



Regional Solutions for Rural and Urban Challenges Research Methods

This paper describes the methods and considerations for each phase of the *Regional Solutions for Rural and Urban Challenges* project.

Literature Review

The literature review was structured in three parts, the first two of which were based on a systematic search of primarily peer-reviewed academic research from the year 2000 to the present date using Articles+ and Google Scholar search engines. In a few cases materials published before 2000 were included to provide essential context for current research.

Search terms for the first part included ‘rural urban connections’ and rural urban linkages’ and generated 99 articles, book chapters, and reports. A second stage review of abstracts resulted in the selection of 50 articles for full reading, of which 48 were referenced in the review. The review drew from several disciplines, primarily regional science, political and social science, international development, and sustainability/land use, and from several regions, mainly the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Europe, and Latin and South America.

For the second part, search terms included ‘regional collaboration’ and ‘regional governance’ and generated 37 articles, book chapters, and reports. A second stage review of abstracts resulted in 25 articles for full reading, of which 21 were referenced. The review drew from disciplines of urban affairs and studies, public administration, politics, and public policy, primarily from the United States and Europe.

The first two parts were conducted in the period October-December 2018. The third part was completed in October 2019 which included additional materials recommended from stakeholder and expert interviews and newly published articles and books. This resulted in 26 additional more references for the review.

Stakeholder and Expert Interviews

During the period February to May 2019 a series of telephone interviews were conducted with stakeholder and experts with the aim of (a) affirming (or otherwise) the value and relevance of the project in the research, policy, and practice arenas; (b) obtaining perspectives on the framing of the project and any elements to be included or considered; (c) inviting recommendations on examples of regional efforts, other people to interview, additional literature to be reviewed, and potential venues for disseminating the project’s findings; and (d) raising awareness of the project.

In all, 67 people were identified for interview, based on team member networks, the literature review, and recommendations from those being interviewed. Team members made initial contact by email, and then conducted a total of 46 interviews lasting 20 – 60 minutes by phone (and in three cases face-to-



face) using a semi-structured format intended elicit responses to the purposes listed above. The results were synthesized into a single document.

Definitions

Defining terms became an imperative for both team members and people contacted during the duration of the project and the following glossary was prepared.

- **Rural** For policy and analysis purposes, the Census Bureau and the OMB define rural respectively as non-urban and non-metropolitan – the former a function of population and density, the latter a reflection of commuting patterns around urban centers into surrounding counties. Both are widely used even though their deficiencies have long been recognized.
 - **Rural-urban continuum** A recognition that there is a range of characteristics and experiences between densely urban and remote rural which dichotomous labels cannot convey. The continuum provides context for assessing the contributions that suburbs, exurbs, and small cities make to rural-urban connections. The Economic Research Service’s Rural-Urban Continuum Codes and the Isserman classification are two examples of typologies that better recognize the on-the-ground realities. For data comparisons, the team adopted the Isserman classification¹ based on 2010 Census data at the county level.
- **Region** A geographic area, which can be small (say, two counties) or large (say, multi-state or transnational), which can be classified as:
 - Formal region – an area officially recognized for political and administrative purposes, such as a state or local government, a statutory regional commission, or a federal or state administrative agency division.
 - Functional region – an area defined by a system of interactions or functions: for formal purposes, such as councils of governments or school districts, for analytical purposes, such as commuting zones, or for operational purposes, such as service territories for private companies and public or nonprofit agencies.
 - Physical region – an area defined by its landforms, ecosystems, or climate.
 - Cultural region – an area defined informally based on its history, culture, dialects, attitudes, and stereotypes.

Some areas may be defined by two or more of these types; most areas are parts of several different formal regions. Some are fixed such as formal and physical, while others will change over time, such as functional and cultural.
- **Regionalism** A political or social expression of regional distinctiveness, often based on cultural factors (see *cultural* region above), which can be both positive – embracing history, art, language, literature – and negative – focusing on homogeneity and excluding outsiders or ‘others.’ It can evolve into *regionalization* – extending to like-minded areas, cultures, identities across borders; into *regional awareness* and identity; and into *cooperation* and integration between areas focused on issues of common concern.
- **Regional development** A process for addressing regional scale problems and issues through public policy interventions implemented at the regional level. On the international stage, regional development is mainly equated with governmental aid to the developing world, but it can refer to

¹ A. M. Isserman (2005). “In the National Interest: Defining Rural and Urban Correctly in Research and Public Policy”, *International Regional Science Review*, 28 (4) 465-499. Doi: 10.1177/0160017605279000



an array of measures – policies, regulations, financial incentives – that support local and regional processes for economic, social, and environmental betterment.

