

This apprehension is particularly acute for rural municipalities, who fear that their identity, rooted in shared history and community ties, may be threatened by regional partnerships with their larger urban neighbours.

Putting Identity on the Table — Issues of identity should be clearly articulated in any partnership. Members should be encouraged to openly discuss how partnerships are affecting their individual identities at all stages of the process.

Developing Supportive Identities — Partnering may require some compromise, but it must be clear that it will not lead inevitably to a loss of identity or autonomy. Local and regional identities can be mutually supportive. For instance, joining a partnership may help municipalities or organizations gain a better understanding of their own purpose or mandate, as they must evaluate what they have to offer and the role they can play in the agreement.

Crucibles of Partnership

‘Crucibles of partnership’ describe areas of practice that feed innovative and effective partnerships. Current activity may act as a laboratory for developing best practice. It is crucial to recognize that current activities are important sources of knowledge and experience. Learning and capacity building should be explicit aims within any partnership.

“Nobody’s quite sure how to grab hold of a knowledge and skill base and make it happen. We’re always struggling to know what we don’t know, and we just deal with what we think we see.”

Adaptability — Currently, a range of toolkits and advice documents are available to assist communities in partnering. However, while these may be sources of inspiration, the most successful partnerships respond to local context. Honouring local expertise will ensure that partnerships are created with local culture, resources, strengths, and issues in mind.

Knowledge Sharing — Sharing knowledge and information within and between partnerships enables communities to build upon others’ experiences, helping to capture and establish a pool of knowledge and best practice for partnering.

Environment — Promoting sustainability and responding to environmental challenges and promoting sustainability are by necessity intersectoral and intermunicipal undertakings, requiring holistic, integrated and regional solutions. A tremendous range of experience is being developed within Alberta around the environment and communities may wish to capitalize on this knowledge.

Local approaches, expertise and experience matter. This pamphlet provides some general information to facilitate partnerships and assist communities in responding to urban-rural interdependencies. However, our conclusions should not be an endpoint in the engagement between research and practice. Instead, we hope this pamphlet serves as the basis of an ongoing and productive dialogue.

CRSC will continue to enable this process, and we invite your participation in developing an online forum aimed at dialogue on these issues. Please visit us at the following website:

www.crsc.ualberta.ca/partnership.cfm

We thank the participants, communities and regions who shared their experience with us and who greatly contributed to the development of this research project. Thanks also to the following Departments for their support:

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Sustainable Resource Development
Municipal Affairs

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Photo Credits: Gord McKenna (front cover)
Iwona-Erskine Kellie (inside first page)

Partnerships:

Responding to the Challenges of Urban-Rural Interdependency



The Importance of Interdependency

Intermunicipal interdependency is a fact of life in Alberta and elsewhere. Growth pressures and population increases drive urban expansion farther into rural areas, blurring the traditional political boundaries separating rural communities and urban centres. Communities and governments must respond to the challenges of interdependency with innovation rooted in collaborative cultures and practices.

To this end, CRSC's work on the nature of urban-rural relations has revealed some potentially useful insights, which are summarized in this pamphlet. In particular, the research findings presented here focus on the function and evolution of partnerships.

CRSC's commitment to engaged research invites more than just a reading of this pamphlet, however. Partnership and interdependency are complex issues, tied to the unique characteristics of place and context. No understanding of the challenges of interdependency could be complete without the local expertise and everyday experiences of partnership.

We invite you to visit our website at www.crsc.ualberta.ca/partnership.cfm to share your experiences of intermunicipal partnership. By engaging a variety of voices in discussions of our observations and outcomes, we hope to enrich the pool of knowledge about intermunicipal partnership.



Partnerships: CRSC's Research into Interdependency

Driven by an interest in interdependency, CRSC undertook a comparative, multi-method study of urban-rural interdependencies in Alberta. Three regions were examined: Alberta Southwest Regional Alliance (ABSW), Calgary Regional Partnership (CRP), and Northeast Alberta Information HUB Ltd. (HUB).

Our aim was to better understand:

- how and why communities, businesses, and governments work together;
- the perceived benefits and drawbacks of partnering; and
- the factors supporting or hindering, the success of partnerships.

The information in this pamphlet is drawn from the experience of our participants. We hope that their observations regarding partnership yield beneficial insight.

Understanding Partnership

Interdependencies involve complex and shared challenges around a variety of pressing topics. Environmental management and resource access, innovation and economic development, infrastructure and transportation, and urban-rural migration all pose unique challenges for communities. Urban-rural relationships are often expressed in the form of partnerships - collaborative relations crossing municipal boundaries and involving a range of regional actors.

“Putting strategic planning in place, getting your councils together to talk and to plan for the future is critical for the long-term viability of local government, wherever they're located.”

Why Partner, With Whom and How?

Sharing Resources — Partnerships are often formed to make effective use of combined assets to achieve mutual benefits. For instance, cost-sharing schemes enable communities to carry out projects that would be financially prohibitive for any single organization. Likewise, expertise, administrative capacity and wider community resources may also be of common value.

Developing Regional Foundations — Having the support of another group confronting similar issues provides a regional basis for successful projects. Working together creates feelings of confidence and goodwill as well as offering communities greater leverage and power, improving their capacity to compete and promote economic development.

Decentering Policy — Partnership can create innovative bottom-up solutions to regional and intermunicipal problems, while also promoting citizenship and political legitimacy in local government.

Expanding Networks — Partnerships may benefit from including organizations from unexpected or non-traditional sectors. Expanding the network and types of actors in a partnership helps partners access wider expertise and a more diverse array of community resources.



Informal and Formal Relations — Successful partnerships may be formal, informal or somewhere in between. While formal partnerships allow for explicit, clear and structured agreements, it is essential to continue to develop healthy informal relationships.

Managing Relations

Conflict is a common by-product of partnering.

Partnerships are challenging because they respond to shared needs, but do not take place at a single scale nor between identical partners. They can create or aggravate inequalities between partners, potentially producing a destabilizing rift in the process. Common areas of conflict include disputes over autonomy and identity, the distribution of financial resources, and organizational roles and leadership. Managing conflict is essential to developing effective collaboration. Successful partnerships can be enhanced by developing non-traditional problem-solving skills to bridge different scales, communities and interests.

“Well, get out and meet your neighbour. When you get out and you're working together with your neighbour you're accountable to people and to decisions. I think that that's really important.”

Challenging the Status Quo — Conflict is a predictable aspect of partnering and not necessarily a sign of failure. Partnering is valuable as it challenges the status quo and encourages adaptation and reflection.

Shared Aims and Principles — When disputes over details seem irresolvable, partners may return to broader common ground to help gain a sense of perspective (e.g. principles of shared growth). These principles should be clearly established and agreed upon at the outset of the process.

Promoting Healthy Working Relationships — Cultivating healthy informal relationships is essential to successful partnerships. No matter how formalized a structure becomes, informal activities help establish the kind of trust and understanding that is essential to a successful partnership.

Negotiating Identity

Urban-rural partnerships create new types of relationships and regional identities, raising questions about local identity and municipal autonomy. Commonly, participants are concerned that new regional relations mean that the needs of the partnership take priority over those of their individual organization or municipality.

“I have experienced an apprehension to join up in partnership with some of the other municipalities or on a regional level for fear that it gives away a lot of our personal rights or a loss of our autonomy.”