



## **Toward a More Useful Way of Understanding Regional Governance**

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### **Abstract**

The paper proposes a framework to clarify and specify regional governance for scholars and practitioners. Using capacity and purpose rather than forms of governance or government as a foundation, the framework identifies five dimensions—actor group, agenda, internal capacity, external capacity, and implementation experience—that together describe regional governance for a time, place, and policy goal. Each dimension is described with indicators/contributing factors and implications of the framework are suggested.

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Over recent decades, inter-local and regional experience in the United States has changed in significant ways. The amount of such activity increased substantially. The focus shifted from government to governance and from governmental consolidation to problem-solving. In 2009, the Obama Administration avowed an interest in regional-scale policy and put money into relevant programs; both the interest and the funding subsequently decreased. (Barnes 2009; Pierce 2010; Staley 2010.) Inter-jurisdictional responses to the on-going financial crisis and the recession have also brought new urgency and new practices to the topic. Considerable research, including the impressive output of the Brookings Institution's [Metropolitan Policy Program](#), has documented, analyzed, and encouraged regional collaboration. These accumulated changes fundamentally challenge the previously dominant ways of thinking about regional governance and highlight the need for more useful analytic frameworks.

Specifications of regional governance have typically comprised a range of forms that are used to implement collective action at the regional scale. Emblematic of this approach is Walker's (1987) classic seventeen-level typology of regional service delivery approaches ranging from relatively easy interventions (informal cooperation, private contracting) through modestly difficult interventions (functional transfers, annexation, multipurpose special districts) to the hardest interventions (structural change through consolidations or two-tier federations). In a voluminous literature spanning nearly a quarter-century, other authors have elaborated elements of Walker's typology in pieces spanning models of regional growth management to case studies of metropolitan regionalism. (For a representative sampling, see McKinney and Johnson 2009; Feiock and Carr 2004; Kemp 2003; Katz 2000; Greenstein and Wiewel, 2000; Oakerson 1999; Rothblatt and Sancton 1998; Downs 1994; Peirce 1993).

Although the longstanding argument among metropolitan government, public choice, and new regionalist approaches has made a substantial contribution to understanding the relative benefits of alternative governmental arrangements (Foster 2001), the debate over the *forms* of regional governance has probably taken us as far as it can. Continuing an evolution of thought increasingly emphasizing collaborative approaches to region-scale problems (Cooke and Morgan 1998; Mason 2008; Pastor, Benner and Matsuoka 2009; Visser 2002), we propose a reframing of regional governance, one that focuses less on structure and more on capacity and purpose. Capacity, in our formulation, is the attributes of regional governance that reflect how actors make decisions to organize, determine means of action, accumulate appropriate resources, and act on a specific regional problem or issue. Purpose is the goal regarding the problem or issue. We conceive regional governance as a complex, multi-faceted politics, part of historical processes of adaptation in the political economy to changing environments and vicissitudes. This evolution manifests in various decision-making structures, modes of governing, attitudes, and outcomes across topic, space and time.

We thus define regional governance as *deliberate efforts by multiple actors to achieve goals in multi-jurisdiction environments*. By this definition, regional governance:

- Crosses borders, by definition jurisdictional, and also usually sectoral (public, private, nonprofit, civic) and/or functional (e.g., environment, economic, social);
- Encompasses, but goes beyond, the institutions, tools, or structures that may establish and implement decision-making and action;
- Involves purposes and goals— solving a regional problem or seizing a regional opportunity—as the object of a regional governance effort; and
- Is a kind of politics and does not assume consensus or cooperation as a dominant mode, but does assume the attempt to exercise power on behalf of interests, ideas, and values.

Regional governance is not the end in itself; it is the means by which a goal is sought.

This definition builds, in part, on the insights derived from looking at politics in a place as a “regime.” Stone (2005) defines “an urban regime...as the informal arrangements through which a locality is governed.” While regime analysis has been useful to us in highlighting and analyzing the way that governance occurs, its focus on informal structures and processes aimed at actions within a single jurisdiction makes it incomplete for illuminating regional governance in the cross-boundary, multi-jurisdictional way that we define it. In a region, boundaries vary by the scope of the functional purpose. Further, there is no single government or default authoritative institution for carrying out decisions; there is no formal entity at whose actions the “informal arrangements” are aimed. The process of regional governance is more tenuous, complex, and risky than it would likely be within a single jurisdiction.

