New Community Spaces: Regional Governance in the Public Interest in the Greater Toronto Area

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Abstract
This article examines community-driven forms of institutionalized collaboration at the regional scale. We advance a generic and scalable framework that captures not only participants and incentives but also the structures and processes that shape urban policy objectives. This framework allows us to track implementation and adaptation, and to assess institutional viability, legitimacy, and performance over time. We find that the Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance represents a durable and high-performing place-based alliance of social, economic, and political actors dedicated to regional development strategies that include growth and equity goals. Yet the CivicAction Alliance is not a governing coalition. Elite dominance of the policy agenda, value-based tensions, and weak linkages between elected and civic leaders indicate that governance challenges with important democratic implications remain.

Keywords
regional governance, Toronto region, social inclusion, urban governance, cross-boundary collaboration

Regional policy challenges are intensifying everywhere. Economic restructuring, demographic shifts, social polarization and income inequality, eroding infrastructures, and environmental degradation and climate change

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coincide with fiscal austerity and decreasing state policy activism. Unfolding both within and across municipal boundaries, these complex problems continue to radically reshape urban and regional policy landscapes necessitating renegotiated governing arrangements. It has become orthodox to assert that public problem solving requires state and societal actors to voluntarily work across sectors, levels of government, and jurisdictional boundaries to address economic, social, and environmental objectives (Bradford 2015).

“New state spaces” that privilege political, economic, and social relations unfolding at the regional scale (Brenner 2004) also open up “new community spaces” for the expression of organized societal interests. We argue that the Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance is a rare example of nonpartisan, community-driven institutionalized collaboration at the metropolitan scale that does not conform easily to existing comparative models. A broad cross-boundary agenda, multi-sector representation, and demonstrable performance coexist with exclusive leadership networks and weak linkages with local elected officials indicating that CivicAction is not public-sector governance but does represent governance in the public interest.

Three key findings emerge from the analysis. First, CivicAction is not a substitute for more comprehensive regional policy making, but it does fill important governance gaps by providing organizational capacity, policy advocacy, and program implementation to address regional growth and equity objectives. Second, although CivicAction exhibits some democratic deficits, its performance over time suggests the need to take seriously a broader array of societal interests, values, and objectives. Rather than simply reading off private-sector hegemony over economic development priorities as an immutable feature, the participation of elites from multiple sectors is a key aspect of governance in complex urban settings. Finally, governance involving state and societal actors requires analytical attention to key drivers and linking mechanisms; governance gaps provide important participatory incentives, and civic leadership emerges in this case as a critical mediator variable without which cross-boundary collaboration would not have occurred.

**New Community Spaces: Network Governance and the “New” Regionalism**

The extent to which policy choices and the governance structures to implement them are evolving to match shifting urban landscapes remains an important empirical question. We explore here the complex picture presented by a large and heterogeneous set of actors, resources, and objectives, and a broad scope and scale of governance activities. Our interest lies in the prospects for cross-boundary collaboration to balance economic growth and social equity
agendas at the metropolitan scale. Arguing that stable citywide coalitions and broad cross-cutting agendas that integrate multiple issues are no longer as viable as they once were, recent research is more optimistic about the prospects for integrating community and economic development at the neighborhood scale (Stone and Stoker 2015). We argue that institutionalized forms of collaboration at the regional scale also present a viable analytical counterpoint to fragmentation, political trade-offs, and resource inequities. However, we also recognize that important governance challenges remain.

Against a backdrop of ineffectual intermunicipal cooperation and disconnected networks, we find durable and high-performing network governance in the Toronto region. Political and bureaucratic leaders participate, but the Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance, or CivicAction for short, is voluntarily sustained and driven by private and not-for-profit sector leaders. Its adaptive institutional structure balances interest inclusion with internal capacity, representing multiple social, economic, and cultural issues in the region. Yet elite domination begs questions about democratic legitimacy, and weak and idiosyncratic linkages with local governments in the region, especially with the City of Toronto, indicate that CivicAction is not a governing coalition.

These developments are challenging to capture both conceptually and empirically. We propose a model of institutionalized collaboration to complement existing comparative models. Variously referred to as “development coalitions” (Keating 2001), “civic intermediaries” (de Souza Briggs 2008), “diverse epistemic communities” (Benner and Pastor 2015a, 2015b), or simply “institutionalized collaboratives,” as we do here, these represent durable place-based alliances of social, economic, and political actors dedicated to balanced regional development strategies that include growth and equity goals. In these arrangements, elected officials, private sector, and community leaders determine and implement actionable goals in the wider public interest while providing opportunities for broader civic participation. An agenda reflecting multiple objectives adapts to shifting regional challenges and priorities, and activity is anchored in a visible organizational space with dedicated resources. Municipal governments can be either conveners that launch the initiative or partners if the leadership resides elsewhere (Bradford and Bramwell 2014).

