

# Rural Collaborative Governance: Implications for Policy Makers



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

Research findings from the Northern Peninsula Regional Collaboration Pilot Initiative and the South Kerry Development Partnership bring to light five contributions for policy makers at various levels: (i) financial and human resources are required to ensure active and continued participation by local and regional actors, (ii) new mechanisms are required within government to work with communities and regions as partners, (iii) collaborative governance is a long-term initiative built on trust and relationships, (iv) legislating government department participation does not ensure active participation, and (v) new measures are required to evaluate collaborative governance processes. Each of these contributions is further outlined below.

Collaborative governance initiatives are developed through linking existing local and regional actors, including government. These actors, through a shifting of power, can become engaged and empowered decision-makers. This process is premised on the notion that local and regional actors have both the **human and financial capacities** to participate in collaborative governance. Given the emphasis on process, collaborative governance is time consuming for all actors. Many local and regional actors face challenges with volunteer burn out, which compromises their ability to deliver their core mandate. Collaborative governance becomes an additional responsibility to already taxed actors. Collaborative governance initiatives rely on the strength of regional actors and regional institutions. Policy makers need to ensure adequate and appropriate supports are provided to ensure local and regional actors can become actively engaged. These supports may take the form of financial assistance to enable enhanced capacities, or in-kind supports for mentorship.

Historically, governments have worked with communities and regions. This relationship typically is viewed as government as service provider and communities/regions as client. Collaborative governance initiatives require **new mechanisms within government for working with communities and regions as partners**, not as clients. The shifting of power and responsibilities from government to the region necessitates new relationships, new methods for decision-making, and new skills and capacities.

To fully participate in collaborative governance, government departments need to recognize that time and resources are required to build, enhance, and maintain relationships with regional actors. Given the value of face-to-face dialogue demonstrated by these cases and the collaborative governance literature, relationships cannot be based solely on electronic means. Under a collaborative governance approach, no longer are governments the sole decision-makers; instead governments need to develop methods for co-decision-making.

The findings further suggest that government policy makers and front line staff need to recognize that **collaborative governance is not a short-term initiative**. Trust and relationships required to ensure an effective collaborative governance initiative take time to develop. It is important to recognize that each change of government personnel challenges the stability of the collaborative governance initiative. Relationships developed through collaborative governance are typically between regional actors and individuals from government; not necessarily the government department. The cases demonstrate that when the government representative changes, the relationships change as well, unless the transition is carefully managed. New representations mean new relationships must be developed, often setting collaborative governance back. Therefore, attention to transition is needed.

**Legislating government departments to participate in collaborative governance does not ensure active participation.** This can be seen from the experiences of the SKDP. Within the board structure of the Partnership four seats are reserved for statutory agencies. Board members noted the level of participation from the statutory agencies varied greatly; the legislative requirement for participation did not necessarily work in practice. For the change to governance to be effective, senior officials in government departments need to understand the value of their participation. Government representatives need to be given appropriate time to participate, acknowledgement for their commitment, and possibly incentives to engage with collaborative governance initiatives.

The final contribution to policy makers realized through this research is the **need for appropriate measures to evaluate collaborative governance processes**. Standard measures used in program evaluations, largely focused on compliance, are not appropriate for collaborative governance given the shift to shared power and responsibilities. Government departments need to determine, together with other stakeholders, what the measures of 'good' investments in collaborative governance are. A number of scholars have initiated this dialogue this research supports a continuation of the development of governance evaluation mechanisms, ensuring it is useful for rural regions.

For more information about this research visit [http://ruralresilience.ca/?page\\_id=161](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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