

taking place in rural settings, such as forestry, fishing, agriculture, the energy industry, and mining, are based on the wealth of natural resources found there. But newer industries, including service and distribution, recreation and tourism, and manufacturing, join resource-based employment to make the rural economy as diverse as the landscape.

Early in Canada's national history, as much as 80 percent of the population was occupied with farming and lived in the countryside. With the industrial revolution and particularly the coming of the national railroad, many rural people established villages and towns or migrated to cities, especially in eastern Canada. Today, only about 3 percent of Canadians are directly involved in farming, but about 30 percent live in rural and remote regions and carry out their businesses there. They support a rural economy that underpins the urban economy, and more than any other Canadians, have the responsibility of managing Canada's natural resources wisely.

Rural people share many interests, goals, and needs with city dwellers, but they also have unique challenges. Many communities have seen their populations falter as employment opportunities decline. Economic diversification is often the key to community sustainability, but the resources to achieve this goal may not always be available. An important goal of sustainable rural development is building the capacity of rural peoples and communities to determine their own futures.

## New Approaches in Rural Development

In its March 1997 report *Think Rural!*, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Natural Resources urged the Government of Canada to develop a comprehensive and regionally focused rural policy for Canada. In the Speech from the Throne, September 1997, the Government of Canada made such a commitment, which has taken form in the Canadian Rural Partnership. This innovative cross-government approach is aimed at coordinating federal programs, policies, and activities in support of rural communities. As its name implies, it depends on the cooperative work of many partners. An interdepartmental working group representing 26 federal departments and agencies designs and carries out the initiative, aided by rural teams in all provinces and territories. These teams build partnerships, networks, and alliances with rural people and their communities to address key rural issues.

## Features of Rural Canada

*The population in Canada's rural and remote areas increased between 1981 and 1996, reaching nearly 9 million people. However, because of the higher growth in major urban centres, the share of Canada's population in rural and remote areas declined over this period, from 34 to 31 percent. The population of rural areas adjacent to major urban centres has generally grown during this period, while that of more distant areas has declined. The population of young people is declining in rural areas because of declining birth rates, an aging population, and the migration of young families to cities. Compared to more populated areas of Canada, rural areas have lower employment rates for all age groups; lower per capita income but per capita real income growth above the national average; more hospital beds but fewer physicians per 1000 people; and lower levels of formal education. The Canadian average masks considerable regional variation.*