Analytically, we locate our model at the intersection of network governance and the “new regionalism.” We begin with a brief overview of prevailing urban theories and their inadequacy to account for shifting policy contexts. Next, theories of network governance and economic development discourses in the “new regionalism” provide a conceptual bridge to theories of cross-boundary collaboration for inclusive regional economic development. We
illustrate our model of institutionalized collaboration with reference to civic governance in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Although we acknowledge the limitations of this device, for the sake of parsimony, we offer here an abridged version rather than a detailed case study.¹

To illustrate our model, we use a generic and scalable framework that captures the dimensions of scope and scale, as well as the participation of societal coalitions in regional governance. Importantly, this model captures not only participants and incentives but also the structures and processes that shape policy objectives as well as their implementation and adaptation. This also allows us to assess their viability, performance, and inclusiveness over time. Although this is not a comparative study, the generic framework we introduce can be used to guide subsequent comparative research on institutionalized collaboration in other contexts.

The Shifting Landscape of Urban Governance: Scope, Scale, and Coalitions

The idea of institutionalized cross-boundary collaboration is, of course, not entirely new. Urban regime theory examines the ways in which governmental, business, and other civic leaders blend their resources to build and maintain stable coalitions around a long-term governing agenda (Stone 1989, 2005, 2015). Urban governance theory eschews a political economy lens in favor of an institutional one, emphasizing the capacity of the local state to initiate, shape, and manage governance processes (Pierre 2011, 2014a).

Both of these theories offer comparative models to account for variation in long-term institutionalized commitments among state and societal partners, but each emphasize the negative sum aspects of these arrangements that tend to favor some societal interests over others. Stone (2015) has since extended his analysis to account for the more complex “multitiered political order” that has emerged since his seminal work was first published, but his original iteration of urban regime theory—which influenced an entire generation of urban scholars—observed that equity-oriented coalitions are far more difficult to sustain than downtown development ones (Stone 1989, 2005). According to Pierre (2011), local politicians and business leaders coalesce around economic development agendas, whereas municipal bureaucrats and nonprofits focus on neighborhood revitalization and social service delivery. These theories remain powerfully explanatory of the negotiated arrangements and “blended resources” underlying much of urban policy, as well as the trade-offs, participatory inequities, and variations in capacity that typically prevail in most places, but leave insufficient theoretical space to account for several major shifts in the scope and scale of policy agendas and the coalitions of actors that participate (Judd and Laslo 2013; Stone and Stoker 2015).
First, the local political agenda is less narrow, and economic and community development is less polarized in actual urban policy and practice (Bennett and Giloth 2008). Rather than trading-off growth and equity objectives, some of the most economically successful places “mix and match” programs to pursue “balanced development strategies” that integrate economic, environmental, and equity goals (Savitch and Kantor 2002, p. 147). The participation of societal actors in urban decision making is also changing. Along with the private sector, civic leaders from the nonprofit, education, labor, and other community-based sectors actively shape the mix of policy objectives that determine a city’s development strategy (Hanson et al. 2010). Finally, the rescaling of governance within and beyond city limits draws analytical attention downward to the neighborhood scale and upward to the metropolitan scale, dynamics that prevailing urban theories with their focus on the central city are unable to adequately capture (Foster and Barnes 2012).

Our interest here lies in the regional “empowerment puzzle” and the prospects for integrating rather than trading-off growth and equity goals. Collective regional problem solving is a complex governance challenge involving “interdependent, complex, loosely-linked actors and institutions with shared purposes but no shared authority” (Clarke 2004, p. 30). Prevailing theories and comparative models cannot capture governance that simultaneously crosses jurisdictional, sectoral, and geographic boundaries. Assessing the prospects for these institutionalized cross-boundary arrangements requires careful attention to the ways in which diverse interests and resources are inserted into regional governance, as well as to the viability and democratic inclusiveness of these arrangements.

**Network Governance: Participants, Objectives, and Incentives**

Theories of network governance explore how collaboration for complex problem solving occurs in spite of institutional fragmentation, disincentives, and questionable returns to self-interest (Ansell and Gash 2008; Peters and Pierre 1998). In this view, cross-boundary collaboration refers to

> the processes and structures . . . that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished. (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015, p. 18, emphasis in original)

Actors with different values and interests negotiate shared norms and priorities through deliberative processes and trust-building exchanges (Healey 2007). By no means assured, nor appropriate where entrenched polarization...
or extreme power imbalances exist, deliberative processes are best suited to complex problems of long-term significance (Innes and Booher 2010). Because “the relative and combined power of participants can enable or disable collective action” and because the resulting decisions affect citizens who typically do not participate directly, the inclusion of diverse interests from multiple sectors is a key structural factor (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012, p. 12).

Yet the power dimension presents a thorny issue for these theories that provide analytical lenses to explain “efficiency, synergy, inclusion and empowerment” but often fail to address “issues of power, conflict, and interests” (Kjaer 2009, p. 137). Who is included and excluded from the process, and how different constituencies influence urban decision making matters. Legitimate governance requires broadly representative policy agendas, yet the inclusion of multiple values and interests can impede public problem solving.

