

**REGIONAL PROBLEM SOLVING:
A FRESH LOOK AT WHAT IT TAKES**

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

This essay, adapted from an article we wrote for *Urban Affairs Review*, proposes a new way of thinking about what it takes to solve problems at the regional level. The framework, which emphasizes regional capacities and purposes instead of the traditional focus on governance structures, identifies five dimensions of regional governance.

While the original article was intended for a more academic audience, our intent with this version is to present the framework to practitioners — mayors, planning directors, regional leaders and staff. We are not offering these ideas as a guidebook for effective regional governance — there is no one way to do regional work. Rather, we present these observations as a tool for identifying where practitioners might want to invest their time, energy and resources to build governance capacity for regional problem solving.

We aim to publish a handbook next year offering more details, along with some thoughts on “scoring” the five dimensions of regional governance. This will allow practitioners to assess the relative strength of their region’s governance capacity for specific problems and goals, with higher scores indicating stronger capacity.

Note that the analysis presented here is useful only after regional leaders have determined *whether* an issue will be better addressed by multiple jurisdictions rather than within one of them. That’s the first big “regionalism” question. If the answer to this question is, “Yes,” then the next question is *how* to do it, and we hope this essay can help practitioners as they begin the work of addressing an issue in their region.

We intend to develop these ideas further. So, we very much welcome comments from readers on the usefulness of this framework, as well as suggested improvements.

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INTRODUCTION

Usually, when people talk or write about “regional governance,” they focus on governmental forms — that is, how governments can or should create structures to work regionally. In this essay, we propose a reframing of regional governance, one that focuses less on structure and more on the capacities needed to work regionally.

Capacity, in our formulation, refers to the ability of people and institutions to organize, determine means of action, accumulate appropriate resources, and act on a specific regional problem or issue. By **regional governance**, we mean deliberate efforts on the part of those people and institutions to achieve goals in multi-jurisdictional environments. Regional governance can include a range of “actors” from the public, private, community, and civic sectors. What these actors have in common is that they are working toward a goal or goals for the region. They may not have the same motivations or aims, but they are interacting with one another to weigh alternative courses of action and to navigate their differences as they address a problem or opportunity facing the region.

Our view is that regional governance varies by place, time and goal. Different regions will do this work in different ways, and a given region may use very different governance approaches depending on the issue or the goal, or on the challenges the region faces at a specific time. The task for practitioners is to assess the capacity of their regions to do this work in a given situation or at a given time and to consider how to enhance that capacity where needed as they strive to bring people and institutions together to address specific issues or to achieve specific goals for the region.

A REGIONAL GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

We present five dimensions of regional governance and underlying indicators for each of them. Practitioners can use this framework to assess regional governance for a particular place, time and goal, as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Dimensions and Indicators of Regional Governance

Dimension	Indicators
1. Actor Group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stakeholders (cross-sector, -jurisdiction, -function, -level) to achieve goal 2. Leadership to achieve goal 3. Commitment to group and purpose
2. Agenda	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Agenda framing 2. Agenda assessment

	3. Popular comprehension of agenda
3. Internal Capacity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Money/resources to act 2. Information/expertise to act 3. Authority/legitimacy to act
4. External Capacity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Federal-level influence 2. State-level influence 3. Connectedness to relevant external regions, organizations, coalitions
5. Implementation Experience	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Level of overall region-scale activity 2. Level of region-scale activity on goal 3. Institutionalization of experience

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ACTOR GROUP. The first dimension looks at characteristics of the actor group that is working toward a goal for the region. The actor group may vary from a formal entity with decision-making authority to a loose, ad hoc set of individuals who are interested in a specific issue or problem. Regardless of the group’s structure or authority, the most important measure of its capacity and potential impact is the wherewithal of the actors to achieve their goal.

Our framework uses three indicators to assess the capacity of the actor group:

- The first is *actor group composition*. The question here is whether the group includes those people and organizations that are needed for the group to achieve success in realizing its goal. The appropriate and necessary stakeholders will vary based on the time, place and goal.
- The second indicator gauges *leadership* for the group purpose. Here we are interested in where the group's leadership falls on a range from unacceptable (e.g., the group has no defined leadership structure or its leadership is not widely accepted or recognized) to acceptable (e.g., the leadership arrangement is widely known and has broad support).
- The third actor group indicator assesses the degree of *commitment to group and purpose*. Our view is that a shared commitment among the actor group to working together toward a purpose and staying at the table despite differences is a core attribute of successful regional governance.

AGENDA. The second dimension of regional governance captures the group agenda.

Students of government have long noted that how you frame and present an issue is critical to addressing it effectively. Relevant to this dimension are three indicators:

- The first indicator captures the *agenda framing*. Here we are looking at how effectively the group formulates its vision, goals and priorities.
- A second indicator captures the *agenda assessment* by the actor group. A group's performance on this indicator can range from incomplete or poor assessment to a thorough and deliberate consideration of agenda issues, scope, strategy and tactics for goal achievement. Agenda assessment includes

consideration of whether the group’s goal can be addressed appropriately at the regional scale.

- The third agenda indicator gauges the degree to which there is *popular comprehension of the agenda*. Comprehension does not imply popular support (which can come later) but rather widespread understanding of the topic and of the group’s agenda and purpose among key stakeholders.

INTERNAL CAPACITY. The third dimension, internal capacity, gauges the sufficiency of resources available to achieve success on the group’s specific goal. We have identified three indicators that capture the different components of internal capacity.

