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Reversing the Retreat from Rural: Mobilizing Knowledge and Influencing Policy within the Rural Policy Learning Commons (RPLC)

**Author: Sean Markey, Cameron Gunton, Wayne Kelly, Marco Pagani,
& William Reimer**

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Sean Markey

Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada
spmarkey@sfu.ca

Cameron Gunton

Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada
Cameron_gunton@sfu.ca

Wayne Kelly

Brandon University
Brandon, Manitoba, Canada
Kellyw@brandonu.ca

Marco Pagani

University of Bologna
Bologna, Italy
Markpagani@gmail.com

William Reimer

Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Bill.Reimer@concordia.ca

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the efforts of a seven-year partnership project, the Rural Policy Learning Commons (RPLC), to raise the profile of rural development policy in Canada. Substantive and effective rural policy has long been a challenging prospect. Issues of distance and density, which define the rural condition, present barriers to galvanizing policy attention, understanding rural issues, and designing appropriate interventions. The RPLC project experienced several policy impact successes related to specific policy windows. The project also experienced capacity challenges—at all levels of the rural policy process—and offers insights related to complex systems and the challenges associated with seeking to elevate the role of evidence within policy processes.

Keywords: rural policy, rural development, capacity building

Inverser le recul du rural : Mobiliser les connaissances et influencer les politiques au sein de la communauté d'apprentissage des politiques rurales (CAPR)

Sean Markey

Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada
spmarkey@sfu.ca

Cameron Gunton

Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada
Cameron_gunton@sfu.ca

Wayne Kelly

Brandon University
Brandon, Manitoba, Canada
Kellyw@brandonu.ca

Marco Pagani

University of Bologna
Bologna, Italy
Markpagani@gmail.com

William Reimer

Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Bill.Reimer@concordia.ca

Résumé

Le but de cet article est d'examiner les efforts d'un projet de partenariat de sept ans, la communauté d'apprentissage des politiques rurales (CAPR), pour rehausser le profil de la politique de développement rural au Canada. Une politique rurale substantielle et efficace a longtemps été une perspective difficile. Les problèmes de distance et de densité, qui définissent la condition rurale, présentent des obstacles à la galvanisation de l'attention politique, à la compréhension des problèmes ruraux et à la conception d'interventions appropriées. Le projet CAPR a connu plusieurs succès d'impact politique liés à des fenêtres politiques spécifiques. Le projet a également rencontré des problèmes de capacité - à tous les niveaux du processus de politique rurale - et offre des informations sur les systèmes complexes et les défis associés à la recherche d'un rôle accru des données probantes dans les processus politiques.

Mots clés : politique rurale, développement rural, renforcement des capacités

1.0 Introduction

Designing and implementing policy for rural and northern regions has long been a contentious issue, particularly since the challenges are variable and complex. The remote locations, smaller populations at low density, and place-based identities of rural regions create unique policy and programmatic challenges when compared with urban centres.

The orientation of senior government policy, tilting toward neoliberalism over the past four decades, has added further strain to the existence and efficacy of rural policy. The market orientation of neoliberalism positions rural communities at a disadvantage to investment and service delivery, given the dynamics of rural (Halseth & Ryser, 2017). Rural places require high levels of policy coordination and, often, disproportionate levels of investment that market-oriented and efficiency-driven policy mechanisms often fail to recognize or accommodate.

Neoliberalism also exerts downward pressure on the capacity of governments. Again, a preference for individual-oriented and market-based policy has viewed bureaucratic entities as inefficient, or unnecessary, when compared with the supposed dynamism of the private sector (Harvey, 2005; Young et al., 2020). The result of this reduced capacity within governments, despite more recent re-building of capacity and government investment (in Canada), manifests as a limited ability to engage rural communities and regions in policy processes and a loss of general and place-based (i.e., located within rural regions) rural knowledge within the largely urban-centred policy arena (Halseth et al., 2019).