- **Regional collaboration** Processes and activities where governments, businesses, and nonprofits work together across jurisdictional, sectoral, and functional boundaries to address complex regional problems. It may be pursued to pool resources and capacities where these may be stretched thin, respond to threats or opportunities, or overcome government fragmentation. Collaboration may take many forms, formal or informal, voluntary or imposed, and may be challenged by high transaction costs, imbalances of power and resources, and differences in philosophy.
- **Rural-urban interdependence** A recognition that rural and metropolitan areas contribute to each other's prosperity – rural areas providing critical consumption goods for metropolitan consumers, such as food, energy, lower-cost land and labor, and unique recreational experiences; metropolitan areas constituting the end-market for rural production, providing specialized services, offering diverse job opportunities, and generate resources for public and private investment in rural America. The notion of interdependence is an important frame for understanding and valuing the rural contribution.
- **Sector** As in *multi-sector* or *cross-sector*: sector refers to the public sector (government at all levels), the private sector (businesses, large and small, in any activity), and nonprofit (non-governmental, mission-driven agencies, including philanthropic institutions (national, state, local). Activities that involve collaborations between one or more sectors are multi-sectoral.
- **Jurisdiction** As in *multi-jurisdictional* or *cross-jurisdictional*: jurisdiction refers to the geographical area to/for which a government has legal responsibility – city, county, tribal nation, or state. Activities that involve collaborations across one or more jurisdictions, including federal agencies, are multi-jurisdictional.
- **Equity** PolicyLink defines equity as “just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential” (www.policylink.org). The main drivers of inequity are structural racism, income inequality, poverty, disparities in opportunity and power, and governance that limits meaningful participation (ChangeLab Solutions/RWJF). According to RWJF, “(h)ealth equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care” (www.rwjf.org).

Research Protocol

- **Primary Research Questions**

The project was designed around the following questions:

- What are examples of policy and practice that promote boundary-crossing, multi-sector solutions to regional challenges and which advance opportunity, health, and well-being in a region without leaving behind rural areas and low-income people and people of color?
 - How effective are these examples? Who are the main players and beneficiaries? What are the important contextual characteristics? What is innovative? How replicable are they? How can they be improved? What is next?
- What lessons can be taken from these examples that can be replicated elsewhere or at least inform policy and practice more generally? Specifically:
 - What creates the enabling environment for these examples to be possible to succeed? How important are the policy, political, economic, demographic, and geographic contexts?



- What are the conditions that make regional collaboration and solution-seeking approaches most effective in improving social and economic outcomes?
- Where there is a strong regional collaboration and solution-seeking structure in place, what contribution has this made to improved social and economic conditions?

- **Contextual Questions**

These questions were intended to gain an understanding of the pre-conditions or enabling environment that fosters regional collaboration and solution-seeking. The extent to which programs and initiatives were products of their environment and circumstances was required to assess what might be replicable to other places.

- What is the history of the region and how does this determine the current conditions and challenges?
- What impact have race, class, and wealth had on current conditions and challenges?
- How do the region's geography and demographic composition affect conditions and challenges?
- How diverse or homogeneous is the region?
- What have been the main causes of conflict in the region, and what actions have been taken to resolve them?
- What is the institutional landscape of the regions – public, private, nonprofit? Are there differences in institutional strength and capacity between rural and urban?

- **Component Questions**

These questions were intended to examine important dimensions of the project embedded.

- **Community and Economic Development Strategies**

1. What regional issue(s) is this collaboration trying to address? Has the focus of the collaboration changed or evolved over time? If yes, how?
2. What specific strategies are you using to address these issues? How were these strategic priorities determined?
3. Who are the partners to the collaboration? In what specific ways are they engaged?

- **Rural-Urban Connections**

4. Describe how rural and urban parts of the region are connected as part of the work you are doing?
5. Was building and/or growing rural-urban connections intentional and central to this work? Or was it accidental and incidental?
6. Did this specific regional work build on existing regional collaborations and relationships? If yes, how important were these established relationships between leaders and places within a region to the success or progress of this collaboration?
7. What role does trust (or lack of) in local institutions play in the success of this regional initiative?
8. Based on your experience with this initiative, what would you say are the most important catalysts for stronger rural-urban connections?

- **Regional Intermediaries**

9. What is the goal of the regional intermediary that is *primarily* driving this initiative? In other words, what does success look like for that organization?
10. What is the governance structure for the intermediary? How is it financed and staffed?