How coalitions shape urban policy objectives also matters. We know relatively little about how different actor configurations shape policy goals, leaving the details of agenda setting, resource sharing, and decision making somewhat opaque. This gap highlights the need to go beyond the simple identification of participants to empirically examine “efforts to orchestrate relationships among actors” that shape actual urban policy outcomes (Clarke 2012, p. 644).

Finally, we also need to know more about the incentives for different actors to participate in a sustained and meaningful way. Local governments represent the public interest, but societal partners are often narrowly self-interested. For legitimate and impactful collaborative governance, participants must pursue wider public interests as well as their own. We need to know more about what initiates cross-boundary problem solving and what sustains it over time.

The “New Regionalism”: Balancing “Innovation” and “Inclusion”? Theories captured under the broad rubric of the “new regionalism” add concrete contours to our discussion of network governance. Based on the realization that many urban policy challenges are outside the fiscal capacity, geographical scale, and policy scope of any single government or policy area, the “new regionalism” refers to the voluntary processes through which public, private, and community actors address regional issues in the absence of formal metropolitan government (Savitch and Vogel 2000). Characterizing these arrangements is challenging, but their common preoccupation with
voluntary cross-boundary collaboration in complex settings, the role of networks in its facilitation, and the informal institutional dimension of governance make them directly relevant.\(^2\)

Instead of reviewing this vast literature in detail, we isolate its major implications for understanding institutionalized collaboration involving societal actors at the regional scale. We acknowledge the territorial dimension of the “new regionalism” that implies voluntary networked governance among city and suburban governments for service delivery coordination, revenue sharing, or infrastructure investment (Lefevre 1998; Parks and Oakerson 2000). Some accounts are sanguine about the prospects, emphasizing deliberative processes that facilitate trust building to alter the policy preferences of individual governments to support intermunicipal cooperation, whereas others are more dubious, finding that competitive relations and weak capacity typically prevail (Martin and Schiff 2011). However, an emphasis on explaining intermunicipal collaboration among local governments, found, for example, in Feiock’s (2013) Institutionalized Collective Action (ICA) framework, limits the usefulness of these analyses for our examination of how societal interests participate in regional processes; civic elites may participate, but their contributions remain analytically residual. Instead, we focus here on relational approaches that directly problematize societal participation. Regional governance remains public governance, but local governments may not be dominant participants (Ward 2010).\(^3\)

We engage with two dominant discourses in regional economic development, each with different but at times overlapping actors, agendas, and participatory incentives, and examine the prospects for reconciling them. An “innovation” or “investment regionalism” agenda seeks to promote regional economic growth and global competitiveness, the benefits of which are seen to accrue—though not equally—to all citizens. An “inclusion” or “distributive regionalism” agenda is concerned with equality of opportunity for disadvantaged and low-income groups (Bradford and Bramwell 2014; Clark and Christopherson 2009). There is substantial debate over the democratic legitimacy of each of these sets of arrangements as well as their institutional viability and their actual impact on regional development (Carr and Feiock 1999).

The history of private-sector involvement in urban and regional affairs is long and storied, particularly in the United States, but globalization has precipitated major shifts in the organization of business and in economic development practice (Hanson et al. 2010). Regional growth and competitiveness is now widely understood to spring from strategic investments in the public research infrastructure, technology transfer, and human capital that drive innovation in knowledge-intensive industries, as well as the physical
infrastructure, amenities, and overall quality of life to retain them. In this view, knowledge-intensive economic growth provides multiplier effects that generate employment across the wage and skill spectrum in both traded and untraded service sectors (Moretti 2012).

Voluntary business networks have long been drivers of collaborative governance to support regional innovation, often initiating the process, establishing the agenda, funding the effort, and using “their considerable influence to push for acceptance of their proposals” by local governments hesitant to make regional commitments on their own (Hamilton 2013, p. 5). Civic leadership looms large and in the most successful places represents a “form of local genius” that bridges actor networks and promotes an “economic community” with metropolitan reach (Storper 2013, p. 227). Yet there is “nothing inherently democratic about regionalism” (Swanstrom 2006, p. 251). Consensus on regional policy goals is likely in “socially homogeneous” regions, but major social divisions perpetuate inequities and democratic deficits in others (Kantor 2010, p. 449), shutting citizens out of political decision making that occurs in networks “largely hidden from the naked eye” (Storper 2013, p. 227). The typical absence of equity issues on business-led regional agendas makes the economic rationale for regionalism “disastrously incomplete” (Swanstrom 2006, p. 251).

To address this spatial dimension of social, economic, and political disadvantage, a highly normative “community-based” regionalism discourse emerged in the 1990s to advocate third wave policies that seek to balance the “3Es” of economy, equity, and the environment (Wheeler 2002). In this view, inclusive and deliberative approaches to collaborative planning involving multiple actors, jurisdictions, and sectors have the potential to improve regional economic resilience by “co-producing” policies that are more innovative, efficient, and responsive to community needs (Innes and Booher 2010).