By this definition, regional governance includes formal and informal actors in the private and civic sectors, as well as in governmental units, who organize, engage and act with others—in concert or in conflict—to seek a goal. Working toward a goal does not imply that multiple entities have the same motivations or aims. Regional governance entails the whole set of actors interacting to assess alternative courses of action and navigate their differences in addressing a problem or opportunity. This approach also draws upon the rich scholarly and popular literature on “network governance” (Surowiecki, for example) with its emphasis on complex decentralized networks rather than vertical hierarchies or utility-maximizing individual actions in market-like contexts. But regional governance is likely not “a network”; the relationships are likely to be more tenuous, complex, and risky.

Our proposed framework will support analyses of regional governance as a dependent variable (“*why do regions have different regional governance?*”) or an independent variable (“*what effects does regional governance have?*”). Our primary focus in this paper, however, is neither of these explanatory questions. Rather, we focus on the precursor descriptive question of “*what is regional governance?*”

Our view is that regional governance varies by place, time, and goal, reflecting issue differentiation and evolution of alternative political economies and cultures. Regional

governance is not necessarily effective or successful in achieving the goals of regional collective actors, and the analytic framework we present allows for such variety of outcomes. Likewise, the framework itself does not judge the desirableness of the goal sought.

### **A Regional Governance Framework**

We hypothesize five dimensions and fifteen underlying indicators (or contributing factors) to describe and measure regional governance for a particular place, time, and goal, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Dimensions and Indicators/Factors of Regional Governance**

- **Agenda: the purpose and goals of the effort**
  - 1) **Agenda Framing: Clarifying Vision, Goals, and Priorities**
  - 2) **Agenda Assessment: Weighing Support for and Opposition to the Agenda**
  - 3) **Comprehension of the Agenda: Assessing How Much People Know About the Goals and Issues**
- **Actor Group: individuals and organizations that will work together on the agenda**
  - 4) **Actor Group Composition: Deciding Who Will Be at the Table**
  - 5) **Leadership Roles: Identifying Who Does What ... and When**
  - 6) **Actor Group Commitment: Assessing People's Passion and Sense of Purpose**
- **Internal Capacity: the ability to secure in-region resources**
  - 7) **Money and Related Resources: Developing a Budget of Financial, In-Kind Needs**
  - 8) **Information and Expertise: Gaining the Knowledge Needed to Succeed**
  - 9) **Authority and Legitimacy: Assessing the Actor Group's Standing in the Region**
- **External Capacity: the ability to secure resources from outside the region**
  - 10) **Connectedness Inside the Region: Assessing the Group's Regional Links**
  - 11) **Connectedness Outside the Region: Assessing the Group's External Links**
  - 12) **State-Level Influence: Securing Help from State Government**
  - 13) **Federal-Level Influence: Securing Help from the Federal Government**
- **Implementation Experience: experience and legacy of operating at the regional level**
  - 14) **Overall Region-Scale Activity: Weighing the History of Collaborative Problem-Solving in the Area**
  - 15) **Region-Scale Activity on Goal: Learning from Similar Previous Efforts**

This framework was first published as a Research Note in the *Urban Affairs Review*. (Foster and Barnes 2012.) Since the piece was accepted there, we have undertaken to

translate the ideas into usable guidance for practitioners. (Barnes et al. Forthcoming 2012) We have incorporated insights from that process into this paper.

### **Dimensions and Indicators/Factors**

The following pages describe each of the five dimensions and the indicators or factors that comprise them. Also here is a discussion of the “dynamic core” of regional governance processes, a core created by the relationships between aspects of the Agenda and membership of the Actor Group.

The first dimension captures the group **Agenda**, assessed by the purposefulness of its formulation and assessment and its popular understanding. Students of government have long noted that the articulation of an issue is critical to its achievement (e.g., Deutsch 1963, Greer 1963). Preventing mission creep, framing questions appropriately, understanding relevant choices, and presenting the agenda to achieve popular comprehension are core elements of agenda effectiveness. Relevant to this dimension are three indicators. The first captures the *agenda framing*, how effectively formulated are the vision, goals, alternatives, and priorities for the nature and severity of the regional goal (Warriner 1965). Not all goals warrant a regional approach; pursuing a fundamentally trivial or local issue through a regional agenda can hamper progress on the issue. Moreover, an effective agenda framing need not be wholly clear or comprehensive: for some contexts and issues, limiting the options or purposefully keeping details vague could improve success in achieving the regional goal. A second indicator captures the *agenda assessment* by the actor group, ranging from incomplete or poor vetting of support and opposition to a thorough and deliberate consideration of these elements. (O’Leary-Kelly, Martocchio and Frink 1994). The third agenda indicator gauges the degree to which there is *comprehension of the agenda* (Greer 1963). This does not imply support, which may be withheld, but rather levels of understanding of the topic and the regional nature of the agenda.

