



# Developing a regional governance index: The institutional potential of rural regions



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## A B S T R A C T

**Keywords:**  
Rural  
Regional  
Institutions  
Governance

The problems of rural regions include globally uneven power relations and development patterns, and rapid and uncertain exogenous threats. At the same time, economic and social restructuring involving devolved planning responsibilities, privatised resource rights, and networked management approaches have undermined previous scholarly and policy assumptions about the character of rural regions. We already know that local and regional institutions play a critical role in ensuring the resilience and resourcefulness of rural regions in the face of such challenges. We do not yet understand why some rural regions are resourceful while others strain or even paralyse under conditions of inequity, complexity, uncertainty, and unpredictability. This paper seeks to identify the operational elements of effective regional governance, based on the premise that measuring and monitoring the potential for regional governance enables an assessment of the capacity of regional institutions to cope with the diversity of problems that may arise. A regional governance index is proposed. Four indicators of regional governance are identified, enabling measurement of (1) engagement in regional networks; (2) diversity and synergies across the instrument mix; (3) robustness and adaptability in instrument design; and (4) broader fiscal, administrative and democratic support. These indicators are tested using a case analysis of two rural regions in the USA and Australia. The test reveals the higher level of regional institutional potential in one of the regions, and highlights the critical function of regional network engagement and broader enabling fiscal, administrative and democratic preconditions in this region. The role of the state in organizing the conditions for these is shown to be vital. These findings are of use to particular regions concerned with enhancing their institutional performance, and can also assist government agencies and nonprofits to prioritise their investment and intervention in rural regions. Further development of systematic work in this domain needs to focus on the role and tools of the state, and other 'meta-governors', in organizing both the conditions for regional network engagement, and the broader enabling fiscal, administrative and democratic pre-conditions.

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## 1. Introduction

While recent international attention has focused on *global* processes of change, *rural regions* have come under increasing threat from rapid pressures. After decades of intense economic restructuring, productivist resource development, and demographic change, the problems of rural regions now not only include globally uneven power relations and development patterns, but also complex and uncertain problems such as climate change, biodiversity loss, unconventional resource development, land-use conflict, pandemic disease, and rapid market fluctuations. The spectre of a global food security crisis has even been raised

(Dibden et al. 2013). These problems challenge the abilities of rural regions to respond to change in traditional ways (Hulme, 2008; Woods, 2012).

This is occurring at a time when the broader rural project is part of a global experimentation in statecraft, symptomatic of the *post-Third-Way-period*. Wider shifts in ways of governing, from central top-down control to devolved, privatised and networked modes of governance have resulted in "the new normal" of "institutional blending" and "hybridity" (Lockie and Higgins, 2007; Hodge and Adams, 2013). The empirical literature on governance complexity and failure to achieve outcomes is growing (Rayner and Howlett, 2009; Lurie, 2011; Bakker, 2010).

As a reaction to these problems, the concept of "resilience" has invariably been invoked. What constitutes resilience, and how it is measured and managed, has been debated extensively in the

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international literature (e.g. Skerratt, 2013). Various scholars have expressed concern at the migration of an ecological concept (along with “systems” and “adaptation” concepts) to socio-political domains. Others have lamented its increasing use by government agencies as jargon for abrogating responsibility to rural communities and obscuring national and global responsibilities, citing uneven and “vanguard” driven results. Some have gone so far as to propose “resourcefulness” as a more progressive concept for understanding and managing socio-political relations at regional scales (MacKinnon and Driscoll Derickson, 2013). Yet, whether “resilient” or “resourceful”, at the heart of these concepts is the idea that there is something about a rural region that enables it to cope with globally uneven power and development patterns and rapid and unpredictable change.

Regional institutions – defined here as the enduring yet adaptable rules, norms and organisation of societal functioning at the regional scale – have been identified as playing a critical role in ensuring successful coping in the face of such challenges (Putnam, 1993; Peters, 2012). Yet some rural sociologists have documented an institutional void in rural regions as a result of remoteness from decision-making centres and limited local capacity (Cheshire, 2010). Rural policy scholars have also documented the persistence of singular or boutique institutional responses according to the predominant land use (e.g. forestry/mining/agriculture) (Derksen et al., 2009). And whereas rural regions were once the crucible of innovation for socio-economic and environmental policy (e.g. the Tennessee Valley Authority), rural economists have highlighted that rural institutions and the conditions of rurality (as opposed to the benefits expropriated) are these days elided in favour of other wider policy concerns (Renwick et al., 2013; also Tietz, 2012).