Informal institutions and networks represent “development coalitions” (Keating 2001) or “diverse epistemic communities” that build common agendas and facilitate collaborative strategies across “unusual sets of coalitions” unaccustomed to joint work (Benner and Pastor 2015a, p. 309). Examples of regional policies with both equity and growth implications include public transit, affordable housing, fair tax policies, immigrant settlement, and land-use planning for “smart growth,” but many analyses have begun to emphasize the particular promise of comprehensive regional workforce systems that link economic and employment objectives (Melendez et al. 2015).

However, if growth-oriented business-led networks are of suspect democratic legitimacy, the political viability and actual performance of community-based regionalism are similarly questionable. Critical theorists reject this approach outright, arguing that “bottom-up” community-driven regionalism
results in uneven development and does nothing to alter the underlying structural deficits of neoliberalism (Brenner 2004). Others find fault with its tendency to minimize conflict and power imbalances arising in the “messy real world politics of place” (Markusen 2001, p. 294). Shifting the political arena creates a “dilemma of scale” for equity activists who, lacking the resources to influence political decision making at the regional level, face co-optation and dilution of their agendas (Lester and Reckhow 2012).

Empirical research remains thin, and there is much debate over the actual impact of these arrangements. For example, while Jonas and Pincetl (2006) found low-performing networks dominated by business interests with little meaningful engagement of low-income communities, other analyses of “collaborative regional initiatives” in California argued that durable and inclusive regional governance is possible but rare (Innes and Rongerude 2005). Benner and Pastor (2015b) found successful examples in San Antonio, Salt Lake City, and Houston, each of which took different policy routes and involved linkages among different constituencies. In their comparison of civic governance experimentation in Swiss regions, Kubler and Schwab (2007) similarly found variation but argued that trade-offs between viability and accountability are less deterministic and explanations more multivariate than critiques suggest.

This brief overview establishes the value of situating our examination of institutionalized cross-boundary collaboration at the intersection of network governance and the “new regionalism.” By expanding the analysis beyond prevailing theories of urban governance and intermunicipal cooperation, we account for shifts in policy scope and spatial scale, and draw explicit attention to the participation of societal actors in regional governance. Perhaps most importantly, this analytical frame elicits questions about the capacity of these arrangements to meaningfully shape and implement cross-boundary regional agendas, and problematizes democratic inclusion and the uneven distribution of power and resources. These findings underscore the value of more careful attention to the internal structure and process of regional governance networks (for a similar approach, see Rich and Stoker 2014).

**Institutionalized Collaboration “On the Ground”: The Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance**

Typically left out of cross-national comparisons, Canadian city-regions quite literally provide a useful midway point between American and European approaches from which to examine these dynamics (Keating 1991). Relational approaches to urban and regional problem solving, and the actor configurations and power relations that constitute them remain relatively unexplored in Canada, but growing awareness of the differential impact of economic change
and increasing income and social disparities within and between urban regions has recently opened up analytical space to examine “bottom-up” urban policy activism (Taylor and Bradford 2015).

A formative debate has begun to emerge between those who recognize the contributions of organized societal actors and civic interests to urban policy making (Good 2009; Leo 2003; Phillips 2006; Tindal and Tindal 2009) and those who question either the legitimacy of these blended governance mechanisms (Boudreau, Keil, and Young 2009) or their viability and performance, seeing the participation of nongovernmental actors to be of marginal consequence in the context of provincial dominance over municipal affairs (Horak and Young 2012; Sancton 2011; Thibert 2015).

Recent research on the social dynamics of economic performance in Canadian city-regions suggests the merit of further investigating the former perspective. In this cross-national comparison of 11 cases, only one represents a durable and locally driven cross-sector coalition (Bradford and Bramwell 2014). The Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance emerges as a rare example of influential and high-performing community-driven institutionalized collaboration at the regional scale in Canada (Bramwell 2015; Bramwell and Wolfe 2014).

To examine the viability, performance, and democratic legitimacy of these complex, multiactor institutional arrangements, in this section, we trace the formation, consolidation, adaptation, and performance over time of CivicAction using Emerson and Nabatchi’s (2015) integrative framework for collaborative governance as a conceptual map. This framework represents a dynamic, scalable, and generic model that allows us to track how five variables interact to shape durable cross-sector collaboration in the GTA. These include participatory incentives, leadership, participants, institutional structures, and regularized interaction.

The Formation of CivicAction: Governance Gaps and Civic Leadership

The GTA is the fourth largest metropolitan economy in North America and one of the continent’s fastest growing mega-regions, having rapidly catapulted to global status in the past 10 years. Forced amalgamation in the late 1990s exacerbated fragmentation and already competitive intermunicipal relations, resulting in almost dysfunctional structures that to date have largely precluded meaningful metropolitan governance (Frisken and Norris 2001; Sancton 2008).6

The difficulty of constructing a “single narrative” to capture the “highly varied and distinctive local economies, cultures, and landscapes” that make up the GTA has left this urban powerhouse struggling to implement comprehensive
political initiatives and strategic plans (Bourne, Britton, and Leslie 2011, p. 237). The region faces increasingly complex and cross-cutting policy challenges in the areas of regional economic development, transportation infrastructure, immigrant integration, and rising poverty and social polarization but has historically lacked the collective capacity to address them (Bourne, Britton, and Leslie 2011; Horak 2013).

