

Sustainability Issues in Rural-Urban Partnerships: A Study on Regional and Inter-municipal Collaborations between some Southern Alberta Municipalities

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to examine impacts of rural-urban and inter-municipal partnerships in finding suitable solution(s) to rural municipalities' environmental problems. The study also evaluated how involvement in collaborative partnerships affect the effectiveness of participating municipal governments in fulfilling their social service responsibilities. Moreover, the study examined necessary conditions for a sustainable and enduring voluntary regional and inter-municipal collaborations. The study was based on qualitative research paradigm. Seven municipalities in Southern Alberta were involved in the study. Overall, the study revealed that municipalities involved in a regional and/or inter-municipal partnerships fared better socio-economically than those that were never involved. It also revealed the need for maintenance of trust and effective management of the cost of involvement. It was discovered that sense of common destiny/identity including identification of potential partnering opportunities is essential for sustainable regional collaboration. It was also discovered that sustainable regional partnership requires an establishment of framework for identifying priorities and for reaching agreement on action to be taken. Provincial/federal policies and incentives that encourage collaboration are also essential for successful voluntary rural-urban communities' partnerships.

Keywords Environmental Sustainability, Regional Cooperation, Regional Partnership, Regional Economic Development Alliance, Rural Development, Urban-Rural Economic Development

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose and Benefits of Rural-Urban Economic Development Partnership

There are different purposes and motivating factors for

initiating and operating a rural-urban partnership. However, the necessity for rural-urban partnership development arose from recent changes in economic policies at various levels of governments all over the world and the consequences of those changes on provision of social services, rural development and rural urban migration. While these economic policy changes have resulted in significant positive changes in some countries, geographical regions, and municipalities, the changes have brought some hardships to a number of regions and municipalities. The changes in economic policies have also made some companies to lose their competitiveness in the marketplace and forced a number of them to close down. These consequences of economic policy changes have resulted in changes in economic activities in some localities, caused demographic changes in some municipalities and consequent reduction in revenue generations and attendant difficulty in maintaining infrastructural services at the local level. Today, many rural communities are struggling with being able to provide waste collection services, wastewater treatment and their other social service responsibilities. Recent economic crunch is also making it more and more difficult for rural communities to secure funding for services' maintenance and infrastructural development. In view of all these challenges, governments at various levels, researchers and other stakeholders have been seeking various ways to address the problems. The concept of regional economic development has been identified as a good approach to solving the problems [1-26]. Alberta Enterprise and Advance Education agency [2] defined regional economic development as "a collaborative approach by communities and supportive partners to achieve prosperity in a defined geographical area based on a shared economic vision for the future." In otherwords, regional partnership is an arrangement where municipalities and other interested parties in a geographical region cooperate to advance their mutual interests. A rural-urban partnership is therefore a regional partnership involving rural and urban municipalities.

In highlighting various benefits of rural-urban partnership,

Epstein (2001) [1] stated that rural-urban partnership (RUP) would ensure overall balanced development process. He explained further that RUP creates mutually beneficial network relations between municipalities and corporate organizations in the municipalities involved. Kawka [3], in his contribution to the discussion on importance of rural-urban partnership stated that "many contributors see the linkages between urban and rural areas as a potential for future economic growth." Poudel (2003) [4] also among other things found that rural-urban programme resulted in increase in average annual income and increase in average employment number. In addition, Dabson (2010) [5] in articulating benefits of RUP stated that "rural areas provide critical consumption goods for metropolitan residents and businesses, such as food, energy, lower cost land and labor, and unique natural and cultural experiences. In return, metropolitan areas constitute the end markets for rural production, provide specialized services, offer diverse job opportunities, and generate resources for public and private investment in rural America." He further said that "the economy and well-being of rural America is vulnerable to ever-tightening fiscal constraints, to weakening civic and institutional capacity, and increasingly metropolitan-centric policy framing, all of which is moving thinking and acting regionally from the desirable to an absolute necessity." Moreover, Dabson said that there are incentives coming from federal agencies and foundations to work regionally and collaboratively in order to be eligible for funding." All these factors are the driving forces enhancing the formation of rural-urban economic development partnerships in many parts of the world.

