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Partnerships and integrated responses to rural decline: The role of collective efficacy and political capital in Northwest Tasmania, Australia



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In the context of changes wrought by globalisation and subsequent neoliberal responses, studies of locally-specific institutional frameworks of governance may suggest more effective ways of responding to rural economic decline. There is no consensus as to whether collaborative forms of governance empower regions to successfully adapt to economic change and the mechanisms through which partnerships may influence the distribution of resources. In this article we examine how formalised partnerships between governments, businesses, not-for-profit and community-based organisations facilitate integrated responses to rural decline. Research on partnership governance to date has tended to focus on power from either a relational, or a strategic-relational/structuralist point of view. We draw on literature that combines these approaches to examine how policy actors are able to generate and assemble resources to address problems through place-based partnerships. Using documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews, a case study of the Cradle Coast Authority in Northwest Tasmania shows that partnerships generate networks through micro-processes that enhance collective efficacy and build political capital amongst key policy actors, which are important pre-conditions for effective rural planning and decision making and policy development to distribute resources to address rural problems.

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1. Introduction

Within non-metropolitan Australia, a dichotomy has intensified between locations with access to diverse economies and opportunities for social interaction and more remote regions where dependence on resource-based economic activity, income inequalities and a lack of transferrable skills entrench vulnerability to exogenous shocks and changes (Hugo, 2005; Tonts et al., 2012). Two out of every three Australians lived outside the five largest

cities in 1911 but only one in three did so in 2011. The population living outside the five largest cities increased from 2.8 million to 8.3 million during this period, with this growth taking place almost entirely in, or within convenient driving distance of, high-amenity coastal regions and inland provincial towns (Vamplew, 1987, pp. 26, 41; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Outside these growth regions, populations grew negatively in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia between 2001 and 2011, reflecting continuing job losses due to technological change and increases in the size and capital-intensity of extensive wheat-sheep farms in those states (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Stayner, 2005). From the mid-1970s, the provision of state support structures and services to rural communities gave way to a neoliberal policy focus on free markets, 'user pays' and 'self-help' in the allocation of resources and the relocation of infrastructure from small communities to larger population centres leading to spatially uneven economic development (Gray and Lawrence, 2001).

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Government-endorsed partnerships with non-government organisations are increasingly being used to address problems of spatially uneven economic development. Current debate regarding the role and usefulness of a partnership as a means to address rural economic decline may be informed by a more comprehensive understanding of the means by which partnerships function. In this article we use a realist governmentality approach to identify the mechanisms through which local actors in a rural context influence central government policies through place-based partnerships. We argue that dense networks that generate a shared perception of the resourcefulness of the partnership's ability to achieve its goals (collective efficacy) provide the platform for the development of the partnership's capacity to coordinate and mobilise investment in place-based assets (political capital). There is limited understanding of how the social networks generated through partnerships might influence how these assets are developed or utilised to produce value. More specifically, no research to date has examined the means by which collective efficacy may influence the allocation of resources within place-based partnerships through the formation of political capital. To evaluate this argument we examine the views of policy actors within a partnership through a case study of partnerships used to promote development in Tasmania's North-west region.

We begin by presenting a brief review of the literature on rural governance that provides a context for evaluating the effective functioning of place-based partnerships in rural planning and policy development. This will be followed by a review of the ways in which partnership actors develop collective efficacy through developing networks that build trust and improve the flow of information between actors. This collective efficacy is proposed to create political capital that actors may use to attract resources to their region and influence policy formation. We then examine propositions relating to the operation of partnerships through interviews with key actors and document analysis in our case study of the Cradle Coast Authority in Northwest Tasmania. The results are then evaluated to illustrate how the partnership is seen by its actors as developing networks and shared perceptions of efficacy that are drawn upon in the establishment of priorities and mobilisation of resources for the development of the region (political capital). In conclusion, we consider the implications of collective efficacy and political capital in partnership operation for rural planning and policy development.