The past three decades of relative neglect and reduced policy capacity have contributed to an erosion of infrastructure and service delivery (in both boom and bust settings) in rural regions (Breen & Markey, 2019; Infrastructure Canada, 2019). Policy and investment gaps have also left rural communities and regions with reduced capacity to respond to the vagaries of environmental, social, and economic change (Lemmen et al., 2008). Too often, the pressing demands of metropolitan places mean the unique circumstances of rural and northern places are overlooked or misunderstood by urban-based policy decision-makers. Rural place-based identities may increase social cohesion, but they are often perceived as parochial and oppositional. As a result, policy decision-makers are often unable to recognize the underutilized assets and capacity embedded within rural and northern places (Douglas, 2005; Markey et al., 2012).

While the rural portfolio in Canada has seen a partial resurgence at the federal and various provincial government levels in recent years, it is best described as existing in a state of incoherence (Krawchenko et al., (in press); Markey et al., 2019). There is a recognized need to invest in rural regions, owing to a variety of factors associated with the erosion of rural infrastructure, the continued economic importance of rural regions to the economic vitality of the country, the (moral and legal) need to address reconciliation, and the need to prepare for the impacts of climate change, yet the national level and most provinces lack any kind of comprehensive rural vision or integrated capacity that would indicate substantive prioritization of rural issues (Quebec and Nunavut serve as notable exceptions). The result is a largely sectoral and stuttered approach to rural attention and investment that ultimately fails to authentically engage rural citizens, or commit to a coordinated, long-term plan to facilitate renewed rural development (Krawchenko et al., in press). The loss of the federal Rural Secretariat in 2013 stands as a

significant marker in the degradation of rural policy coordination in Canada (Lauzon et al., 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the experience of the seven-year Rural Policy Learning Commons (RPLC) project as it sought to enhance and influence rural policy knowledge in Canada, 2014-2021. The goals of the project were to (1) increase Canadian prosperity by identifying and analyzing policy options relevant to rural and northern places; (2) evaluate these options in the context of national and international policy innovations; and (3) build leadership capacity among rural and northern researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners. It is important to note that RPLC was not a research project per se. Rather, it was our collective purpose to connect rural researchers with each other and with policy actors (to leverage existing research knowledge), conduct comparative studies of rural policies from other jurisdictions, and seek to build the capacity of the rural policy sub-system within Canada. Given the extended timeline of the project and the process and engagement parameters of the funding provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Partnership Program, it serves as an interesting case study related to the complex relationship between knowledge production, mobilization, and policy development. While the context of the project relates to comparative rural development policy, it is our hope that the findings hold relevance and contribute to the literature and practice for understanding complex rural policy environments in Canada and internationally. At a more general level, we also seek to contribute to the call for research and case examples related to the impact of high quality, evidence-based research on policy processes (Oliver & Boaz, 2019; Evans & Cvitanovic, 2018; Cvitanovic et al., 2016).

In the following sections, we introduce the rural policy context and define “rural.” We then provide more details of the project and outline the methodology for the paper. Next, we present findings, drawn from the project and discuss their relevance to policy influence. In the final section, we discuss a series of themes that may be useful to future research networks.

2.0 Literature: Situating Rural in Policy and Policy Change

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of policy, and as Evans and Cvitanovic (2018) note, the term is used as a catch-all for a range of activities and processes. Institutional action-oriented definitions of policy tend to focus on the decisions of governments and what they “do or do not do” in order to ensure “the social order—the coordination of individuals, groups, and institutions within reasonably stable normative systems—so that basic needs can be met, groups, crises managed, and the future survival of the society enhanced” (Dye, 1987, p. 10). Other definitions focus on process and expand the parameters of policy-making into the realm of governance and the participation of other non-governmental actors (Evans & Cvitanovic 2018). Regardless of the definitional emphasis being placed on “policy”, there is recognition that it matters. As Kerr and Seymour (2010) state:

It is not the size of the population, the level of the natural resources or the geographic location of a country that determines its long-run economic performance. Rather, it is primarily the quality of a country’s institutions and policies that determine, over time, its economic fortunes (Kerr & Seymour, 2010, p. 5).