1.2. Requirements for Successful Rural-Urban Partnership

Although there are many benefits in rural-urban partnership development, there are quite a number of requirements for the sustainable success of a rural-urban partnership. For example, Kawka [3] said that "a key challenge in rural-urban partnership is to ensure that mutual benefits arise from rural-urban linkages. He also said that a number of the strategies and actions relevant to rural development would need to exploit rural-urban linkages sensibly, to the mutual benefit of the people, communities and businesses involved." In supporting the same view, Dunmade (2010) [6] expressed his belief that whoever the partnership may involve (whether it is rural-urban partnership, rural-rural partnership, or rural-corporate partnership), there should be mutual respect and mutual benefit for such relationship to be sustainable. In the same vein, Epstein [1] highlighted a number of essential preconditions that have to be met before RUP can be expected to succeed. The listed success factors include: (1) political commitment, (2) Conviction of villagers that the authorities are really committed to promote not only urban but also rural development as well as enlistment of their participation and sustenance of their interest, (3) promotion

of agri-based industries, (4) establishment of industrial extension service for rural areas, and (5) linking urban-based businesses with rural small-scale producers. Several other scholars [7, 11-26] especially Zaki, Daud, Zohdie and Soom [7]; Nader [11]; Munankami, Sacendoncillo and Saroca [15]; Douglass [17]; Public policy research institute [19]; Gordon [21] and Lackey, Freshwaters and Rupasingha [24] expressed similar opinion and highlighted a number of other success factors. Importance of such partnership is premised on the fact that a town's relationship with its neighbours, businesses, provincial government and federal government will affect its ability to develop/expand its socioeconomic infrastructure. A town's partnership and the nature of its collaboration with these institutions will not only affect its socioeconomic development but it will also affect its environmental sustainability. Many scholars have carried out studies on various issues affecting rural-urban partnership and regional economic development. These studies include researches on the purpose, structure and challenges in regional economic partnerships, and requirements for successful regional collaborations [1-26].

Zaki et al [7] were of the opinion that collaboration is required in planning and implementing sustainable rural development strategies. They recommended that those collaborative approaches should "focus on the process of problem solving, which means involving all stakeholders--in an effort to produce better solutions." Furthermore, they said that the collaboration should involve stakeholders' participation, goals and vision development, learning through collaboration, effective leadership and organization, capacity building, development of innovative solutions, and how to measure success. In addition, Dabson hinted that regional collaboration can be "expensive, over-dependent on the commitment of individuals, sometimes unpopular, and occasionally unsuccessful. It is important to note, however, that regional collaboration can come in a variety of sizes, strengths, and flavors. It can be formal or informal, temporary or permanent, limited or broad in scope, involve a few or many partners, and can be essentially local in scale or extend across state or even national boundaries." [12]

This paper with a focus on rural-urban partnership is a part of our studies on issues affecting sustainable growth of seven selected municipalities in Southern Alberta [8]. In this paper, impacts of various types of municipal collaborations on the sustainable growth of the town under study were articulated. Costs and benefits of their involvement in rural-urban partnerships with the two neighbouring cities: Calgary and Lethbridge were particularly outlined.

1.3. Some Features of Participating Municipalities

Figure 1 is a sketch of Southern Alberta region showing the locations of the towns under study and their relative proximity to the two cities with which many of them have rural-urban collaborations. Population of each participating municipality range from 500 to 6000 except the seventh town which is 18000 in population. All the municipalities

involved in this study are mainly agrarian communities with varied levels of industrial/commercial activities



Figure 1. Map of Southern Alberta and locations of municipalities involved in the study

The methodology used for this study is discussed in section two while results obtained from the study were discussed in section three. Finally, conclusions that could be drawn from the results of the study are outlined in section four.

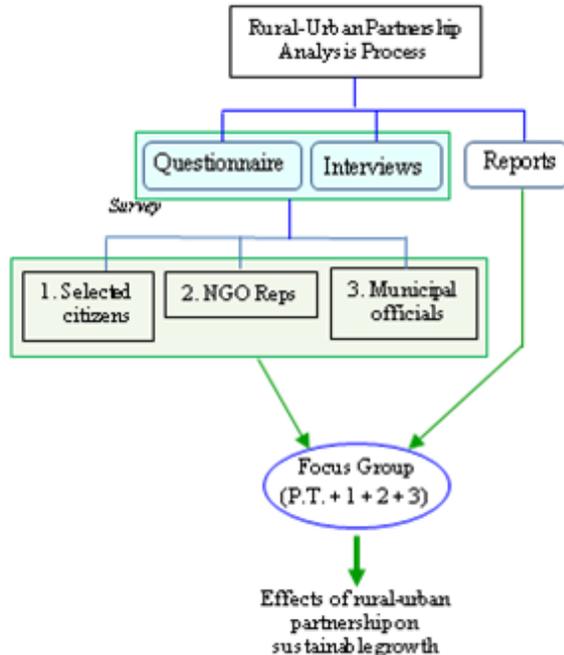


Figure 2. An illustration of the research methodology

2. Materials and Methods

The research process used in this study is illustrated with Fig 2. The research project started with articulation of research questions, design of interview/survey questions and identification of suitable participants. This was followed by

preparation of ethics application and obtaining approval from Mount Royal University’s Human Resources Ethics Board for the study.

