RURAL REGIONS WORKING PAPERS

Working Paper #1
Regional is Rural

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Brandon University established the Rural Development Institute in 1989 as an academic research centre and a leading source of information on issues affecting rural communities in Western Canada and elsewhere.

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Preface

Information is critical in communicating ideas, involving and engaging others, and informing decisions. In Manitoba, the recent multi-stakeholder report titled: Regional Economic Development Strategies (2015) calls for more information. These working papers are in part a response to that call. These five papers are intended to add ideas to the conversation about rural regions from an economic perspective.

The approach taken with these papers is to provide information on topics relevant to economic development and at the same time moving the conversation from a local discussion to one about rural regions. One starting point is to find out more about the importance of regions. Another topic adding to our understand of regions is that Manitoba is already divided up into regions. Governmental agencies and many organizations subdivide the province up into many different regions. Another way of defining regions is one based on established economic models. We have also developed eleven indicators to help you compare one community to another and one region to another. Finally, we end where we began with examples of how this data might be combined into information graphics to contribute to more effective communications.

We know these working papers are a beginning, not the end, but they do add to many different conversations about rural regions. Let us know what you think of these papers and what else is needed to contribute to you learning and your conversation.

The working papers can be read in any order you wish.

1. Regional is Rural

2. Understanding Regions with Economic Models

3. Administrative Regions in Manitoba

4. Manitoba Municipality Indicators Database

5. Applying Regional Understanding to Municipalities

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Introduction

Regional distinctions and disparities have long existed in Canada and are still found today in every province and territory. Regions, whatever their form or purpose, shape and impact the country's rural communities. From government program service delivery to the businesses that make up the local economy to the election of representatives and beyond, the people living and working in rural communities are impacted by regional structures that are either imposed upon them, that they have created themselves, or a combination. By embracing this perennial regional reality, leaders in rural communities can collaborate with their neighbours to pursue shared goals, tackle common challenges, and create a strong future for the places they are working hard on behalf of.

What is a region? Vodden et al. (2013) in their paper, Understanding Rural Governance in Newfoundland and Labrador, define a region as, "an area comprising two or more communities across which a service is delivered or collaborative developments are taking place" (p. 2). How are regions defined? This question is much more complicated to answer. Regions are defined by federal and provincial governments for electoral boundaries and service delivery. They are defined by the private sector for operational reasons such as sales boundaries and where to locate. Many non-government organizations use regions to ensure their boards are made up of people from across the geography they represent[1].

The intent of this paper is to argue that regions, regardless of structure or purpose, are important because regional is rural by providing six reasons why regions matter to rural communities: 1) One-size fits all doesn't work; 2) Shared people and economies; 3) Pooling resources; 4) Data collection; 5) Representation provincially and federally; and 6) Service delivery and location of offices. Changes made with respect to regional governance in Quebec over the past 15 years are briefly reviewed. These changes also help demonstrate the six reasons why regions matter.

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1   A more in-depth examination of administrative regions in Manitoba and how to define economic regions can be found in working papers #2 and #3 in this series.

Why Regions Matter

A bottom-up approach to regional development emphasizes creating opportunities for people living throughout the region. It embraces broader development over a focus on growth (O'Neill, 1994). Value is placed on growing an individual and improving their freedom of choice by increasing their access to necessary good and services (O'Neill, 1994; Todaro & Smith, 2003). By working together, communities in different regions can undertake an informed process of planned alteration of the economic and social structures hindering their ability to improve their quality of life. The State of Rural Canada Report (SORC) recently released by the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF) recommends that, "rural communities themselves must be active participants in understanding, planning and investing in their own futures" (2015, p. 102).

Regional distinctions are why a one-size-fits all approach does not work for rural communities. A place-based rural policy where rural communities are at the center of planning and building their communities and economies, as argued by the SORC, underscores the fact that a one-size-fits all solution will not work. Cultural, economic, geographical, and historical differences mean that different regions face different challenges and are poised to take advantage of different opportunities. Collectively, the communities in a region bring together different assets and have different needs. The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), in its 2012 report, Promoting Growth in All Regions, emphasized that a one-size-fits all approach does not help dismantle barriers to growth. Coordinated policies and efforts across communities, governments, and economic sectors are more effective. The benefits of growth that is broad-based and inclusive can lead to increased equality, resiliency and financial stability. The knowledge, skills, and actions of local residents and leaders, "is a robust determinant of regional growth" (p. 15).

