The University of Montana

Public Policy Research Institute

Working Across Boundaries: Principles of Regional Collaboration

A growing number of land-use issues transcend political and jurisdictional boundaries. These issues are most effectively addressed at a regional scale, somewhere between local, state, and national levels. During the past few years, people from many walks of life have experimented with a variety of regional approaches to land-use issues. While some of these initiatives augment existing government institutions, others are more ad hoc in nature. Whether formal or ad hoc, regional initiatives involve people with diverse interests and viewpoints in collaborative forums—public spaces that would not otherwise exist to solve common problems. Although there is no single model or approach to regional collaboration, several principles have emerged to help people think and act regionally. These principles should be adapted to the unique circumstances of each place or region.

Principle # 1 – Focus on a Compelling Purpose or Interest (Catalyst)

Most people are unaccustomed to working across boundaries. We tend to focus on the tasks immediately in front of us, within our small sphere of influence. Anything beyond that is "someone else's responsibility." Our social and political arrangements further discourage working beyond our individual silos. Regional collaboration becomes compelling when people recognize that they are more likely to achieve their interests by working together than by acting independently. The objectives of regional collaboration may include one or more of the following: (1) building knowledge and understanding; (2) building community (or a sense of place and regional identity); (3) sharing resources; (4) providing input and advice; (5) advocating for a particular outcome; (6) resolving disputes; and/or (7) governing. Far from being mutually exclusive, these different objectives reinforce one another, and suggest a natural progression from knowledge- and community-building to advocacy and governance. To begin a regional initiative, focus on things that people are predisposed to do.

Principle # 2 – Organize around Collaborative Leaders (Leadership)

Regional initiatives require a certain type of leadership. In contrast to exercising authority by taking unilateral action—a command-and-control model of leadership—regional stewards readily cross jurisdictions, sectors, disciplines, and cultures to forge alliances with diverse interests and viewpoints. They invite people to take ownership of a shared vision and values, and they work hard to bridge differences and nourish networks of relationships. To move in the desired direction, regional stewards share power and mobilize people, ideas, and resources. In the midst of this action, they provide integrity and credibility, and advocate for the integrity of regional partnerships. They also show a high tolerance for complexity, uncertainty, and change. They emphasize dialogue and building relationships by respecting the diversity of ideas and viewpoints. Respect builds trust, which in turn fosters communication, understanding, and eventually agreement. In short, regional stewards practice "regional leadership."

Principle # 3 – Mobilize and Engage the Right People (Representation)

To be effective, regional initiatives must engage the right people and build a constituency for change. If your objective is to advocate for a particular interest or outcome, that will require a different group of people than if you are trying to resolve a multi-party dispute or address a multi-jurisdictional issue. In the latter cases, you should seek to be as inclusive as possible—engaging people who are interested in and affected by the issue; those needed to implement any potential recommendation (i.e., those with authority); and those who might undermine the process or the outcome if not included. Think carefully about the roles and responsibilities of existing jurisdictions and agencies, and keep in mind that there may be people outside the region who need or want to be involved.

Principle # 4 –Define the Region to Match People's Interests (Regional Fit)

How people define a region naturally flows from their interests and concerns. Regions are most often defined in one of two ways—one rooted in a sense of place, the other based on a certain function or the "territory of the problem." Natural ecological boundaries—such as watersheds, ecosystems, wildlife habitat, and so on—can help inform the appropriate definition of a region, but in the final analysis, the region must engage the hearts and minds of people, and appeal to their shared interests. The precise boundaries of a region are often less important than clarifying the core area of interest. Boundaries can be soft and flexible, adaptable to changing needs and interests. In sum, the region needs to be large enough to capture the problem, and small enough to get traction.

Principle # 5 – Assemble the Necessary Resources (Capacity)

To collaborate on a regional scale, people need to be able to jump start the process, and also sustain it over time. The capacity to initiate and sustain regional collaboration hinges on four types of essential resources: leadership, a constituency for change, organization, and technical information.

