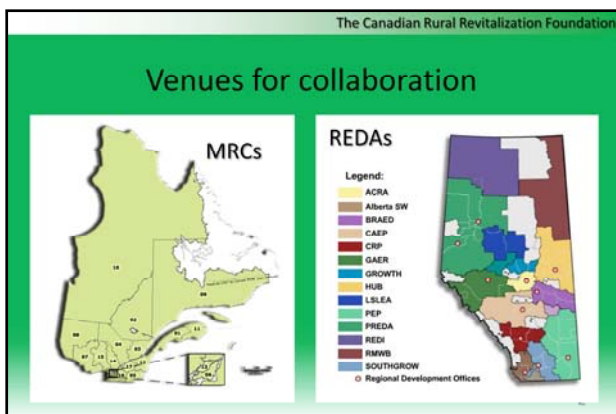




- This research on regional collaboration began as a result of my attendance at the Rural University in Québec.
 - This event is organized on a biannual basis – always in some rural region and always through the collaboration of multiple communities within that region.
 - Workshops, plenaries, and tours are organized in a number of towns – each with a focus on their specific experience with the conference themes and always with a panel of academics, policy-makers, and practitioners.
 - For the past few events I have been struck by the remarkable way in which these towns worked together – apparently managing many thorny issues – both those related to the operation of the conference as well as many other issues that affected their well being in general.
 - It wasn't what I was seeing when I visited towns in other parts of the country – they were largely dominated by sporadic collaboration around specific events or outcomes – and with a bifurcation of collaborators and non-collaborators.
 - Why was this so different in Québec?
 - What can we learn from this difference about how we can improve regional collaboration?
 - My story today is about what I think might be a large part of the explanation.
 - It is also the framework I am using as Matthew Brett and I are doing the due diligence of research to check out the veracity of this story.
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- Perhaps the greatest contrast in my mind is between AB and QC
- Both of these governments champion a bottoms up approach and encourage local municipalities to engage in an expanded mandate over local decision-making – moving beyond the maintenance of roads and water to include economic development and environmental stewardship
- But the institutional contexts of the 2 provinces are considerably different
- >Under the Levesque government, Québec established a number of regional boards (86 MRCs) (sometimes against substantial opposition) composed of mayors and municipal representatives with a mandate for regional development and resources to support it. The emphasis was on regional development – cross sectors and inclusive of social development.
- They were heavily influenced by the previous establishment of health infrastructure on a regional and integrated nature (Jean Lesage – early 1970s – following the Quiet Revolution).
- >In Alberta, the approach was more laissez-faire – where regional collaboration was encouraged, some resources were allocated to regional groups if they requested and justified it, but there was little consistent pressure for such collaboration (Regional Economic Development Alliances). The focus was clearly on economic development.
- The results have been dramatically different at the local level.
- In Quebec there are many examples of regional initiatives – tailored to local conditions and themselves providing a basis for second-order activities in small places
 - Over the 20 or so years of their operation within this new regime, local municipalities have learned how to use the regional structures to voice their concerns, debate, negotiate, compromise, and collaborate with other municipalities, and in turn, to negotiate with the provincial government on behalf of their region and village or town
 - In turn, the provincial government has discovered the value in subsidiarity – now allocating responsibility to the regional boards for a wide range of economic and social policy and programs, and (most importantly) showing confidence in the decisions and accountability of the MRCs – making the governance of the province both more efficient and effective
 - This system of consultation has even become more elaborated with the recent emergence of regional round tables – with more issue-focused objectives
- In Alberta the situation on the ground is very different
 - A few regions have taken initiative, formed their own corporate bodies, and moved ahead, largely on their own steam
 - Most municipalities, on the other hand, were unable to get beyond their protectionist traditions to reach agreements with their neighbours around the complex challenges they faced – either denying that conflicts of interests existed or refusing to discuss them in any but the most limited terms
 - In the end, the provincial government simply made the decisions for the municipalities, pointing to the failure of regional collaboration, lack of accountability, and the pressure of time as a justification for top-down management
- What are the lessons here?

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Collaboration lessons

- Strong regional institutions
- Multiple venues of interaction
- Multi-sectoral and cross-departments
- Common language and understanding
- Patience and tolerance

“Budget for Breakage”

- First: Bottom-up development needs an institutional context of strong regional governance to make it work
 - Needs to be secure enough so that community members can be confident that the deals they make will be respected over multiple government turnovers.
- Second: The inevitable conflicts of interest that emerge require multiple venues for expression, negotiation, and the compromise that are necessary for action
 - This is a community capacity issue – do you know how to collaborate, negotiate – and most important of all: to compromise?
- Third: Must be multi-sectoral and cross-departments.
 - Quebec had the advantage of an initial infrastructure based on the physical infrastructure established for sharing among health, welfare, labour, and economic development.
 - Is very difficult to get one department to relinquish some of its assets to collaborate with another department – rather than build in that sharing to begin with.
- Fourth: This requires the development of a common language and understanding for collaboration.
 - Some of the perceptual differences are subtle but manageable once they are recognized and addressed.
- Finally: all of this requires a spirit of patience and tolerance by people and institutions that are not favourably disposed to either of these
 - It took Quebec 20 years of stressful and sometimes acrimonious work to get to the point they are today
 - From an institutional point of view this means >‘budgeting for breakage’

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Regional Collaboration: the importance of social infrastructure

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