- The first indicator assesses the sufficiency of *money and resources* to effect regional action on the group’s goal.
- A second indicator looks at whether the actor group has the necessary and sufficient *information and expertise* to act effectively on the issue. This can mean both having the right data and the right people involved—i.e., people with the wisdom and understanding that are needed to achieve progress toward the group’s goal.
- A third indicator gauges the degree to which the group has sufficient *authority and legitimacy* to make decisions and act.

Indicators of internal capacity do not necessarily track one another. For example, 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 but lack the financial or information resources it needs to act effectively.

EXTERNAL CAPACITY. The dimension of external capacity captures the ability of the actor group to connect to and secure external resources to support its goal. We have identified three indicators of external capacity:

- The first and second indicators measure *state and federal connectedness*. The goal here is to assess the extent to which the group has sufficient political, economic or intellectual influence to shape policy or program outcomes at both the state and federal levels. This influence may arise from a variety of factors, such as: the seniority or power of a region's elected state or federal officeholders; and/or inter-personal relationships between regional leaders and key elected, appointed, or professional players in the policy area.
- A third indicator of external capacity measures a group's *overall non-governmental connectedness*. This refers to the formal and informal channels that the group can readily use to reach out to and engage with key constituencies, organizations, peer regions, national and international foundations, and other entities that can support the group in achieving its goal.

IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCE. The final dimension of regional governance that we have identified is implementation experience, based on the presumption that experience in addressing issues at a regional scale increases the chances of effective action. We see three indicators of implementation experience as follows:

- One indicator is the overall *level of region-scale activity* for the region.
- A second indicator assesses the *level of region-scale activity on this goal*.

- A third indicator is the degree to which a region *institutionalizes its experience* in policies and processes, thus “normalizing” the habits of effective regional governance. Of course, institutionalizing bad processes does nothing to enhance regional governance, so this indicator has to take into account the efficacy of those processes as well as the fact that they exist.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

Regional governance, in and of itself, does not automatically solve problems or ensure successful action on issues of region-wide concern. Our analytic framework marks an attempt to identify and measure important determining factors in a region’s capacity to work successfully on a regional scale in specific situations. In considering and applying this framework, practitioners at the regional level should keep several considerations in mind:

- First, we believe that the most important “value-added” of this framework for practitioners is its emphasis on capacity and purpose in assessing regional governance. The framework deliberately shifts the conversation from the number or arrangement of local governments and regional entities in a given region to the capacity of the region to act across time and a range of issues.
- Second, the framework reinforces that regional governance for a specific region, time and/or issue will vary. For example, 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 resources may likewise differ from regional governance for economic development, affordable housing or other issues. And no

matter the year, regional governance for economic development will be different in Chicago, Charlotte and Cheyenne.

- Third, while regional governance will vary regularly and widely for many regions, the framework may reveal the importance of political culture to regional outcomes. Of specific interest is how different aspects of governance best support or inhibit regional problem solving in different political cultures.
- Fourth, the framework allows practitioners and researchers alike to weigh the connections among various measures of regional governance. For example, with the proper indicators in hand, we should be able to assess such things as: the relationship, if any, between the composition of the actor group and its overall commitment; the connections between external and internal capacity; and the connections between implementation experience and the region's ability to shape policy and program outcomes at the federal and state levels. This information, in turn, can help regions assess what governance factors are most important to their success in specific situations and, conversely, which do not matter as much in terms of their influence on outcomes. Having this information in hand also will help us refine the framework as we learn more about the relative influence of the various dimensions of success.
- A fifth consideration is that measurements of regional governance will happen primarily at the regional level for some time to come. The dimensions and indicators of capacity that we propose are not typically available in national databases. While we could see proxy measures being developed in some situations, the work of developing and tracking the right indicators for a given region will require

assessments from people deeply knowledgeable about the region and its circumstances and history.

- Finally, while our primary purpose in presenting this framework is to provide a better description of regional governance and what it entails, we hope that using the framework can help reveal capacity areas that are especially favorable for achieving certain regional goals. For example, regional governance marked by low state and federal influence but high popular comprehension may prove conducive to action on key regional economic goals, but not on others.

CONCLUSION

For regional practitioners, the proposed framework presented here highlights key aspects of regional governance that can potentially contribute to better outcomes. The framework can therefore provide a basis for strategic discussion within a region about its capacity to work on specific issues at specific times. Using the framework, we can imagine people and institutions coming together to explore a range of important questions, such as:

- Of the various indicators of our region's governance capacity, which ones are likely to change in the near future? How will those changes affect the potential for effective action on problem X or Y?
- Which dimensions or indicators might our region enhance for best effect in order to address problem X or Y?

- How does our region compare to others in terms of its overall capacity for regional governance on problem X or Y? How does our region compare to others with regard to specific dimensions and indicators?

Of course, many regions already are exploring these and other questions about regional governance, mostly on a less formal basis than this framework suggests. Our hope in presenting the framework is that it might encourage more regions and regional actors to begin thinking in these terms. We also hope it will inspire fresh thinking about what it takes to deliver on the promise of regional governance to solve problems and address urgent issues.

As we stated in the Introduction, we intend to produce a more detailed “handbook” next year on this topic, including thoughts about scoring each of the indicators for a specific problem or goal. In the meantime, we welcome comments about how this framework can be amended and improved to support regional problem solving.

Author Biographical Sketches

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