Defining rural is a critical and complex part of understanding rural policy processes. It is also, as noted, part of what vexes policy-makers in seeking to design contextually appropriate policy and programmatic interventions. Researchers have noted how the diversity of rurality produces challenges for public policy, leading to the often-repeated phrase in Canadian rural policy discourse attributed to Canadian rural researcher Ray Bollman that, “if you have seen one rural community, you have seen one rural community” (as cited in Markey et al., 2015, p. 2). There exists tremendous rural diversity within regions, and even greater cultural, economic, and environmental diversity between regions in a nation as geographically vast as Canada.

From a policy perspective, rural boundaries matter in terms of the implications associated with population levels and defining jurisdictional responsibilities. Moving beyond population and density formulas, du Plessis et al. (2002) present the concept of ‘degrees of rurality,’ which nicely accommodates various interpretations of rural and allows for community identification as rural, even though certain communities may exceed population, distance, or density parameters. The RPLC project aligned itself with the approach of du Plessis et al. (2002; 2004) in that the definitional framework used should be selected based on a research topic, approach, and purpose. This framing of rural offered definitional flexibility that allowed the project to capture more of the rich diversity and variability of the rural condition and accommodate divergent rural research interests.

Within the current era of policy incoherence, there are opportunities to influence policy direction and a need to support efforts, however lacking in strategic intent, to re-invest in rural places. This is the policy environment that RPLC found itself within. Thankfully, there is extensive literature on understanding the process of policy change and how research efforts, concerning the production of evidence, may seek to garner influence within the policy process.

2.1 Understanding Policy Change

Policy change is a widely researched topic in a number of fields. The literature spans a broad range of issues encompassing both theoretical and practical considerations. As Capano and Howlett (2020) outline, the multifaceted nature of policy-making means that there is no universally recognized methodology for policy analysis. Rather, there are a range of theories and methodological techniques drawn from diverse fields. The advantage of this diversity is that there is the potential for contextually informed problem-solving (an important trend in policy studies) while also complicating theoretical development.

There are a variety of theories associated with understanding both the processes and outcomes of policy change that are well documented in other sources (Cerna, 2013). An influential theory of policy change that is particularly relevant to our analysis of the RPLC project is the policy window, based within the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) developed by Kingdon (1995). The model conceptualizes policy formation and change as the result of the convergence of three distinct “streams”: (1) the existence and recognition of a policy problem, (2) an appropriate political setting and institutional process to address the problem, and (3) policy proposals to deal with the problem. New policy formation occurs when the three streams converge in order to establish a sufficient rationale for policy action—i.e., the creation of a window of opportunity for policy action (Béland, & Howlett, 2016). We will draw upon the policy window concept in our review of RPLC policy influence below.

Policy change may be described in terms of the type of change, the dynamics of change, and the output. The type of change can be classified, or measured, as being incremental or radical (Peters et al., 2018). The dynamics may be classified as evolutionary or revolutionary (Capano & Howlett, 2009), and the output of the policy change can be classified as reversible or irreversible. Capano and Woo (2018) complement these considerations of policy change by introducing the concept of ‘policy robustness,’ or, “the capability of policies to maintain functionality and effectiveness in policy goal attainment,” (p. 422) and how to design such considerations into institutions and systems. Important for our purposes in this paper, Capano and Woo’s 2018 paper includes considerations of policy capacity, both political and technical, to sustain and adapt policy processes over time and when faced with complexity and uncertainty. Policy capacity is an important theme (and overall goal) associated with the RPLC project.

