

“Reimagining Collaboration: Local and Community Economic Development Systems”

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Summary and Findings: Due to demographic, political, and economic shifts in recent years, the community, local, and regional economic development field has adjusted to a rapidly globalized economy with fluid political alliances and changing populations. Community and economic development organizations are increasingly part of a web of partnerships and arrangements among local governments, funders, financial institutions, neighborhood groups, and other partners with a diverse set of constituents (Yin 1996). This paper frames the emerging practices of community, local, and regional economic development professionals using a theoretical mixture of state capacity and institutional change. The results of our nationally administered survey of over 200 economic development professionals indicate organizations are collaborating in a variety of ways; especially through interjurisdictional cooperation, collaboration between the public sector and nonprofit organizations, and utilizing networks within and between local governments and other economic development organizations. Furthermore, we analyzed the data to gain deeper insight into the relationship between networking and collaboration among nonprofit organizations, local government, and other economic and community development organizations. Barriers to innovation include the inability to cede jurisdictional control and insufficient leadership that fosters collaboration across borders.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Collaboration has been widely discussed as an alternative economic development strategy to traditional interjurisdictional competition consisting of tax breaks and other incentives. Our survey was intended to test the hypothesis that there are some innovative collaborative practices taking place across a wide spectrum of jurisdictions across the country. We found that there is an increased awareness of collaboration, with programs such as sustainable development and partnerships with higher education, in particular. These may be specific areas of interest for policymakers to begin to make connections for collaboration that could extend into other areas. However, there are still some barriers to collaboration, including limited leadership and fear of losing jurisdictional control. These represent significant challenges to implementing innovative strategy, particularly in an era of decreasing local revenue. Policymakers must actively address long-standing resistance to working together. This may be done by encouraging collaborative activities and programs, changing funding structures to support collaborative projects, and highlighting the benefits of working together.