More recent scholarship has provided a counterpoint to the idea that rural institutions are simple, absent or excluded, and have highlighted the increasingly complex modes of governance in rural regions (Morrison, 2007; Hodge and Adams, 2013). They argue that rural regions are not suffering as much from an institutional void, as that increasingly hybrid arrangements have rendered the institutional form illusive (Morrison et al. 2012; Cheshire et al., 2014). Economic and social restructuring involving devolved planning responsibilities, privatised resource rights, and networked management approaches have created this complexity, and undermined previous scholarly and policy assumptions about the institutional character of rural regions. Put simply, rural institutions are neither absent nor simple nor excluded, they are relational, thick, contextual, and complex. Furthermore, rural regions and their communities are principal locations for a range of crucial policy issues, from climate change to food and energy security to biodiversity to ecosystem services to amenity for recreation and tourism. They deserve particular attention, because not only are they on the losing end of globally uneven power relations and development patterns, but they are also at the pointy end of climate change, biodiversity loss, and land-use conflict. The institutional resilience and resourcefulness of rural regions in the face of these global relations and exogenous threats is therefore critical to both rural and urban futures.

Yet the general conception of rural institutions – as relational, thick, contextual, and complex - has rendered regional governance (and indeed rural regions) as difficult to understand and operationalize (Jonas, 2012; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). Furthermore, while there has been some important theoretical and single case study work in this domain (e.g. Ostrom, 1990) there has been with very little systematic comparative work on how rural institutional relations effectively respond to increasing inequity, complexity and change. It is necessary to ask: *How might a relational, thick, contextual, and complex understanding of institutions and governance*

*shed light on the state and territorial politics in rural regions? What are the institutional factors affecting the potential of regional governance? And at what point do the state and other actors intervene?*

While there are a number of strands across the social sciences which deal with different aspects of regional institutions and governance, a comprehensive analytical framework for comparatively assessing the institutional potential of governance at the regional level is yet to be developed. This paper sets out to develop and apply such a framework in order to answer these questions.

The paper begins by synthesising the different strands across the social sciences in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of rural regions, regional institutions, and regional governance. Regional governance is defined as diverse but networked policy-making and implementation arrangements over time and scale, a view which is necessary because it includes both the self-organised and centrally-steered coordination of diverse institutional actors and instruments, and therefore an integrated focus on complex sets of relationships and instruments over space, level and time within a region. Drawing on broad principles in political science and sociology, and applied empirics in public administration, management, and law, the operational elements of cross-sectoral, cross-instrument, inter-temporal and cross-scalar interactions in regional governance are then isolated. The importance of regional governing capacity, regional institutional diversity, regional institutional design, and regional institutional context is highlighted.

This enables the development of a *regional governance index*, with four primary indicators and associated metrics, relating to (1) levels of engagement in regional networks; (2) levels of diversity and synergy across the instrument mix; (3) levels of robustness and ‘adaptability’ in instrument design; and (4) levels of broader fiscal, administrative, and democratic support. These indicators are tested using a comparative case analysis of two rural regions, from northeastern Australia and the midwestern United States of America (USA). Taking into account administrative, fiscal, democratic and environmental differences, application of case study data to the index is shown to explain the higher level of regional institutional potential in one of the regions, which correlates with other published work on the overall resilience or resourcefulness of these two regions. The discussion then highlights the critical function of regional network engagement and broader enabling fiscal, administrative and democratic pre-conditions in this region, and the critical role of the state in organizing the conditions for such. The paper concludes by arguing that the institutional resourcefulness of rural regions – at a time of great environmental and social change – has never been more important. Further development of systematic research in this domain needs to focus on the role and tools of the state, and other ‘metagovernors’, in organizing the conditions for regional network engagement as well as broader enabling fiscal, administrative and democratic pre-conditions. As rural regions become more complex and subject to the combined challenges and opportunities of climate change, resource-use pressures, privatisation and institutional hybridity, there is a critical need for more systematic and comparative research in this domain.

## 2. Definitions and debates about rural regions, institutions, and governance

Research on the properties and components of rural regions, institutions, and governance has generated significant results over the last few decades. There is no single all-encompassing regional governance theory however; rather there are a number of different research fields pursuing varied methodologies across the social sciences, which shed light on different aspects of regional

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