Bridging from the theoretical dimensions of policy change to understanding specific policy systems involves the many forms of policy analysis. For example, Radin and Weimer (2018) describe five types of analyses that are common practice for policy analysts. The first type is ‘policy process research’, in which the analyst examines a wide array of policies developed by different governmental organizations and focuses on how processes led to outcomes. ‘Policy analysis method’ is a rational, systematic approach in which various policy alternatives are designed and evaluated based on their ability to achieve goals. ‘Policy-relevant research’ involves using information and knowledge that is generalized, but related to the topic under consideration, to inform policy development for a specific problem. Policy research is quite a narrow approach that involves using context-specific empirical evidence to inform policies. And, ‘Policy transfer’ is the most commonly employed method for policy analysis and consists of modifying successful policy designs and applying them elsewhere. While all of these analysis methods possess slightly different characteristics, they all share a similar overarching goal: to improve future policy designs through better policy outputs (which achieve desired goals and objectives) and through better processes (that lead to desired outputs) (Radin & Weimer, 2018).

Within the policy analysis literature, we infer that the role of evidence in supporting policy change is weak (Oliver & Cairney, 2019; Weeden & Gibson, in press). There are sophisticated frameworks for describing the policy process and the relevant variables, but cultural, ideological, and accessibility issues inhibit the productive mobilization of knowledge into policy processes and action. The RPLC project was designed to address some of the traditional barriers to this disjuncture through effective knowledge mobilization and facilitating connections among researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners. A key strategy for knowledge mobilization was the use of comparative policy analysis (e.g., Vittuari et al., 2020). This approach was augmented by advice in the literature associated with the dynamics of policy influence and the role of evidence in policy decision-making. These goals were facilitated by the nature of the partnership grant program that emphasized interaction and relationship-building to build a more durable legacy of policy influence. Taken together, these studies have shown “how public policy is, above all, a practical discipline whose explicit purpose is to advise policy-makers on how best to address public problems” (Capano & Howlett, 2020, p. 4), which again provides suitable alignment with the overall objectives of the RPLC project within the challenging context of seeking to build better connections between the role of evidence and policy influence.

2.2 Role of Evidence and Policy Influence

As Boswell and Smith (2019) illustrate, there is a range of theories and models seeking to describe and analyze the relationship between research knowledge and policy development. Overall, they summarize that much of the work fails to capture the complexity of the interplay between research and policy.

The translation of research knowledge into policy-relevant evidence is beset with multiple barriers associated with academic capacity, institutional norms, and the politicization of knowledge. Much like policy, there is no strong consensus on what counts as good evidence (Oliver & Cairney, 2019). Academics are particularly prone to a lack of policy awareness and capacity, assuming if evidence exists, it will be found and used. There are also challenges associated with assumptions about the policy process itself, for example, that it moves in a rational, linear fashion – and that the appropriate capacity exists at the policy level to understand and apply the evidence generated.

Research conducted by Weeden (2019) identifies five challenges associated with seeking to effectively use, integrate research as evidence in support of policy processes, including (1) barriers to accessing research evidence, (2) the lack of effective knowledge translation tools and capacity; (3) a common misalignment of academic research with policy needs; (4) the mismatch between the slow research cycle versus fast policy cycle needs; and (5) a lack of political will to implement research findings (and the politicization of the policy process). Overall, these findings align with research in portfolios beyond rural policy, which have shown that efforts to incorporate more and better evidence in the policy process have not substantively altered the dynamics of the traditional policy cycle (Newman, 2017; Cvitanovic et al., 2016). There is a need to develop better clarity and consistency about what constitutes evidence when it is needed, and to support relationships that facilitate necessary interactions that may lead to policy influence (Deloly et al., 2021). Sohn (2018) supports a focus on the relational dynamics of policy-making, noting that “evidence-informed policy-making requires framing and persuasion strategies, and an investment of time to form alliances and identify the most important venue” (p. 2). As mentioned above, the importance of relationship-building and seeking divergent approaches to mobilize knowledge underscored the strategic objectives and initiatives of the RPLC project.

3.0 RPLC Project and Study Methods

RPLC was a seven-year SSHRC partnership grant 2014–2021. The project brought together thirty-four international institutional partners (universities and research centres) and forty-six applicants, structurally encompassing the mandate of the partnership granting program by connecting rural policy researchers with the aim of sharing, comparing, and mobilizing knowledge related to rural development policy.

