EVALUATING REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES: POLICY LESSONS

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• Key thematic findings
• Summary / Conclusions
• Policy Lessons
SEVEN KEY THEMES

• ‘Region’ Themes
  – History and Identity
  – Urban-Rural Dynamics

• ‘Organization’ Themes
  – Governance Structure
  – Leadership
  – Relationship Building
  – Resources
  – Monitoring and Measurement
HISTORY & IDENTITY

• Impact of **path dependence** on how regional economic development is pursued.

• A shared history, geography and strong regional identity positively influenced collaboration in 6 of 12 regions:
  – Cape Breton Island, North Country (NY), Northwestern Ontario, Greater Peterborough Region, Windsor Essex, Okanagan Valley

• **POLICY:** Develop a culture of collaboration *in* and *between* urban and rural communities. Recognize that local/regional economies are not always bounded by traditional borders
• Concern about **power or resource imbalances** between urban and rural jurisdictions within the region

• Urban-rural dynamics emerged as a theme in 7 of 12 regions:
  – Cape Breton Island, Greater Peterborough Region, Windsor–Essex, Niagara Region, Vancouver Island, Tristate TechBelt, North Carolina Research Triangle

• Urban areas were usually perceived as receiving a greater share of time effort and resources from regional initiatives.

• **POLICY:** Actively and meaningfully integrate rural communities into regional approaches where there are strong urban centres
GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

• Diversity of structures used to organize regional economic development
  – Formal, informal; Bottom up, top down
  – Public, private; For-profit, not-for-profit

• Diversity of organizational governance mechanisms
  – Board of Directors, Steering Committees, Executive Committees
  – Multiple stakeholders “at the table” (business, community, government) allowing for more transparent and accountable decision-making

• POLICY: Support governance that is transparent and accountable using structures that accommodate multiple stakeholders
LEADERSHIP

• The importance of regional champions / leaders was emphasized in 10 of the 12 regions
  – Leadership can make the difference between an initiative or collaboration gaining traction or falling flat.
  – Strong leadership can move initiatives from the planning to the implementation stage by catalyzing support
  – Leaders emerged from the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors
  – Strong champions can build support for a project in the presence or absence of committed stakeholders.

• POLICY: Seek out organizational / regional champions that are passionate about an initiative.
A negative attitude towards collaboration was one of the primary barriers to success in many of the case studies:

- Social/professional linkages and networks need to be continuously fostered across a region to ensure collaboration does not stagnate
- Constant relationship building to widen reach of collaborative projects
- Transaction costs of collaborating can cause potential free-riding

**POLICY:** Support relationship building and networking between regional actors to widen reach of collaborative projects
RESOURCES

• Human resources viewed as both a success factor and a challenge across the cases
  – In some cases, limited capacity to undertake collaboration due to staff turnover and volunteer burnout

• POLICY: Engage in capacity building.

• Funding viewed as essential for success. Differences across the cases in terms of the locus of decision-making related to funding access and allocation
  – Collaboration to access funds (North Country, Tech Belt)
  – Top-down funding, local determination (Vancouver Island)
  – Top-down funding and allocation (Research Triangle)

• POLICY: Allow flexibility in funding programs so that resource allocation can be determined at the regional level.
MONITORING & MEASUREMENT

• Mixed approaches to monitoring and measurement
  – Using indicators to track regional progress (TechBelt initiative)
  – Using national, state and county statistics to measure economic performance (Research Triangle)
  – Development of statistical indicators in progress (Niagara Region EcDev, Four Counties Labour Market Planning Board, North Country Regional Economic Development Council)
  – Not using any indicators or relying on qualitative measures (Windsor-Essex EcDev, Upstate California Economic Development Council, Vancouver Island Economic Partnership, Okanagan Valley Economic Development society)

• Qualitative, anecdotal evidence much more commonplace than statistical measure of ‘success’

• **POLICY:** Recognize challenges in measuring outcomes. Qualitative and quantitative indicators are both valuable.
SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

• There is no ‘one’ model for collaboration in regional economic development
  – The evidence underscores importance of local/regional context
• Factors that can facilitate and improve the collaborative process:
  – A strong history and identity of operating as a ‘region’
  – Meaningful integration of rural areas into regional initiatives
  – Identifying champions that can foster support for an initiative
  – Oversight structures to increase transparency and accountability of decision-making
  – Continuous relationship building to widen reach of collaborative projects
  – Access to resources is critical
  – Engage in monitoring and measurement using both qualitative and quantitative indicators
POLICY LESSONS

• Develop a **culture of collaboration** in and between urban and rural communities.

• Recognize that local/regional economies are **not always bounded by traditional borders**.

• Support the **integration of rural areas** where there are strong urban centers.

• Seek out organizational/regional **champions** that are passionate about an initiative.
POLICY LESSONS

• Support governance that is transparent and accountable, and structures that accommodate multiple stakeholders.

• Engage in capacity building to support rural community participation in regional economic development initiatives

• Allow flexibility in funding programs so that resource allocation can be determined at the regional level

• Recognize that the measurement of outcomes is difficult. Qualitative indicators of progress are equally as valuable as quantitative ones.
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QUESTIONS

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