

RURAL-URBAN INTERACTION IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR: Understanding and Managing Functional Regions

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THE TWENTY-THIRD IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES DEVELOPED FROM REGULAR PUBLIC FORUMS SPONSORED BY THE LESLIE HARRIS CENTRE OF REGIONAL POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT. MEMORIAL PRESENTS FEATURES SPEAKERS FROM MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY WHO ADDRESS ISSUES OF PUBLIC CONCERN IN THE PROVINCE.

The map of Newfoundland and Labrador has become a patchwork quilt of administrative boundaries that change – usually becoming larger – with new government initiatives. School Boards and Health Boards became much bigger in the last decade. New Rural Secretariat regions were put in place, inserting nine provincial government-defined regions over the 20 economic zones established in the 1990s (Tomblin and Braun-Jackson, 2006). The 20 economic zones, in turn, overlaid the 59 rural development associations (RDAs) that had evolved since the 1950s (Douglas and O’Keefe, 2009). In addition, most provincial government departments have their own administrative boundaries, many with regional and local offices, and few align with each other. The federal government supports a network of 15 Community Business Development Corporations (CBDCs), and various federal departments and agencies have their own administrative boundaries and regional offices.

On top of these government-defined and supported regional creations, there is a myriad of community-based and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with their own administrative boundaries throughout the province. Table 1 (on page 39) highlights the range of sizes of administrative regions. There is a cluster of very large regions with 4-6 units encompassing the province, including health and school boards, to a mid-range of mostly economic development organizations with 15-20, to smaller regions of 25 to over 50.

In all these cases, regional boundaries have been established formally and more often informally for good reasons. The size of an area is usually based on the purpose it serves. The large areas for Boy Scouts and hockey districts no doubt make sense for the coordination and organization of the activities they involve. The 20 economic zones were established based on an extensive consultation process and analysis

of existing community and economic development boundaries (Task Force on Community Economic Development, 1995). The Transportation and Works road maintenance areas are based on the optimal distances to plow and salt winter roads.

Once established, of course, people and organizations get used to their boundaries. In a busy world, with accountability for how you allocate your budget and manage your staff or organize your volunteers, you focus on your activities in your region. The silos so often identified as dividing government departments and branches of large organizations have a regional manifestation as well. Neighbouring municipalities are accountable for how they allocate resources for the services they provide *within their boundaries*. The same is true of other organizations.

Yet people live their lives cutting across administrative boundaries all the time: you live in one municipality and work in another; you make minor purchases on the way home from work, but you may go to the other side of town or, especially in rural NL, to another town miles away, for major purchases. Your kids go to school based on School District boundaries, and your health care is determined along different boundaries. Add in recreation, social organizations, church groups, libraries – all with varying boundaries – and it’s a wonder we can coordinate funding and planning for anything.

And the more we learn about economic development, or health, or education, or even happiness, the more we know that it is the integration of factors that produces successful outcomes. The best way to be healthy is to have a job. For children to learn, they need to be well nourished when they go to school in the morning. Municipal services, from road clearing, to water supplies, to solid waste management, require planning and infrastructure and administration that cut across boundaries.

# of NL Regions	Organizations
4-6	MNL & M.A. regions, Tourism Department & DMOs, 4-H districts, INTRD regions, Boy Scout and hockey league districts, Skate Canada, RDA and REDB groupings, Health, Education Boards, Library Board divisions, Wellness Coalitions
7-9	Rural Secretariat, Women's Centres/Councils
10-12	Girl Guide Districts, CYNs, WI, soccer regions
13-15	CBDCs, Service Canada offices, Knights of Columbus districts
20	REDBs + Nunatsiavut; Tourism organizations; INTRD sub-regions
25-30	Functional/Labour Market Regions, HRLE regional locations, Family Resource Centres, Crime Prevention Committees, Search and Rescue
50+	Former RDAs, EAS offices, multi-community high schools (89), youth and recreation clubs, Transportation and Works operations sites (winter)

When we took part in the “Memorial Presents” public forum on April 14th in Conception Harbour, we reported on a project called “Rural-Urban Interaction in Newfoundland and Labrador: Understanding and Managing Functional Regions,” which set out to clarify all this. We worked with Dr. Alvin Simms from the Geography Department at Memorial, Dr. David Freshwater from the University of Kentucky, and with Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador (MNL). The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF) received funding from the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Labour Market Development Agreement, and we collaborated with communities and organizations provincially and in three case study regions: the Irish Loop (a rural area adjacent to an urban centre); Twillingate-New World Islands (rural non-adjacent to urban); and the Labrador Straits (rural remote).