Key drivers refer to the variables without which the impetus for collaboration would not exist. In cross-boundary collaboration, participatory incentives are conceptualized as governance gaps. Numerous participatory incentives exist including crisis, or the promise of material or political gain or censure. However, governance gaps representing problems that affect participants equally and threaten serious consequences for inaction but remain outside the capacity of any single organization to solve, are “the ultimate consequential incentive,” and a broadly recognized precondition for collaboration (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012, p. 9).

Yet most urban regions, particularly of a similar size to the GTA, experience similar policy challenges and governance gaps. Precisely why some places appear better able to address them than others is a seminal question of much comparative urban research. In this context, civic leadership emerges as the variable most critical to CivicAction’s formation, consolidation, and ongoing durability.

The importance of both elected and civic leadership in collaborative governance is widely confirmed. Local politicians and public managers increase governance capacity by leveraging public, private, and community resources (Hambleton 2014). Leaders from the business or nonprofit sector recruit other influential participants, secure resources, and “boundary span” between sectors and informal local networks (Nelles 2012). Different types of leadership play different roles in collaborative governance, but an “identified leader” capable of initiating and securing resources and support is essential for the formation of cross-boundary collaboration (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015).

Concerned about a compromised future for the GTA, an influential group of civic leaders formed the Toronto City Summit Alliance (TCSA), renamed the Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance in 2009 to better reflect its regional mandate. Although the original motivation is unclear, the initial Toronto City Summit in 2002 was a one-day event organized on the initiative of then Mayor of Toronto Mel Lastman that attracted community leaders largely recruited from the personal and professional networks of its founding members.7

By all accounts, it was the highly impactful keynote address from David Pecaut that galvanized the formation of CivicAction. This speech is credited with establishing collective awareness about the policy challenges facing the
GTA and the weakness of existing institutional capacity to address them. Swift collective reaction was evident in

the gasp that went up in the audience. Because we could see our future: a city in decline, no leadership, no fiscal authority, no fiscal tools that really meet our needs, no ideas, sort of more of the same complaining and nothing. So that was a significant moment. (Confidential Interview)

There is a broad consensus that CivicAction is unlikely to have gotten off the ground without David Pecaut, who was tapped to act as inaugural chair after his rousing keynote speech. Acting as an “identified leader” capable of securing resources and support, his “energetic” leadership, personal networks, and willingness to absorb the high transaction costs of initiating a region-wide collaborative effort until his untimely death in 2009 are almost universally cited as one of the key reasons for the early momentum and sustained success of CivicAction.

The summit not only made salient the governance gaps in the region but also provided the impetus to recruit the cross-sector leadership required to launch and sustain the initiative. Yet much depends on who participates in institutionalized collaboration and how. The leadership selection process and the nature of linkages between community leaders and elected officials are critical variables that capture democratic legitimacy.

To ensure broad regional representation, the Steering Committees (both inaugural and current) include leaders recruited from the private, community-based, labor, and public sectors in the region. These include former federal, provincial, and municipal politicians; senior-level public managers, presidents, and CEOs of prominent charitable organizations with regional reach such as the United Way; presidents of all universities and colleges in the region; several local and national unions; chambers of commerce; CEOs from large firms headquartered in Toronto; and organizations with regional mandates such as Greater Toronto Airport Authority (GTAA), the regional transportation authority Metrolinx, and the Toronto Region Board of Trade.

Linkages with elected officials and policy makers are also evident. Current and former participants include three provincial premiers (Bill Davis, David Peterson, and Bob Rae), several former provincial cabinet ministers, and two former mayors of Toronto (David Crombie and Art Eggleton, now a federal Senator). Sitting provincial premiers Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne gave speeches at the last two summits in 2011 and 2015, respectively. Despite intentional membership turnover over a 10-year period, the Steering Committee has kept its multisector membership, has grown to almost 70, and continues to shape and oversee the strategic direction of CivicAction.8
However, while it strived “to undermine any accusations” that it was “some elite or special group,” CivicAction has always been essentially an exclusive leadership coalition intentionally structured to streamline deliberation and facilitate implementation of its agenda (interview with David Pecaut, July 9, 2009). Membership on the Steering Committee is by invitation from the Board of Directors, and participants are chosen as much for their personal networks and for their experience in complex settings as for their ability to represent multiple community interests and perspectives.

Power relations on the Steering Committee are relatively frictionless not only because participants are of similar social and professional standing but also because they are chosen for their reputations of being able to look beyond the narrow interests of their constituencies to work toward consensus on broader goals. As the founding CEO Julia Deans put it, recruiting “the right people” was essential:

Influencing the influencers was what we were really good at. We were never a grassroots organization. We appealed to the people at the top, saying “we need you to play a big role.” On any initiative we were always asking “who are the influencers we need at this table? Who are the people who have their own networks that they can call on?” (Interview with Julia Deans, May 8, 2013)

Yet leadership carefully selected to facilitate consensus is also intended to forestall value conflict, which raises important questions about the democratic legitimacy of governance activities involving unelected participants.

