members were medical marijuana producers. Two women – one in her 50s and another in her 70s – also described the economic importance of the medical marijuana industry. Both were diagnosed with cancer and after their treatment, found themselves with exorbitantly high medical bills. Each of these women decided to produce medical marijuana as a way to supplement their incomes and help pay for their medical expenses. Another woman I met at a small farm in the area said that her husband had been laid off several months back and was being retrained for a job in the health professions. “My grow is paying for nursing school,” she said. “If it wasn’t for that, my husband wouldn’t be in the program.” Stories such as these abound, indicating both the scale and scope of the economic impacts of marijuana production in Claytown.

However, the long-term benefits associated with the industry are hardly secure. Prices of marijuana have been declining significantly over the last three years as markets for medical marijuana have become over-saturated. Moreover, full legalization is becoming an increasingly realistic possibility in California. California Lieutenant Governor, Gavin Newsom, recently announced that he will be leading a blue ribbon panel convened by the American Civil Liberties Union to conduct regulatory and legal analyses of marijuana legalization in preparation for a 2016 ballot initiative. While the passage of such an initiative would play an important role in
terms of social justice issues – the majority of those who are incarcerated for marijuana-related offences continue to be young, urban men of color – it is likely to have negative economic effects on rural northern California communities. Without substantial organization and planning, small-scale rural producers are likely to be marginalized by corporate interests, thus losing a critical component of rural economies.

Given the economic importance of the marijuana industry in Claytown, it is somewhat surprising that there have been so few public conversations around preparing for legalization. Indirect discussions of marijuana are ubiquitous – a local newspaper features articles on various aspects of marijuana in the region at least weekly, there is a monthly radio show dedicated to medical marijuana issues, and the Board of Supervisors meeting on the recent medical marijuana ordinance was one of the most highly attended meetings in years. Yet, at the same time, marijuana is treated as something of a public secret. As the advocate for homeless people in the Claytown described,

The [marijuana] industry attracts a lot of campers [during harvest season]… I’m always so surprised when I go to a city council meeting and some council member says, “where are all these people coming from? What are they doing here?” And I’ll spell it out for them, but really? They don’t know? How’s that possible?

During informal conversations I asked numerous growers whether there were any discussions around preparing for a post-legalization economy. Many of these growers expressed concern over the possibility of legalization, and described how establishing local cooperatives or certification schemes would be important ways to secure niche markets in the region. However, they all said that such conversations had not yet occurred, but that they needed to soon. I received similar responses from the non-profit directors interviewed. All agreed that some kind of conversation around what the local economy would look like after legalization – and how to prepare for such changes – was necessary, but that no such conversation had yet been instigated. In this way, marijuana production and its impact on the local economy remains a public secret, with little in the way of preparation or planning for a post-legalization future.

Methodological Reflections

By and large, the resilience framework has been a useful way to conduct and frame research on current conditions and prospects for long-term social, economic, and ecological well-being in rural areas. Discursively, it provided a foundation upon which to ask residents questions about change and future possibilities (expectations, goals, current trajectories, previous and potential challenges) in their communities. The language of ‘resilience’ proved to be productive as well in that it valorized rural experiences as something that could – and should – be nurtured and supported. This aspect of the language of resilience arose continuously in interviews whereby respondents would make comments such as that of one of the back to the landers I interviewed,

Resilience? Well, I’ve never thought about [local conditions] in that way. I like that. It’s a nice way to think about how we can move forward as a rural community.

In this sense, the notion of rural resilience disrupts logics of urban inevitability that are reproduced in academic literature and through many analyses of demographic change (i.e. the majority of the world does now live in cities, but that doesn’t mean that rural inhabitants are going to disappear, or that they don’t matter). Rural communities in northern California do face
a range of economic and social challenges, but residents of this region are committed to confronting, and overcoming, these challenges to maintain their rural lives, communities, and identities. In this sense, the notion of rural resilience is both methodologically and politically useful.

I am not, however, convinced that the concept of ‘resilience’ is as useful in analyzing rural social change. In the academic literature, ‘resilience’ tends to be employed ahistorically and apolitically (for an elaboration of this critique, see Walker and Cooper 2011). Furthermore, the mainstreaming of what might be termed ‘resilience thinking’ in development practice runs the risk of providing technical solutions to what are instead political problems. In other words, because resilience thinking often neglects historical processes and questions of power, the proposed solutions to challenges associated with climate change and livelihoods, for instance, do not necessarily address the much more deeply embedded issues of historically-produced structural inequality, political marginalization, and the often negative effects of market-oriented policies.

A more useful way to address questions of resilience may be to treat the term not as a predetermined concept, but as an object of inquiry in and of itself. In other words, to analyze academic and community-based conceptions of “resilience” to better understand the historical and political character of diverse meanings, as well as the contexts in which they are produced. Thus, a more human-centered approach to questions of resilience might be to analyze what different conceptions of resilience mean, rather than presupposing a universal definition. In doing so, researchers and development practitioners can begin to understand what is important to the individuals and communities themselves, what they perceive to be the most significant barriers to ‘resilience,’ and what solutions they see as being viable. To this end, the Atkinson Center for Sustainable Futures and Oxfam are leading the way in social science research by creating a framework that explicitly takes into account community members’ subjective understandings of resilience.

References Cited