Rural Manitoba has changed and rural communities today share people and economies every day. Administrative boundaries do not define how people live or the local economy. Instead of doing almost everything in their home community, people drive in different directions for school, work, shopping, entertainment, and recreation (Rural Works, 2015). This change suggests that a move away from looking at the rural economy based on individual communities towards ones that look at economic regions would acknowledge this fact that people no longer do everything in their hometown. Rural residents have familial, social, and economic relationships with other residents in nearby communities, creating formal and informal connections within the region. For example, a rural resident could live in one community, work in another, play on a hockey team in a third, and do most of their household shopping on a monthly trip to a fourth. Rural residents live, work, and play regionally: how rural residents go about their lives should be reflected in the development and implementation of rural policy.

Pooling resources to provide services and amenities to citizens in the region, instead of just those in individual communities, is a way for local governments to respond to a shrinking or stagnant population and tax base, as well as efficiently provide services to more people. In their Tools for Change series, the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM) shows how Manitoba Municipalities have pooled their resources regionally to benefit their citizens (2005). The first example is forming partnerships to share services such as water and sewer, recycling and refuse disposal, road maintenance and snow removal equipment, and human resources recruitment and training. These partnerships can help solve service delivery dilemmas that hinder the region's ability to attract and retain people and businesses.

Another example of pooling resources is tax revenue sharing agreements, such as the agreement between the City and Rural Municipality of Portage la Prairie in 2000, which can be found on the AMM website in an application for the Municipal Innovation Awards Program (2005). Recognizing that each municipality had something to contribute to successful economic development, they entered into an agreement that, in part, led to their successful efforts to attract a multi-million dollar potato processing plant. The agreement provides for all increases in commercial and industrial property taxes 60%/40% with the host community receiving 60%. It also establishes a joint committee with two representatives from each municipality that is supported by cost-shared staff. Working with regional neighbours to pool resources creates opportunities to solve common problems, attract economic development, and find more efficient ways to deliver local services.

Often, the population of rural communities is so small that data collection beyond basic demographic information is limited. In order to maintain anonymity and statistical integrity, small communities are grouped into regions for data

collection purposes. Statistics Canada uses Census Divisions and Census Subdivisions and the Labour Market Survey only collects data on a regional basis. Regional Health Authorities collect data on the populations in their regions. These data are used to help characterize and provide a better understanding of sub regions within provinces allowing for comparisons between regions and provincial averages. This, in turn, should inform policy decisions that respond to regional problems and solutions.

Federal and provincial representatives are elected based on distinct regional boundaries, which is especially true in rural areas. These regions form the basis for democratic decision-making and, together, form the elected members of Parliament and the Legislature. As a local leader, knowing who represents your region to other levels of government is important for ensuring your community's priorities are being heard. In addition, many province-wide organizations use regions as a way to ensure representation from all areas of the province. For example, both the AMM and the Keystone Agricultural Producers (KAP) are structured in a way that local members in a region elect their representatives to their governing board. These and other organizations are vehicles through which communities can make their local or regional visions and concerns known and seek change. The regional representatives for these organizations have put their name forward to ensure particular opportunities and challenges in the region are known at a provincial level and they will know leaders in other communities that might be in a similar situation.

Many federal and provincial governments deliver services on a regional basis and, in rural areas, locate offices in a limited number of communities to serve the broader region. From the local view, knowing more about a department's geographic regions equips leaders to quickly contact nearby offices of key departments; however, limited access to these supports and services could hinder activities. From the provincial and federal view, decisions have to be made about what the regions are – who is in and out – and how many offices to locate in a region, as well as which communities in the region get to be home to the office and the jobs that come along with it.

Vodden et al. (2013) identify some challenges that come along with regional governance that should be kept in mind. One of the main challenges was having the funding for staff and programs, as well as access to technical expertise to support undertaking regional activities. Another challenge to regional-based action was getting buy-in from leaders, residence, and businesses to invest the time, energy, and financial resources to initiate and sustain momentum. Travel considerations limited availability for face-to-face meetings, which are necessary for

developing and implementing common plans of action across the region. Partnering on regional activities requires a lot of communication and patience; however, rural communities stand to benefit from putting their energies into a regional focus.