A core insight of urban governance is that institutionalized linkages between state and societal actors are a key feature of governing capacity. Although CivicAction is durable, influential, and high performing and has policy influence and capacity to implement programs, it is not a governing coalition. Its linkages with the past two mayors of the City of Toronto and with other mayors in the region have been largely weak and tangential. For example, though he attended the 2007 summit, David Miller, the Mayor of Toronto at the time of CivicAction’s consolidation, did not build relationships with its leaders. With an administration beleaguered by scandal and dysfunction, the relationship between CivicAction and Mayor Rob Ford was even less productive. Relations with the mayors of surrounding municipalities appear cordial but largely symbolic, and only two senior municipal bureaucrats from surrounding municipalities currently participate on the Steering Committee.9

Some people felt that more political bridges could have been built to support city and region-wide governance initiatives “had there been more active dialogue,” whereas others speculated that CivicAction was perceived as “an
anti-mayoralty type initiative” that fueled political competition over “who speaks for the city” (Confidential Interviews). Either way, the potential for building a durable partnership between mayors and civic leaders in the region has remained untapped, at least until very recently. A founding member of CivicAction who took over as Chair in 2010 after David Pecaut’s death instead of running for mayor in that year’s election, John Tory successfully ran for Mayor of Toronto in 2014, presaging the potential for closer future links.

The Consolidation of CivicAction: Flexible Institutional Structures, Deliberative Processes, and Adaptable Agendas

At the consolidation phase of institutionalized collaboration, participants with differing values and substantive goals work across their respective institutional, sectoral, or jurisdictional boundaries to establish collaborative norms and institutions (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). Representing “democratic devices” that provide connectivity among participants, governance structures with a formal locus, defined mandate, and dedicated staff clarify and consolidate collective agendas and regularize interaction.

Two tangible outcomes resulted from the 2002 summit. At a follow-up summit less than a year later, Enough Talk: An Action Plan for the Toronto Region was released, which set out a broad cross-sector strategic agenda for long-term change that included regional issues such as public transit and physical infrastructure, tourism and cultural events, research infrastructure, education and training, immigrant integration, diversity in civic leadership, and poverty reduction. All past, current, and ongoing initiatives can be traced back to this foundational report.

The Steering Committee also decided to institutionalize the alliance to support implementation of this strategic agenda. Through its flexible institutional structure, CivicAction focuses multisectoral efforts and adapts its agenda as issues change. The Steering Committee identifies cross-cutting issues and designates actionable project development to issue-based working groups. Agendas are adapted and refined at summits every four years, which also provide opportunities for broader civic participation. Projects are developed for implementation by new or existing organizations with the requisite institutional capacity.

A small secretariat that started with “two desks and seven dollars in the bank” has evolved into a formal structure with a CEO and a core staff who build networks, fund raise, develop and manage projects, and plan events and meetings. CivicAction is primarily funded by donations, the vast majority of which are from private firms, but also draws financial support from the
Government of Ontario, four unions, and several not-for-profit organizations. Initiatives such as the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), the Toronto Region Research Alliance (TRRA), and the Luminato festival have also attracted federal and provincial funding.

Beyond careful leadership selection to facilitate consensus, another mechanism used to reach agreement on cross-boundary issues is a strategic emphasis on issue-based rather than interest-based organizing through which “you are not advocating for any specific group of people but for the public interest [so] there is not an obvious owner of the problem” (Interview with David Pecaut, July 21, 2009).

This approach did not always unfold as anticipated, particularly on CivicAction working groups. With participants motivated by different values, framing issues collectively and building shared commitment between business, social sector, and environmental activists were often a challenge due to clashes between participants with pragmatic and principled motivations. On some working groups, “the battles, and the tension, and the conflicts were unbelievable,” and not all initiatives have been equally successful (Confidential Interview, emphasis in original). Interview data suggest that environmental activists and business leaders had some “uncomfortable confrontations,” and the Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults (MISWAA) report contains a disclaimer that reflects disagreement on core principles among working group members.

The Durability and Performance of CivicAction: Policy Influence and Successful Projects

It is one thing for institutionalized collaboration to form but entirely another for it to perform. CivicAction is not only durable and representatively inclusive, but it has also charted demonstrable impact on a cross-boundary agenda. It is of particular significance that even though it relies primarily on private-sector funding, the alliance has never been dominated by narrow economic development objectives. Instead, most initiatives have both growth and equity implications. To demonstrate CivicAction’s performance over time, we offer here a brief description of selected initiatives and illustrations of their lasting impact.