Our research delineated the many administrative boundaries in the province, and then, using Geographic Information System (GIS) technology, Alvin Simms mapped the *functional regions* in the province. Functional regions are based primarily on daily commuting areas, but also factor in retail catchment areas. Functional regions are often inconsistent with administrative boundaries but reflect the way people (particularly the growing number of commuters in the province) live their daily lives and therefore have implications for those who deliver all of the services mentioned above. Separate reports and a synthesis report will be released by the Harris Centre on the project in the coming months, and a new internet-based Regional Economic Capacity Index (RECI) will be available in the fall of 2011, providing community and regional data on Labour Markets and Demography, Economic Structure, Incomes, and Governance. RECI allows you to compare

your community and region to others, to assess how you relate to your functional region, and to determine areas of strength and areas requiring attention to assist community sustainability.

There are some early conclusions arising from the project. First, most administrative areas are large compared to functional regions. In fact, the 28 functional regions identified for NL align best with rural development association boundaries that were developed from the bottom up during the 1960s and 1970s. These were areas that citizens in neighbouring communities understood as having common cause when trying to promote rural development: jobs created or infrastructure established might not be in my community, but it was close enough for me and my family to benefit. Governance boards could also draw on communities that were close enough to get together regularly to meet. (Even with the Internet, research is clear that face-to-face interaction is critical in business, governance, or any other activity, to build trust.)

The research also shows that there are numerous examples of voluntary collaboration between municipalities and other organizations to facilitate planning and coordination of services and activities. Municipalities are forming voluntary joint councils to coordinate their roles in the region. Others are getting together to hire a regional recreation director or economic development officer, which individually they could not afford. We found that most new collaborative efforts are single purpose, where communities partner to address a particular need or opportunity. Most examples of collaboration are amongst social organizations and activities. The least common related to environmental activities. While there is growing interest and support for voluntary service sharing, amalgamation continues

to be widely opposed as something forced from the outside. Yet, there are repeated calls for better mechanisms for regional cooperation that can be adopted *flexibly* to meet varying needs across varying regions.

By comparing data from 2001 to 2006, we also learned that functional regions change over time. If a fish plant closes in an area where it is the primary employer, commuting between communities stops. If a new mine opens, a region that was cut off from neighbouring communities suddenly expands as people from a much larger area commute to the new jobs. Where governments invest in infrastructure and services has a major impact on functional regions. The maintenance of ferry service, the location of the regional high school, what roads get paved – all effect the ability of people and businesses to interact on a daily basis. Functional regions are not based solely on immutable natural forces beyond our control: public policy and investment matters.

Realizing that functional regions change over time highlights that we should not attempt to re-draw all our administrative boundaries. Indeed, for some functions, whether it be specialized health care services that could not be maintained in 28 locations around the province, or regional tourism planning which takes in regions that are bigger than daily commuting areas, functional regions are too small. What our understanding of functional regions points to – and what RECI will assist community and industry and government planning with immeasurably – is that governance bodies need to understand how they relate to neighbouring regions, and how functional regions within their areas of responsibility need to be factored into decision making. The fact that Lewisporte has more interaction with Grand Falls-Windsor than it does with Gander does not mean the boundary for the Regional Economic Development Boards (REDBs) should be changed. It does mean that the Kittiwake REDB should be cooperating with Exploits REDB when they are working with the Lewisporte area on labour market development, infrastructure or regional marketing.

Finally, Dr. Simms' work points to the existence of what he calls "orphan" communities which are not part of a larger functional region. Some are obvious where they are not connected by road or are very remote. Some change over time where, as in the Cape St. Mary's area, neighbouring communities formed a functional region

in 2001, but by 2006 there was insufficient commuting to form a functional region. The closure of a fish plant, out-migration, and aging populations can all impact the level of interaction among neighbouring communities. Whatever the cause, these disconnected communities face unique circumstances and require their own strategies.

These findings suggest that most communities in the province are not on their own. If they assess their population and services and employers as a *region*, they will have many more opportunities than if they think they have to go it alone. To take advantage of these assets they will need governance arrangements that cut across boundaries, often in varying ways, depending on the activity being considered. One size does not fit all. That has been a governance mantra for 20 years, but our governance approach has seldom created the capacity and supported the tools to enable regional decision making. This research and the related reports, along with the on-line Regional Economic Capacity Index, should help us understand and manage regional interdependence in our province. **NQ**

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Citations: Douglas, D. & O'Keeffe, B. (2009). "Rural Development and the Regional Construct: A Comparative Analysis of the Newfoundland and Labrador and Ireland Contexts." In Baldacchino, G., R. Greenwood and L. Felt (eds.). *Remote Control: Governance Lessons for and from Small, Insular, and Remote Regions* (Chapter 4). St. John's: ISER Books, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Tomblin, Stephen G. and Braun-Jackson, Jeff (2006). *Managing Change Through Regionalization: Lessons from Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. John's: Harris Centre, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

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