Following a lineage of political analysis (Long 1958, Dahl 1961, Stone 1993), the first dimension gauges characteristics of the **Actor Group** engaged on a goal. The actors group may vary from a formal entity with authority to a loose ad hoc set of individuals tackling a specific regional problem. Thus, the question of the relative power among the group members is relevant. Regardless of structure or formality, the salient measure here is the wherewithal of actors to achieve their goal. This is gauged by three indicators. The first is *actor group composition*, measured by whether the set of people and organizations involved includes stakeholders needed for success in realizing the group goal. Determining which stakeholders are “needed to succeed” is case specific for a time, place, and goal; what constitutes an appropriate actor group will vary. As Kooiman (2003, 11) notes, “day to day governance occurrences appear to be complex, layered interaction processes enacted between a variety of unpredictable actors with discrepant interests and ambitions.” Full inclusiveness in the sense of including all stakeholders potentially affected by or interested in the goal—is not presumed. The second indicator gauges *leadership roles* needed for achieving

the group purpose, which may range from unacceptable—as could occur if no leadership structure is defined or if leadership is not adept — to acceptable, as occurs when the leadership arrangement is clear and satisfactory. The third actor group indicator assesses the degree of *commitment to group and purpose*. This does not imply that members of the group will or must have mutual regard, high degrees of consensus and low levels of conflict. Although there is evidence that individuals may self-select into groups whose members and agenda are sympathetic with their own views (Henry, Lubell and McCoy 2010) and that ideological differences within a group are positively associated with intragroup conflict (Grissom 2010), other findings suggest that such conflict is better managed and channeled in groups with high social capital and trust (Jehn and Mannix 2001; Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen 1993). Our view is that common commitment to work together, to stay at the table, toward a purpose over the relevant duration and despite differences is a core attribute of regional governance.

### **Dynamic Core and Relationships Among the Indicators**

Although these indicator/factors are presented separately here, the analyst will not want to consider each factor solely in isolation. Rather, analysis of each factor will also take into account its impact on other factors and vice versa. To take a simple example, assessment of access (or lack thereof) to money and in-kind resources (see below) might prompt reconsideration of the membership in the actor group. Bringing these analyses together will be especially important for practitioners, who are crafting a strategy to identify (and prioritize) additional capacity needed to accomplish their goal.

To support examination of the relationships among the factors, the Workbook, mentioned above, features attention to the “Dynamic Core” of regional governance: the interactions between factors associated with the agenda framing and the membership of the actor group. This core integrates the *what* (the purpose or goal) with the *who* (the people who will work to achieve the goal). We suggest that this matrix (actor group members and aspects of the agenda) is the most important of the possible relationships among the indicator/factors. Obviously, any two of the factors could be run against each other, and the choice of which ones to look at will depend on the place and the goal under study.

The remaining three dimensions and their associated indicators focus on the *how* of regional governance.

The third dimension, **Internal Capacity**, gauges the sufficiency of resources to achieve success on the specific goal (Foster 2000). We focus on three kinds of internal capacity. One captures the sufficiency of *money and related resources* to effect regional action. A second assesses whether the actor group has the necessary and sufficient *information and expertise*—data, people, insights, wisdom—to act effectively on the issue. A third gauges the degree to which the group has sufficient *authority and legitimacy* to make decisions and act (Pierre and Peters 2005, 46-48). Indicators of internal capacity do not necessarily track one another. A business-led group addressing regional economic development challenges may

have money and information, but insufficient legitimacy or authority to achieve its aims. In contrast, a government-led group may have legitimacy and authority to decide on a course of action, but lack financial or information resources to act effectively.

The dimension of **External Capacity** captures the skills and reach of the actor group to connect to and secure external resources to support the group goal. This includes having sufficient political, economic, or intellectual influence to shape policy or program outcomes in favor of group aims at both the *state* and *Federal* levels (Abbott 1983; Orfield 1997). Such influence may come through the seniority or power of a region's elected state or federal delegation as well as from inter-personal relationships between regional leaders and key elected, appointed, or professional players in the policy area. External capacity also measures *in-region connectedness*: the actor group's ability to work effectively with relevant organizations, individuals and coalitions external to the group but internal to the region. *Connectedness outside the region* refers to the actor group's relationships through formal and informal channels to constituencies, organizations, peer regions, national and international think tanks and foundations, and other entities that may be useful in formulating, obtaining resources for, and achieving the regional goal (Provan and Kenis 2008).