For its first initiative, CivicAction helped revitalize a tourism industry experiencing severe unemployment due to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis, raising $11 million (in Canadian dollars) under the Toront03 initiative to market the region internationally as a safe place to travel. This early “quick win” demonstrated the ability to rapidly leverage resources and demonstrate results, garnering buy-in from leaders reluctant to squander time on ineffectual activities.
Shortly afterward, CivicAction began to focus more explicitly on program
development, successively launching a series of projects almost all of which
continue to operate in the region more than 10 years later. One of its earliest
programs remains one of its most successful. Jointly developed with and sub-
sequently housed in the Maytree Foundation in 2003, the TRIEC provides
mentoring and employment networks to help skilled immigrants enter the
regional labor force. In addition to helping thousands of people find work,
this program is notable for its policy influence. A locally driven innovation
that “scaled up,” TRIEC served as a template for the Local Immigration
Partnership program (LIP), which has been rolled out across the country by
the federal Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) (Bradford
2011).

In conjunction with the United Way and the City of Toronto, CivicAction
was also an early driver in 2004 of the Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy,
which it later relinquished to the other two agencies for further development
and implementation (United Way of Greater Toronto 2005). This eventually
resulted in the City of Toronto’s Priority Neighbourhoods Program, which
continues to target low-income neighborhoods for focused social interven-
tion and revitalization, though its long-term sustainability and impact is ques-
tionable (Horak and Moore 2015).

Continuing its antipoverty work, CivicAction’s other 2004 initiative was
the MISWAA task force that produced the Time for a Fair Deal report. Along
with focused lobbying efforts, this report helped to influence both federal and
provincial tax policy for low-income families, contributing to the establish-
ment of the federal Working Income Tax Benefit and the provincial Ontario
Child Tax Benefit (Jackson 2006). As one interviewee opined, the 2007
Ontario budget “was a CivicAction budget” (Confidential Interview).

Following the 2007 summit, CivicAction announced the launch of
Luminato, an international performing arts festival and David Pecaut’s per-
sonal brainchild. Held annually for more than 10 days in multiple venues
across the City of Toronto, Luminato is well attended by tourists and resi-
dents alike and has grown to attract an annual audience of 700,000, making it
one of the world’s top festivals of its kind.

Given its emphasis on civic leadership, CivicAction has recently turned its
attention to inclusive leadership development. The Emerging Leaders
Network (ELN), launched in 2006 to recruit and develop young leaders, now
consists of more than 700 people who meet regularly to network and to dis-
cuss pressing issues in the region. Also housed within CivicAction itself is
the DiverseCity: The Greater Toronto Leadership Project that includes eight
initiatives to improve the ethnic and identity-based representativeness of
civic leadership in the region.
Somewhat ironically, the only initiative directly focused on innovation and regional economic development failed. The TRRA, formed in 2005, was intended to encourage collaboration among governments, knowledge-intensive firms, and public research institutions to support a regional innovation agenda but was dissolved in 2012. The exact details are unclear, but anecdotal evidence suggests that TRRA lost federal and provincial funding because it was unable to sustain stakeholder buy-in and consensus on strategic direction.

CivicAction’s most recent initiative focused on policy advocacy for regional transportation infrastructure to alleviate serious traffic congestion. CivicAction’s Regional Transportation Champions Council, supported by the “What would you do for 32?” awareness campaign, lobbied hard for a regional transit strategy.13 Taken together, a provincial budget committing billions of dollars to transportation in the GTA, a provincial premier sensitive to the region’s unique policy challenges, and the election in 2014 of John Tory as Mayor of Toronto have meaningful implications for intergovernmental collaboration on transit infrastructure in the region.

At the most recent summit in the spring of 2015, the “Better City Bootcamp,” CivicAction released its future policy agenda, which is perhaps its most explicitly equity-focused agenda to date, targeting for future project development issues such as housing affordability for senior citizens, career pathways for unemployed youth, workplace mental health, early childhood interventions for at-risk families, public spaces for physical activity, and extreme weather management.

Conclusion

In closing, we find that CivicAction is not public-sector governance but represents regional governance in the public interest. In contrast to other recent work arguing that the prospects for integrating community and economic development are more auspicious at the neighborhood scale, we have argued that institutionalized forms of collaboration at the regional scale also present a viable analytical counterpoint to fragmentation, political trade-offs, and resource inequities.

Formed to address complex governance gaps in the GTA, CivicAction represents viable and high-performing multiactor governance that has survived changes in leadership, regularly adapted its agenda, and has consistently represented regional issues even in the absence of broad regional representation. Influential political and bureaucratic leaders actively participate, but CivicAction remains community-based, initiated, driven, and sustained by private and not-for-profit-sector civic leaders. Explicitly cross-boundary, its
programmatic focus on workforce development for skilled immigrants, neighborhood capacity building, tax policy reform for low-income families, cultural tourism, regional public transit, knowledge-intensive innovation, and inclusive leadership development represents a hybrid mix of “innovation” and “inclusion” agendas at the regional scale that is not captured by prevailing comparative models.

