

Rural Collaborative Governance: Implications for Community Leaders



The following contains highlights from research conducted on the Northern Peninsula Regional Collaboration Pilot Initiative and the South Kerry Development Partnership.

This research on collaborative governance in rural regions brings to light four potential contributions to regional development practice at the local level: (i) identifying who speaks for the region, (ii) addressing issues of legitimacy and accountability, (iii) recognizing the challenge for government to operate in collaborative governance initiatives, and (iv) the need for leadership training. Each of these contributions is described below.

Regional development practitioners need to purposefully discuss the question of **who speaks for the region**. Historically, municipalities have spoken for their constituents, but municipalities may no longer be the natural voice given the focus on regions. Elected officials have traditionally only represented their local interests. As the transition from competition to collaboration unfolds the appropriateness of municipalities being the voice wanes. Regions need to engage in discussions regarding how to select the appropriate voice to represent their opportunities and challenges to government. Given the climate of competition between communities that has been fostered through multiple government programs of the past, facilitation may be required in some regions. This facilitation needs to ensure that all key stakeholders are at the table for the discussion. The question of who speaks for the region needs to be regularly re-visited to ensure legitimacy and accountability.

The findings further show that **legitimacy and accounting** are critical concerns for regional development practice. Collaborative governance does not draw its legitimacy or accountability from popular elections. This places collaborative governance at odds with how accountability and legitimacy are usually measured in government. The breadth of support and incremental participation of actors is a key measure of legitimacy for collaborative governance. Evaluating and demonstrating outcomes from collaborative governance is also important in building legitimacy and accountability to both government and the region. Conveying the legitimacy and accountability of collaborative governance can be difficult and time consuming. Ensuring the proper measures are in place facilitates the move from competition to collaboration and the recognition of the difference between government and governance.

Regional development practitioners need to recognize that **collaborative governance is not the status quo** for how government has responded to and participated with communities and regions in the past. As result, practitioners need to understand and remind government that the precedence of previous activities and arrangements are not necessarily the path for moving forward. Collaborative governance requires new relationships, new dynamics of power, new decision-making actors. All of these take considerable time to design and accomplish. Government departments are not used to working in collaborative governance arrangements. Communities, regions, and practitioners need to realize the new territory and have patience with government as it discovers its new role. Regional development practitioners and actors need to realize the challenges for government officials who do “get it” and figure out how government operates in collaborative governance. These officials are committed to these governance initiatives. Regional actors need to assist these bureaucrats as they navigate integrating new processes and activities associated with collaborative governance in their departments.



Finally, **leadership capacities** were identified as a key component in collaborative governance. Regional development practitioners need to be aware of this and explore opportunities to develop leadership skills in new leaders and enhance the leadership skills of current leaders. Simply focusing on enhancing the leadership skills of the current collaborative governance partners serves well in the short-term, but it does not facilitate succession planning in the long-term. Regional development practitioners need to explore opportunities for building leaderships skills through both formal and informal opportunities in the communities and region. These opportunities could take the form of tool kits, manuals, online learning, or more traditional learning sessions/classes.

For more information about this research visit http://ruralresilience.ca/?page_id=161.

These research findings and implications emerge from a doctoral dissertation titled: “Collaborative Governance in Rural Regions: An Examination of Ireland and Newfoundland and Labrador”. The research was conducted by Ryan Gibson at the Department of Geography, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Further Information

Please contact Ryan Gibson (Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Saint Mary’s University) for more information regarding this research initiative.

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