2.1. Participant Selection and Data Collection

Required data for these analyses were collected by using surveys, interviews, reports, and focus groups. The aim was to collect information from people that have knowledge/experience of the peculiar sustainability problems of each participating town/village, the causes of identified problems, efforts made at solving the problems, and outcomes of actions taken to solve the problems. The role of rural-urban collaboration in finding solutions to the sustainability problems was one of the areas of focus of the study. Furthermore, the people selected for the survey were those that should be able to give their perceptions regarding how those issues affected the quality of life in the municipality. It was considered that someone that would be able to adequately answer these questions must be at least eighteen years old and (s)he must have lived in the town for three or more years.

In addition to the survey and interview instruments, community’s approved reports that have anything to do with the regional economic development and sustainability plan/reports were also requested from municipal officials and non-governmental organizations in each town. These reports were considered necessary to track various issues that each town had grappled with, how they addressed them, outcomes of their efforts, and how they affected sustainable growth of the town. These reports were expected to give credibility to data collected through interviews and surveys. These reports included newsletters, annual reports and special reports that are of relevance to the community’s historical economic/industrial development, and/or sustainability. The report must have been approved for release by appropriate authority/ official(s) for this study. Information was also collected from various relevant websites.

Moreover, efforts were made to ensure that the information collected regarding various issues affecting each town is correct and unbiased. To achieve that goal, plan was made to collect data from three categories of people from each town. These categories are (i) citizens, ii) non-governmental organizations, and (iii) municipal government officials. Participants have to be at least 18 years old and must have also lived in the town for at least three years. The recruitment of participants for the project started with identification of sub-urban municipalities in Southern Alberta. Mayors and Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) of the compiled list of potential participating communities were then contacted. Invitations to participate were sent by e-mails and by phone calls to these municipal officials of the communities. One on one discussion was also held with some of them in order to give them detailed information about the project. Seven towns eventually agreed to participate in the research project. Individuals and

non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) representatives were also recruited by searching towns' websites and telephone books to identify NGOs in town and citizens to be contacted. Advertisements were later placed on the towns' websites and in their local newspapers to recruit citizens and non-governmental organizations for the project. Town officials were also engaged to help in recruitment of participants. However, there are not many NGOs in the small municipalities under study. Only an NGO from one of the seven municipalities responded to the call. In addition, the principal researcher also went talking to citizens at post offices, restaurants, business centers, and churches to recruit citizens. Consequently, a variety of demography representing different interest groups within each town were recruited and participated in the project.

2.2. Survey Development and Administration

The survey instrument was designed to collect information about environmental, economic, institutional and social issues affecting sustainable growth of each town as well as on impacts of rural-urban collaborations. The survey was administered as questionnaires sent to the CAO for onward transmission to community members and municipal officials recruited by them. The survey was also administered in the form of interviews to community members recruited by the researcher. Participants were asked of their perceptions on various issues affecting the town, causes of the problems, impacts of the problems on inhabitants' quality of life, steps that had been taken to address the problems, effectiveness of the steps that had been taken in solving the problems, types of economic partnership they belong to, and merits and demerits of their belonging to those partnerships. The survey was randomly distributed.

2.3. Focus Group Meetings

A focus group has been identified as a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards a product, service, concept, advertisement, idea, or packaging. "Focus groups can reveal a wealth of detailed information and deep insight. When well executed, a focus group creates an accepting environment that puts participants at ease allowing them to thoughtfully answer questions in their own words and add meaning to their answers." [27] A focus group for this project was constituted for each town. It was designed to include a council member, a municipal administrative official, a member of the public, an NGO representative, and members of the research team. The purpose of the meetings was to obtain diverse ideas and perceptions of participants about issues affecting sustainable growth in those communities in a relaxed environment. The aim was also to obtain their perception regarding the findings by the researcher from various data collection instruments. Furthermore, each focus group was to identify and discuss issues that the researcher might have not been able to capture

through previously used data collection instruments. It was also responsible for identifying priority issues for the second phase of the project. Discussion about economic cooperation with neighbouring cities and partnership with other municipalities were put on the table for discussion at the focus group meetings. Municipal officials itemized the regional economic cooperation and various bilateral and multilateral partnerships they have with neighbouring cities and town. The officials articulated the costs and benefits of their partnerships and collaboration with the neighbouring municipalities. A focus group was constituted for each town and there were four to nine people in each group. A focus group contained at least a municipal council member and a municipal administrative official. Focus group meetings for the seven participating municipalities were held from May 7 - 18, 2012 and each focus group meeting session was for a period of 90 - 120 minutes.