We also find that important governance challenges remain. CivicAction’s elite-driven nature and issue-based deliberative process circumvent value conflict, eliciting important questions about democratic legitimacy and dilemmas of scale posed by “community-based regionalism.” Idiosyncratic and primarily weak linkages with municipal politicians over “ownership” of the strategic policy agenda and sparse representation of local governments elicit important questions about governing capacity consistent with other findings of weak intermunicipal cooperation in the region (Nelles 2012). CivicAction has substantial influence and capacity that it selectively wields for policy advocacy and targeted program development, but it is not a governing coalition.

Thus, we do not claim that CivicAction has answered the puzzle of regional governance in the GTA. It is by no means a substitute for more comprehensive and integrative regional policy making; there are numerous other initiatives operating within the region, and much fragmentation remains. We also acknowledge that the “power issue” remains, leaving open the question of whether and how to apply standards of accountability, transparency, and democratic legitimacy to community-driven initiatives with public purposes (Pierre 2014b).

Beyond governance gaps arguably present in most regions of a similar size, the question of participatory incentives also remains somewhat obscure. In this case, engaged civic leadership that emerged in the right place at the right time represents the mediator variable without which CivicAction would not have been established or sustained, suggesting that good fortune is often a fickle but powerful explanatory factor. But precisely why many people continue to contribute their time, skills, and personal networks is unclear. Corporate social responsibility portfolios only explain so much. It is entirely possible that the intrinsic motivation of community engagement is incentive enough (Bradford 2015).

However, we do claim that our model of institutionalized collaboration offers important contributions to our understanding of societal participation in complex problem solving at the regional scale. CivicAction represents a durable, multiactor place-based alliance of social, economic, and political actors dedicated to balanced regional development strategies that include growth and equity goals. Elected officials, private sector, and community
leaders identify and implement actionable goals in the wider public interest while providing opportunities for broader civic participation. Activity is anchored in a visible organizational space with dedicated resources, and an agenda reflecting multiple objectives adapts to shifting regional challenges and priorities.

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Notes

1. This article is based on data drawn from 25 semistructured interviews undertaken as part of a comparative cross-national research project on the social dynamics of regional economic performance in Canadian city-regions that used a common methodology (Bradford and Bramwell 2014).

2. The distinctions between “the new regionalism” and the earlier public choice and “old regionalism” approaches are well documented elsewhere (see Frisken and Norris 2001; Kubler and Schwab 2007).

3. There is debate over the extent to which strains of the new regionalism focused on reducing spatial inequality represent American exceptionalism due to the fragmented nature of urban regions in the United States, and the inequities between central cities and suburbs that result from sprawl (Sancton 2001). However, growing social inequality and concerns about gentrification and displacement suggests that these issues are relevant in other contexts (Keating 2001).

4. Selected examples include the Allegheny Conference on Community Development in the Pittsburgh region (de Souza Briggs 2008) and Chicago Metropolis 2020 (Hamilton 2002), as well as more recent developments such as Joint Venture Silicon Valley (Henton, Melville, and Walesh 1997) in the United States, the Manchester Economic Development Corporation (Healey 2007), and the information and communications technology cluster in Waterloo, Canada (Nelles 2014).
5. Of the other three examples of institutionalized collaboration, the Montreal case was narrowly focused on neighborhood revitalization and initiated by federal and provincial governments, Waterloo represents private-sector dominance over what is primarily a regional growth agenda, and efforts to replicate a CivicAction-type initiative in Hamilton ultimately failed.

6. The Toronto region is governed by a large upper-tier City of Toronto and surrounded by the four other upper-tier municipalities of Halton, Peel, York, and Durham, which collectively include 24 lower-tier municipalities.

7. These include David Pecaut, then CEO of the Toronto branch of the Boston Consulting Group, John Tory (current Mayor of Toronto and former leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, 2004–2009), David Crombie (former Mayor of Toronto, 1972–1978), and Frances Lankin (former president and CEO of the Toronto United Way and former New Democratic Party Cabinet Minister and Member of Provincial Parliament, 1990–1995). To ensure leadership diversity and sectoral and regional scope, selection for the Steering Committee is now undertaken collectively by the Board of Directors, CivicAction staff, and current and former Committee members.

8. For a complete list of original and current participants on the Steering Committee, see www.civicaction.ca.

9. For example, the mayors of Mississauga, Hamilton, and Markham along with the Deputy Mayor of Toronto participated on a panel at the 2011 summit, but there is little evidence of deeper or more regular involvement.

10. Held at strategic junctures to attract leadership and build support and credibility, including the original meeting, only five summits have been held in 2003, 2007, and 2011, with the most recent in 2015.

11. Some private-sector donors invest in particular programs according to objectives outlined in their corporate social responsibility portfolios.

12. It is beyond the scope of the analysis to wade into the debate of what programs constitute economic as opposed to community development. However, it is well-established in the literature that regional policies such as public transit, affordable housing, fair tax policies, and workforce development are cross-sector issues that meet both growth and equity objectives (Benner and Pastor 2015a; Leigh and Blakely 2013), and inclusive leadership development is core practice in public administration and community development (Crosby and Bryson 2010).

13. This slogan refers to the extra amount of time each day that commuters would have if a regional transit system was in place.

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