A final dimension of regional governance is **Implementation Experience**. Presuming that experience itself and learning from such experience increases the chances of effective region-scale action, one indicator is the *level of region-scale activity* for the region (Abbott 2000). A related indicator assesses the *level of region-scale activity on this goal*. Regions with experience addressing a regional goal—even if they have failed in the past—can draw insights and knowledge from prior efforts (Savitch and Vogel 2004). Both of these indicators capture the degree to which a region has institutionalized its experience in policies, structures or organizations, and processes, thus “normalizing” its habits of regional governance. A caution is that institutionalizing practices or structures does not automatically enhance regional governance. Irrelevant or inappropriate institutions can lock in a region to practices that ultimately hinder regional governance.

### Some Implications

This proposed framework has several implications. First, it emphasizes factors of capacity and purpose in assessing regional governance, a focus that we believe is constructive for scholars as well as regional leaders and policymakers. By this emphasis, the framework deliberately shifts the conversation from the number or arrangement of local governments and regional entities to a concern with capacity to act at the regional scale across time and a range of issues. The framework still recognizes that governmental and governance forms often constitute the arrangements and rules within which governance capacity operates. We have incorporated this context in the indicators for the authority or legitimacy of the actor group and the institutionalization of regional governance experience.

Second, the framework reinforces that regional governance for a specific region, time, and issue will vary. Because actors, conditions, and technologies change over time, a

region's governance of water resource management in 2012 might well differ from its governance of water resources in 1960. Regional governance for water resource management may likewise differ from governance for economic development, affordable housing, or other regional issues. And regional governance for economic development in 2012 is expected to vary for Chicago, Charlotte, and Cheyenne.

Third, while we hypothesize that, for many regions, regional governance will vary regularly and widely, use of the framework may reveal regions that tend toward a single style of regional governance across time or policy goal. Regions exhibiting consistent tendencies toward a particular regional governance style may have a governance "mode." If so, the framework can contribute to ongoing debates about the nature and importance of political culture to regional outcomes (Hooghe 2011).

Fourth, the framework permits examination of internal dynamics within and across the five dimensions. Researchers and policy leaders will be able to glean, for example, the relationship, if any, between actor group composition and its common commitment; to what degree having high external capacity may accord with high internal capacity; and how linked implementation experience is to having federal and state capacity. Follow up empirical analysis may also reveal dimension- or indicator-level regional governance patterns and trends generally and by issue area. Plausible findings might be, for example, that a region's track record matters for regional governance only rarely, that appropriate framing of the agenda always matters, or that acceptable leadership trumps other indicators of governance. Such discoveries will refine the framework.

Fifth, the proposed dimensions and indicators of capacity are not typically available in national, let alone international, databases. Perhaps imaginative proxies can be developed; for now, however, we assume that measurements of regional governance will require assessments from people deeply knowledgeable about a region, its history, actors, and circumstances. (Use by practitioners of the "workbook" described above may present a research opportunity based on gathering such assessments. The workbook sets up a rating and weights system for those who are inclined to put numbers on things; it also has a process for more qualitative assessments.)

Sixth, the framework may facilitate interesting and useful comparative research on regional affairs. The data challenge is, of course, daunting, but no doubt the ingenuity of scholars is sufficient to meet the challenge. Regional comparisons, within a nation and across nations, are "increasingly appropriate" and important. (Sellers 2005, page 419)

Finally, while our primary purpose is description of regional governance, we hypothesize that empirical applications would link stronger regional governance capacity with more positive regional outcomes. Future tests might also reveal combinations of regional governance indicators that are especially favorable for achieving certain regional goals. For example, regional governance marked by low state and federal influence and high popular comprehension may prove conducive to action on key regional economic goals, even while these characteristics of governance might hamper action on other goals. Illuminating such nuance would be an important aim of empirical analysis.

## Concluding Note

We offer here a regional governance framework to facilitate analysis and provide a platform that consolidates the movement of practitioner and research discussion beyond a focus on governmental and governance forms to questions of capacity and purpose. Our hypothesized specification contains five dimensions, each with contributing factors or indicators.

For researchers, the proposed framework highlights patterns in regional governance by goal, differences in regional governance within a single region across goals, and regional governance trends over time for a region, group of regions, or goals. A more clearly specified and measurable concept of regional governance opens the way for hypothesis testing regarding regional governance as a dependent or independent variable.

For practitioners, the proposed framework highlights key aspects of regional governance and facilitates strategic discussion about regional capacity. The framework could help local actors address such questions as: How does my region compare to others in general and with regard to specific dimensions and indicators? On the various indicators of my region's governance capacity, which ones are likely to change in the near future? How will that affect the potential for effective action? Which dimensions or indicators might our region enhance for best effect? We believe that some such analysis is already practiced, at least informally, by proficient regional governance actors. Feedback loops from practice to research would also hone the framework.

In the end, we intend the framework to inspire fresh thinking about regional governance. We invite refinements and applications to advance this work.

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