3. Results and Discussion

The following results and analysis were based on data collected from fifty one people made up of municipal administrative officials, council members, business owners and employees in town, and non-governmental organizations like sustainability groups and churches.

3.1. Rural-urban Partnerships Involving Municipalities Under Study

Information gathered from the municipalities revealed that five of the seven towns are formally involved in two regional economic collaborations, namely: (a) Calgary regional partnership, and (b) SouthGrow regional economic development initiative.

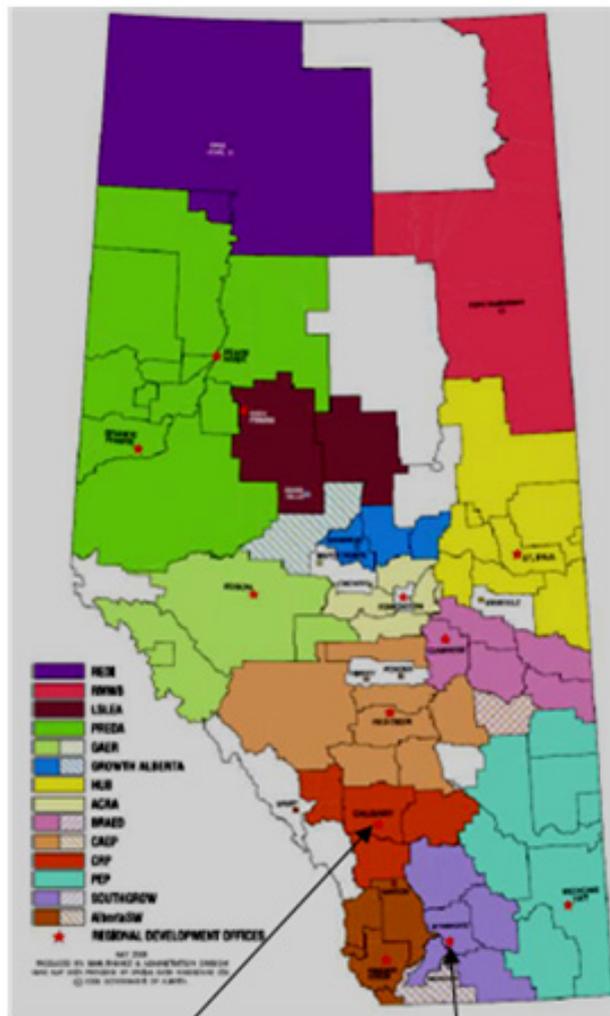
The two regional economic development partnerships are among the eight regional partnerships in Alberta. Figure 3 shows the locations of the two regions in Alberta. Their creation were encouraged by the Alberta provincial government. Regional collaboration program in Alberta is aimed at improved overall municipal capacity to respond to municipal priorities and to build and maintain effective inter-municipal relations through joint and collaborative activities. According to Alberta municipal affairs department, the purpose of regional collaboration program in Alberta is to improve the viability and long-term sustainability of municipalities through strategic activities related to regional collaboration and capacity building [25, 26].

3.1.1. Calgary Regional Partnership

Three of the municipalities involved in this study belong to Calgary Regional Partnership (CRP). The fourth town pulled out from the regional economic cooperation because (according to the town officials) the costs outweigh the benefits of participating in the rural-urban economic cooperation and because the partnership is like another level of government which the town doesn't want.