2. Review of literature

In advanced liberal democracies, state pursuit of 'place-based' development approaches to utilise latent regional assets through greater involvement of the private and voluntary sectors in partnerships and networks established multiple centres of governing. The concepts of communitarianism – the promotion of community as an ideal and a focal point for social change – and community capacity-building – the development of skills and civic engagement that allows people to take responsibility for identifying and meeting their own needs – have become almost ubiquitous in policy documents relating to regional regeneration and social development (Defilippis et al., 2006; Craig, 2007). Government-endorsed partnerships with non-government organisations are used to broker agreement about the identification of priorities and joint strategic planning for investment in assets that will build competitive advantage in the context of a global economy (Beer et al., 2003; Bellamy et al., 2003; Considine, 2008; Davidson and Lockwood, 2008; Eversole and Martin, 2005). Such partnerships are given authority by the state to develop work plans and establish administrative arrangements to ensure a coordinated approach to achieving economic, social and environmental objectives within a

defined geographic area (Hudson et al., 1999). Design features generally included a memorandum of understanding between participating organisations, a senior administrative officer to co-ordinate work, a board of management, and joint work teams to complete projects (Carley et al., 2000; Wilkinson, 2005; Maguire and Truscott, 2006).

The functionality of partnerships, the assembly and acceptance of ideas, and the meanings developed through relationships and interactions may be illustrated using the concept of governmentality. Foucault defined government as a form of power, or access to resources, that is applied through calculated attempts by the state to modify and direct the conduct of others to meet particular normative objectives (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1999; Hudson, 2006). Power is not a fixed entity, 'stored' at particular institutional site through being embodied within, or exercised through the state; rather, it is a fluid, relational concept derived from interactions that take place through dense networks at innumerable 'micro' sites (Moss, 1998; Dean, 1999). Coleman's (1988) conceptualisation of social capital identified dense or 'closed' networks as the source of norms that regulate behaviours. These cohesive social networks serve to reduce obstacles to coordinated action through the establishment of norms and language built on pre-existing interactions that emphasise reciprocity and trust (Granovetter, 2005; Obstfeld, 2005). Similarly, Foucault saw the exercise of power – the ability to influence behaviour in the contexts of partnerships – as a complex set of interactions between state action and the resistance of locally-based individuals and groups (Foucault, 1994; Kendall and Wickham, 1999). As governments mobilise and coordinate the discourse of 'the governed' strategically through heterogeneous technologies of agency (contracts, citizenship, and community), monitoring, and the deployment of government expertise, new institutional settings are established that allow actors at the micro-level to negotiate, challenge and transform policy to access resources (Herbert-Cheshire, 2003; Hudson, 2006). Foucault's modern sovereign state and modern autonomous individual thus have the capacity to co-determine each other's emergence (Lemke, 2007).

Alternatively, strategic-relational views of state power emphasise the ability of a dominant state to manipulate internal power networks to suit its own interests. Through strategic reorganisation and regulation of power networks the state is able to 'short-circuit' mutually contradictory micro-policies and projects that might impact on the state's aims and objectives (Jessop, 2007). This is consistent with a structuralist conception of power, which treats power as a resource that large institutions, such as the state, possess and are able to deploy to access a greater share of resources, at the expense of those who are disempowered (Allen, 2004; Fuller and Geddes, 2008; Hudson, 2006, 2007; Lagendijk, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2002). This zero-sum game view of power posits a binary opposition between the powerful and powerless (Herbert-Cheshire, 2003). In response to an apparent antinomy between the strategic-relational approach and that of Foucauldian governmentality, Jessop conceptualises the state as an ensemble of actors and institutions that provides a point of strategic codification and institutional integration of micro-level power relations. This positions the state as a bridge between the bottom-up circulation of power and its assembly to address problems at the macro-level (Jessop, 1990, 2007).

From this perspective the state, through various mechanisms, is able to impose a neoliberal agenda for the creation of globally competitive regions which advantage holders of capital, rather than redistribute resources to local communities where latent potential for economic development exists (Hudson, 2006; Fuller and Geddes, 2008; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Woods, 2010). As neoliberal reforms have unfolded, the prominent role played by non-state

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