



Regional Solutions for Rural and Urban Challenges

Insights #3

Principles for Effective Regional Collaboration

This *Insights* brief is one of a series produced as part of the *Regional Solutions for Rural and Urban Challenges* project led by LOCUS Impact Investing with funding support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The project explores the possibility that regional collaboration and solution-seeking can be an effective way of improving social and economic opportunity and health for all people and places within a region. We asked this question: Under what conditions are regional collaboration and solution-seeking approaches most effective in improving social and economic outcomes? We saw this as a counterpoint to the prevailing narrative of growing divisions between rural and urban populations along economic, social, cultural, and political lines.

Effective Regional Collaboration means:

1. Building and sustaining trusted regionally-focused institutions with deep roots, contextual understanding, and strong analytical capacity.

The way regional collaboration plays out across the country is a function of the local and regional historical, geographic, social, and economic context. It is also determined by the policy and political environment that may promote or hinder regional collaboration. There are many types of institutions that may be able to fill this role, and whichever steps up will be a function of leadership, institutional capacity, and acceptability within the region. It can be a council of governments or some similar form of regional development organization, a community development financial institution, a community foundation, a public-private partnership, a nonprofit agency, or institution of higher education. More important than the exact structure or composition of a collaboration is engaging the right actors and trusted institutions in an extensive and nuanced understanding of the region – past, present, and future.

2. Recognizing that everyone, urban and rural alike, contributes to regional well-being.

Recognizing, celebrating, and leveraging the many ways in which rural and urban people and economies interact help make the case for regional collaboration. Supply chains, water quality management, commuting, urban expansion, and outdoor recreation, are just a few examples where rural and urban interests must be aligned for mutual benefit. If regional collaboration is to lead to improved opportunity and health for rural communities then the contributions that they make to the regional economy and well-being, often “hidden in plain sight,” must be recognized and rewarded. These contributions may include stewarding natural resources, providing ecosystem services, and managing high-amenity landscapes.

3. Addressing Inequities of geography, race and ethnicity, gender, income, and class in order to improve social and economic opportunity and health for all people and places.

In any state or region, there are always concerns about inequities of power and influence that lead to imbalanced allocations of attention and resources. These concerns over power, voice and belonging can be at the heart of rural-urban divide and other us-vs-them narratives. Effective regional collaborations will bring to the table voices previously absent or ignored; doing this in a sustained and meaningful way will inevitably alter the power dynamics within a region. Thus, regional approaches to problem solving will not come easy for people and communities uncomfortable with change or perceived loss of power. Nevertheless, rapid and fundamental demographic and economic changes are already impacting urban and rural communities making regional collaboration even more necessary.

4. Connecting the many elements that create and sustain healthy economies and communities into regional ecosystems.

Affordable housing, childcare, healthcare, workforce development, transportation, air quality, and broadband are all interdependent and essential to creating and sustaining healthy economies and communities. Each element is the focus of distinct systems and networks of policy advocates, service delivery agencies, funding sources, research specialists, and political constituencies. At a regional level, the aim must be to connect these systems and networks together into regional ecosystems. Regional collaboration entails working across these interdependent elements, sectors, and political boundaries towards articulating common goals, building regional ecosystems through mapping the multiple systems in a region, understanding any gaps, and determining what it will take to improve outcomes.

5. Investing for the long-term.

Regional collaboration is hard, slow, and expensive, but the potential rewards can be significant. Whatever the form of the lead regional organization, resource and capacity constraints inhibit their ability to achieve impact. Transaction costs, both financial and personnel, associated with convening multiple organizations, engaging communities, and managing complex systems are high and difficult to fund, and especially so in low-wealth predominantly rural regions. Flexible and long-term funding that adapts to regional needs and priorities is critical, as are 'collaboration' incentives to encourage regional solution-seeking that crosses jurisdictions, service territories, and sectors.

Please visit <https://locusimpactinvesting.org/what-we-do/rural-work/regional-solutions/introduction/regional-solutions.html> to see all the materials produced for the *Regional Solutions for Rural and Urban Challenges* project.

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