The Calgary Regional Partnership (CRP) was created in “a spirit of cooperation and with the knowledge that we can achieve more by working together as partners. With the challenges of growth and expansion, cooperation and collaboration are essential to preserve those things we value most”. The purpose of forming the CRP was to “preserve the natural environment and water resources while fostering the region’s economic prosperity through initiatives like transit and water/wastewater stewardship systems”. A town in the region can voluntarily join the partnership and freely withdraw it’s membership. The regional partnership has successfully implemented some projects, one of them is Calgary metropolitan plan. [28]

which include the City of Lethbridge. SouthGrow Regional Initiative is a member-driven, non-profit regional economic development alliance for south central Alberta "committed to help communities, organizations, businesses and people in the region to further their economic development goals and to improve their high quality of life." The alliance consists of twenty two communities. It's goal is to "accelerate and enhance economic development and sustainability for the communities in the region." The core goals of the alliance include: (1) encouragement and enhancement of shared services among communities through cooperation, (2) creation of new economic development opportunities in the region, and (3) providing south central Alberta with a unified voice on regional priorities. The regional partnership has embarked on two major projects: (1). Sustainable solutions for water and wastewaters for the municipalities in the region, and (2) renewable energy development. These projects are expected to attract investment in the region. [29]



Calgary Regional Economic Partnership [City: Calgary] SouthGrow Regional Economic Partnership [City: Lethbridge]

Figure 3. Alberta Regional Economic Development Alliances map

3.1.2. SouthGrow Regional Economic Development Initiative

Two of the seven communities under study belong to SouthGrow Regional Economic Development Alliance

3.2. Impacts of Rural-urban Partnership in Finding Suitable Solution(S) to Rural Municipalities’ Environmental Problems

The rural-urban partnership relationship involving a number of municipalities under study and the City of Calgary have helped the municipalities in solving a number of their problems through collaboration. Examples include wastewater management, solid waste management, transit system, and geographical information system. The same benefits are realized by the three communities that participated in this study in their rural-urban relationship with the city of Lethbridge. Other areas in which rural communities under study benefited from their partnership with their urban neighbours (Calgary and Lethbridge) include emergency and health services.

3.3. How Involvement in Collaborative Partnership Affects the Effectiveness of Participating Municipal Governments in Fulfilling Their Social Service Responsibilities

All the seven towns reported they have bilateral or multilateral collaboration with other towns and cities as well as with corporate organizations. The collaborations are on certain socioeconomic and environmental infrastructure/services agreements with some municipalities. Some of the areas of collaborations/agreements include firefighting, emergency response, waste management, water treatments, water supply, policing, and street mapping. Other bilateral and multilateral collaborations reported by some of the towns include partnership relationships with a number of corporate organizations in the areas of provision of services like library, waste management, geographical information system, transportation, and recreational and sporting facilities. In addition, Alberta provincial government provides municipalities with funding for one-time/special projects and emergency purposes. All the seven

municipalities that participated in this project agreed that those partnerships enabled them to meet their social service obligations in a way that would not have been possible if they handled it individually.

3.4. Necessary Conditions for a Sustainable and Enduring Voluntary Regional Collaboration

Information gathered from the survey and focus group meetings revealed that the following factors are essential for sustainable and long lasting regional and/or inter-municipal partnerships: 1) an operational guidelines that stipulates the partnership governing structure and project implementation procedure, 2) transparency, 3) trust, 4) a sense of common destiny, 5) effective management of the cost of involvement, 6) identification of areas of potential partnering opportunities is essential for sustainable regional collaboration, 7) establishment of framework for identifying priorities and for reaching agreement on action to be taken, and 8) supportive provincial/federal policies and incentives that encourage collaboration among municipalities.

These findings confirm the claims of various scholarly reports on the subject, especially the works of Epstein, Kawka, Dunmade, and Zaki [1, 3, 6, 7].

4. Conclusion

The study on effects of rural-urban partnership on sustainable growth in seven selected municipalities in Southern Alberta revealed that the collaborations have been found helpful by the stakeholders in providing necessary social services to each of the municipalities involved. The collaborative effort enabled members to reduce duplication. It also helped them to focus on regional priorities and solutions. In addition it aided them in improving local capacity to undertake projects that individual communities could not do on their own. Furthermore, it fostered collaborative and cooperative attitude among partners. In addition, it also provides an avenue for respected collective regional voice on economic issues, priorities and policies. Moreover, rural-urban partnership can be helpful in leveraging resources, promote innovative ideas, expand service choices and lower costs and thereby help in improving quality of life. It was also discovered that growth challenges are better accommodated through cooperative approaches to service provision and infrastructure development. However, we noted among other things that successful and lasting rural-urban collaboration requires sense of equality of members, transparency, and sense of common destiny. Moreover, it was discovered that sustainable regional partnership requires an establishment of framework for identifying priorities and for reaching agreement on action to be taken. Provincial/ federal policies and incentives that encourage collaboration are also essential for successful voluntary rural-urban communities' partnerships. Further studies on this subject would involve a

study of impacts of political differences and demographic changes on rural-urban regional economic partnership.

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