The Quebec Example[2]

In 2001, the government of Quebec began a province-wide plan to redesign rural policy in the province in partnership with rural community leaders. Embracing a regional approach, existing structures in rural communities such as municipalities, churches and Caisse Populaires worked with Regional County Municipalities (RCMs) and the Quebec government to design and implement a new rural policy. This multisectoral approach, that directly involved 17 provincial departments and agencies, focused on building social capital locally by using programs designed with the flexibility to respond to local conditions. Key to the success of the initiative was a consistent framework for regional governance backed by a long-term financial commitment from the province and RCMs. This long-term commitment allowed for ideas to be tried and potentially fail so mistakes could be learned from, as well as gave time for local leaders to build trust with each other, along with provincial and regional governments. Through contracts signed by the RCMs and the Quebec Government, called Rural Pacts, RCMs have the authority to distribute these funds locally to community-based projects that predominantly focused on improving quality of life in rural communities. Additional support to the new rural policy was provided through Rural Development Officers, jointly funded by RCMs and the province, which were assigned based on the number of municipalities and the number of devitalized communities in the RCM.

In addition to Rural Pacts and Rural Development Officers, Quebec's rural policy included other innovations. A number of Rural Laboratories were established and received funding for rural development experiments with the requirement that they had to share their findings with others. Research took place on a number of topics including health, immigrant settlement, schools, energy and communications technology. There were also task forces established to advance work in specific areas such as housing and climate change. Also, rural policy included a focus on specialty products from local producers, with a goal of having 32 projects per region over seven years. These producers could come from a variety of sectors such as forestry, agriculture and the arts.

Phase 3 of implementing this new rural policy is underway. Phase 1 took place between 2001 and 2007 and involved mobilizing over 30,000 people in 155 communities working together on 462 committees to develop and implement projects designed to create a prosperous future for themselves, their communities, and their region. An extensive review of the policy by the OECD took place between Phase 1 and Phase 2. Among their suggestions for improvement were to provide better support for devitalized communities, ensure knowledge transfer is maintained through subsequent phases, and communicate better with citizens about the policy and programs. In addition to extending and strengthening programs established in Phase 1, a key change in Phase 2 was the designation of separate funds for devitalized communities. As part of this, RCMs received additional financial support by working with devitalized communities in their region, turning what was considered a liability into an asset. Another Phase 2 change was engaging in more rural-urban collaboration and knowledge sharing. Phase 3 began in 2014 and is planned to go until 2024. This phase maintains the regional, multisectoral approach that embraces flexibility and citizen engagement in order to respond to local opportunities and challenges. However, a new Quebec government's austerity measures include aspects of rural policy including reduced support for Rural Development Officers and changing Rural Pacts to transitional rural pacts with a view to reducing provincial funding over time.

Quebec's new rural policy is a regional policy and it highlights the six reasons why regional is important to rural. Through this policy, RCMs have become a level of government that communicates between communities and the province, values and provides support to the smallest communities in their region, and is a vehicle for sharing knowledge about what works and what doesn't. Built in flexibility recognizes that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. At its core, the policy recognizes that you can accomplish a lot when you bring the people in a region together to pool resources and abilities and focus on common goals. Jointly funded Rural Development Officers are located on the ground, where they are needed, in order to provide coordination, stability, and support to community-led efforts. Most of the projects undertaken under the rural pacts were done by non-profit organizations, municipalities, and the RCMs. Quebec's rural policy, the values behind it and its implementation, is an example for other rural community leaders and provinces to take a look at and consider because it reflects what academics and the OECD have been encouraging with respect to rural and regional development.

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2 This summary is based on the webinar Quebec's Approach to Regional Development: An Historical Perspective presented by Dr. Bill Reimer and Dr. Bruno Jean. A recording of the webinar and powerpoint can be found at https://www.brandonu.ca/rdi/webinars-and-speaker-series/.

Conclusion

Rural is regional and success happens when rural community leaders pool their resources to solve local challenges through regional partnerships. Most rural residents already live regionally: rural communities share people and economies. Regional partnerships built by local collaboration are a reflection of how rural residents go about their day to day lives. How regions come together and for what purpose should be ultimately defined by local communities because a one-size fits all policy doesn't work. However, both the federal and provincial governments can support this process through helping develop a common framework for more regional partnerships and providing funding in order to hire staff, fund locally-driven projects, and do research on what does and doesn't work. Acting on a regional basis can be the key to a successful future for rural communities; rural community leaders could improve the lives of the people they represent by giving serious consideration to how to work with their regional neighbours.

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