Leadership comes in many forms. Some leaders are catalysts, others may be visionaries, some are good at motivating and empowering people, and some are conductors—assembling people and resources into a well-orchestrated team. The team itself is the people who are willing to speak up and work for change. It is important to find people who will consider other perspectives and negotiate in good faith toward mutually satisfying ways of addressing the issue at hand. It's also essential to engage people who have good organizational skills—the ability to manage mailing lists, phone trees, planning materials, and budgets. Finally, most efforts to resolve regional issues rely on mountains of varied technical information. To be credible, it helps to gather and interpret this information as a group, through joint fact finding or a similar process.

In some cases, these resources must be developed from the ground up, from scratch. But the more common experience is to borrow or leverage the resources of existing groups already working in the region. In fact, most regions already have the capacities for leadership, change, organization, and technical information—these resources simply need to be identified and better coordinated. The following diagnostic questions can help assemble the necessary resources:

- What resources (people, skills, information, funds) are needed/available to work across boundaries?
- Where can we find additional resources?
- Who can help identify sources of funds and assistance?
- How can available resources be used to stimulate more interest in the project?

Principle # 6 – Jointly Determine Where You Want to Go and How You Want to Get There (Strategy of Action)

People facing a regional problem or issue usually want to roll up their sleeves and get right to work. But it's well worth taking a little time up front to jointly articulate desired outcomes and map out practical strategies to achieve those outcomes. Such a strategy of action is built around a shared vision for change. People negotiate among their desired outcomes until they have a package that everyone can agree on. Then they negotiate options for how to make those outcomes happen.

Every regional enterprise is unique, varying according to site-specific conditions, the nature of the issue, and the needs and interests of the people affected by the issue. Consequently, the most effective strategies of action are homegrown—they are developed by and for the people concerned about a particular region. Developing such a strategy is an important step—it ensures that people are working toward a clearly stated and agreed upon goal, and it spells out specific steps and tools for reaching that goal. A well-drafted strategy also allows people to assess their progress against the stated goals, adapt methods as needed, and document success.

Principle # 7 – Move from Vision to Action (Implementation)

The objective at this point is to strategically translate civic will into political will. Participants can start by understanding how the proposed regional action supplements other relevant efforts. Then, they need to communicate their message to appropriate audiences, making it relevant and compelling. They need to demonstrate to political leaders and other decision-makers that the political capital to be gained is greater than any political risk they may take in supporting the action. Outreach should rely on multiple strategies to inform, educate, and mobilize people (such as media, public events, publications, web sites). Participants should also think carefully about linking their effort to established decision-making systems. Seek access to power—rather than power itself—by building bridges, coordinating actions, and doing things that would not otherwise get done.

Principle #8 – Learn as You Go and Adapt as Needed (Evaluation)

Taking action should be followed by evaluating what was accomplished. This "civic learning" provides the political momentum to follow-through on difficult problems. In some cases, there may be a need to sustain regional collaboration. Participants should begin by capturing, sharing, and celebrating their accomplishments, thereby reinforcing a sense of regional identity. Then, it may be valuable to revise and renew the mission, adapting to new information, opportunities, and problems. Participants will also need to identify and develop the capacities to sustain the regional initiative—people (both current and new members), resources (money and information), and organizational structure.

Principle #9 – Sustain a Regional Initiative (Governance)

After a region has come together, crafted a vision, and taken action, it is often faced with the question of whether there is a need to sustain the regional initiative. If the answer is yes, a region may decide to maintain a simple network to facilitate communication and exchange information. In other situations, it may make sense to create a more formal partnership by negotiating some type of compact or otherwise integrating regional efforts into existing institutions. Another option is to create a new organization –either a new regional agency with governing or regulatory power, or a non-government entity that can serve as a convener and coordinator for future regional work. The more formal the governing arrangement, the more likely a region must address questions about who should be involved in the regional agency; what is the scope and purpose; and how will decisions be made and disputes resolved. Given the variation in the objectives of regional initiatives, it is not surprising that several different governance models have emerged. The bottom line is that the governance structure must be "homegrown," it must designed to meet the needs and interests of people within the region.