

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents the findings of a research project on the increasing presence of urban-rural interdependency in Alberta and the response of communities to the challenges it poses. Interdependency can be understood as the interactions between municipalities, communities and/or businesses which are essential to mutual well-being. Interdependencies may be characterized by flows of goods, services and people; networks of transportation and infrastructure; and urban sprawl and environmental spillovers (Stabler and Olfert, 2002). Partnership activities are focal points in which local government, business and community are able to make sense of, and respond to, policy drivers that overlap the traditional boundaries between town and country.¹

The lines of analysis pursued in this report investigate the connections between partnership and social, economic and environmental considerations. The literature review places this analysis in a broader context of trends in policy and practice by drawing on a variety of secondary research, which does not, however, include existing materials related to intermunicipal collaboration and partnerships that currently exist in the province of Alberta. Furthermore, key areas of enquiry address the conditions under which partnerships arise, factors that affect the success or failure of collaboration, and future trends in the development of urban-rural partnerships.

Situated in three contrasting regions of the province (Alberta Southwest Regional Alliance, Northeast Alberta Information HUB Ltd. and Calgary Regional Partnership), the research project involved a multi-method study using both qualitative and quantitative elements. Through interviews and an online survey involving municipal officials and employees, community organizations and businesses, in-depth information was collected about how partnerships can be used to meet local and regional challenges and opportunities.

¹ The definition of “partnership” is uncertain and contested, both colloquially and in the literature. Different individuals, sources, and sectors have very different understandings of what is involved in a partnership, and also of what differentiates a partnership from a collaboration or alliance. For the purposes of our research, “partnership” was defined as “any agreement, alliance, arrangement, or shared service, ranging from informal (handshake) agreements to formal (legal) contracts”. Despite providing this definition at the beginning of our interviews, it became increasingly clear to us that participants’ conceptions of partnership were contingent. As a result, the word “partnership” appears in this report as a somewhat unstable and changing concept, depending upon the context in which it is discussed.

In summary, the project reported on here addressed three primary aims:

- 1 To shed light on the nature of partnering and urban-rural interdependency as they are currently evolving in three regions of Alberta;
- 2 To explore the ways in which social, economic and environmental factors support or hinder the development of partnership amongst local government, communities and businesses; and
- 3 To expand upon research results and offering principles which aspire to assist in the development of collaborative strategies through an engaged and contextually informed research process.

The findings of the research project pose three primary challenges for urban and rural communities as they develop collaboration and come to understand interdependency:

Challenge One

The research discussed in this report uncovered widespread enthusiasm for partnering and an increasingly wide range of experience in partnership activities. Yet challenges do exist, and are often realised in the process of translating enthusiasm and in-principle agreement into on-the-ground action. The challenge for communities in developing effective partnerships is to develop non-traditional problem-solving skills, bridging different scales, communities and interests. Managing conflicts between urban and rural needs, identities and resources is essential to developing effective collaboration.

Challenge Two

Due to differences in scales and interests, governance relations are extended across geographical areas, contributing to the creation of new regions. Partnerships necessarily involve novel configurations of space and time, and raise issues about identities and futures. Indeed, concerns about the loss of community identity, are common sources of uncertainty and conflict in partnerships. Similarly, the complex issues around which partnerships form, including urban growth, watershed management and regional economic development, pose substantial challenges for the communities involved. Thus, regionalism is not simply the outcome of new ways of thinking about planning and governance, but a response to the changing circumstances and relations shaping life in Alberta today, and in the future.

Challenge Three

The challenge for communities is to recognise the value of practice as a means of learning and capacity building. Learning should be a clearly defined goal of any partnership relationship. This may involve reflecting on the successes and failures of the process, but also include focussed attention on the processes and social relations

contributing to these outcomes. Communities face a difficult challenge in ensuring that they are able to develop the capacities and skills needed to respond to regional challenges. Capturing the experience of practice is an essential component of this process.

Partnerships are not a panacea for contending with pressing social, economic and environmental challenges. However, through shared experience, the development of collaborative skills, and the recognition of those spaces and contexts where new cultures and practices of governance can be fostered, partnerships can provide potential benefits for Albertan communities, showing each partner that they are not alone in facing the challenges of planning and sustainability.