11. What led to the formation of the intermediary? Who were the founders and why did they step up? How has it evolved over time?
12. What is the role of the regional intermediary in building and sustaining collaboration across jurisdictions, sectors, interests, and geographies?
- **Regional Collaboration**
 13. What is the goal of this regional collaboration? In other words, what does success look like?
 14. What led to the formation of the collaboration? Who were the initiators and why did they step up? How has it evolved over time?
 15. What are the strengths and weaknesses of public sector actors in this collaboration? What are the strengths and weaknesses of nonprofit sector actors in this collaboration?
 16. What public or nonprofit sector organizations ought to be involved in this work but are not? Why do you think they are not engaged?
 17. What have been the major barriers to collaboration and how have they been addressed?
 18. How have conflicts and lack of trust been handled to achieve beneficial outcomes?
 19. What is the governance structure for the collaboration? How is it financed and staffed?
 20. How sustainable is the collaboration? To what extent has it become institutionalized in the region?
- **Equity**
 21. In what ways is equity integrated into and a priority for this collaboration?
 22. How is equity defined?
 23. Is this regional approach and/or stronger rural-urban connections leading to more equitable outcomes? If yes, how do you know? If not, what must change to achieve more equitable outcomes?
 24. Based on your experience with this collaboration, does there need to be an intentional focus on equity, or could it come as a by-product of regional collaboration and solution-seeking?
- **Outcomes**
 25. How effective have this collaboration been in achieving its stated goals?
 26. Are there specific outcomes you can cite related to:
 - Changes in policy?
 - Flows of capital and investment?
 - Governance?
 - Attitudes toward regionalism or the benefits of connectedness?
 - Health?
 - Economic opportunities?
 - Advancements in equity?
 27. For the collaboration, how are these outcomes measured and reported?

Site Selection

There was a multi-stage process that led to the selection of seven sites for fieldwork:

- Compilation of a long list of 65 potential organizations/initiatives identified during the expert interviews and the literature review.
- Team review of the long list to take out organizations/initiatives that had little or no apparent relevance to the project. This was followed by a review of websites for each of the remaining



organizations/initiatives, and using team experience and expertise to select which might offer learning and insights leading to answering the research questions.

- The selected 15 organizations/initiatives were then subjected to a due diligence review based on phone interviews with staff and key informants and on available documentation. The due diligence was based on two sets of criteria:
 - **Threshold Criteria**
 - Rural-Urban Linkage: Is there a clear form or method of linkage? Does the initiative articulate way(s) in which urban and rural areas are interdependent on each other and build a strategy based on that interdependence? Is there an intentional effort to ensure rural areas benefit equitably through this initiative? Does the initiative frame its work in terms of regionalism?
 - Equity: Does the initiative involve and/or benefit people of color or other persons who have been historically excluded? Is equity an intentional goal?
 - Collaboration: Does the initiative bring together people from different spheres to work together? Does the initiative overcome fragmentation and silos? Is the collaboration formally mandated/constituted (legislative, regulatory)?
 - Multi-Sector: Does the initiative involve at least 2 (and preferably 3) of the public, private, and non-profit sectors?
 - Measurement/Impact: Is there evidence of success? Is there systematic evaluation and data collection?
 - **Sample Diversity Criteria**
 - Geography: Region of country: South, Pacific Northwest, etc. Geographic composition of site's region: e.g. population size of urban area (major metropolitan, mid-size city, micropolitan); size and degree of remoteness of rural areas.
 - Structure of Collaboration: Type of lead organization, membership composition. Governance structure, diversity/inclusiveness of collaboration.
 - Issue Areas: Some combination of economic development, land use/transportation planning, health, natural resource management, environmental protection, infrastructure, social services, etc.
 - Equity: Affected Populations: African-American, Latinx, Native
- The results of the due diligence process were carefully reviewed to assess what could be expected to be learned from a more in-depth look at the organizations' activities through site visits. The result was agreement on seven organizations.

Site Visits

The site visits were conducted in July through September 2019. Each site was visited by two team members (except for one) for periods of 3-6 days depending on the nature and complexity of the organizations, the availability of people for interview, and geographical spread. Interviews were conducted with organizations' staff, board members, partner organizations, local community representatives, and funders, with the number of interviews per site ranging from six to 25, with an average of 14. Team members used an interview protocol based on the due diligence criteria.

Every interview was written-up and a synthesis document prepared for each site. Each site synthesis was subsequently shared with a lead organization representative to check for accuracy and completeness.





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