The project was organized into a series of topic networks (e.g., rural renewable energy, rural governance, migration, natural resource development, transformation in Indigenous communities, and rural infrastructure). In addition, the project included two cross-cutting organizational networks (rural research centres network and the RPLC-CRRF alliance—Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, a non-profit association dedicated to the, “revitalization and sustainability of rural Canada”), and three service functions specifically designed to facilitate the

partnership and knowledge mobilization (KM) functions of the project (KM and digital services, research exchange, and distance learning and rural institutes).

The task of rural policy is inherently well aligned with adopting a partnership approach for several reasons. First, research and KM regarding rural and northern conditions and policy options face challenges from the three main characteristics of its object of focus: long distance, low density, and multiple identities. Gathering evidence about widely dispersed places—in sufficient quantities to meet reliability and validity standards—is both costly and time-consuming. By facilitating the exchange of knowledge among partners, the opportunities for systematic comparison, critical assessments, and serendipitous discoveries increase significantly. In addition, the relative strengths of each partner can be made available to the others, thereby avoiding duplication of skills and services within each region.

Second, rural and northern research is highly vulnerable to government cuts. Programs and projects that are multi-disciplinary in nature, or are less visible in the institutional or public context, are often the first to be dismantled or face challenges of influence within siloed bureaucratic structures. Partnership arrangements are better able to resist these tendencies by increasing the visibility and power of interdisciplinary networks (Oliver & Faul, 2018).

Third, the partnership approach was strategic, given the existing relationships of the partner organizations. The rural research community in Canada is not large, and many applicants hold prior histories of working collaboratively. The partnership and network design of the project underscores the main pathways through which the project sought policy influence. Network formation is a well-known mechanism for engaging with policy systems (Howlett et al., 2020). This collective approach is important in rural contexts, given the expansiveness of rural space (and challenges of access) and the data gaps that exist in rural settings. Working collaboratively helps to overcome some of the research and engagement challenges associated with rurality.

3.1 Methods

The RPLC project developed the following policy impact framework (see Table 1), which we provide here for comparative interest for other studies and to illustrate the indicators selected for measurement and the comprehensive approach to project evaluation. Guided by this framework, we employed three methods to produce the data for this paper. First, we conducted a summative evaluation of project outputs according to the policy influence framework. Second, we conducted a content analysis of all project reports, coding specifically for themes related to policy engagement and impact as outlined in the framework. Third, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 RPLC participants, inclusive of academic and policy-actor partners, to assess their thoughts on the policy impact of the project. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, were digitally recorded, and transcribed and coded using latent and manifest content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We adopted a deductive approach based on patterns that were identified in the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). These themes were then reviewed by the evaluation committee.

Table 1. *RPLC Policy Impact Framework*

	Strategic objective	Areas of focus	Outputs & outcomes
Policy Impact of RPLC	<i>Increase opportunities to exchange insights</i>	Create accessible spaces that inspire conversation and action	RPLC members use virtual and physical spaces to exchange insights, inspiring new thinking and products/projects
	<i>Add to existing research knowledge</i>	Assess state of knowledge (address gaps and promote comparative analysis)	RPLC teams establish understanding of current state of research (i.e., database, literature reviews) RPLC teams discuss and establish research priorities and areas of key interest New research is published that is focused on priority areas and gaps Expansion of comparative policy
	<i>Increase the mobilization of knowledge</i>	Share new and existing research knowledge that is accessible and engaging to a variety of audiences	The RPLC produces and shares information on a variety of platforms while creating a strong social media presence A variety of audiences interact and engage with RPLC KM platforms and materials Materials shared across RPLC network for comparative policy analysis Decision-makers have access to and engage with up-to-date rural research outputs
	<i>Strengthen networks and institutional capacities</i>	Facilitate connections	The RPLC reaches out to and builds relationships with rural institutions (departments, research centres, other organizations) Rural networks and institutions are well connected to one another and regularly communicate and collaborate to achieve common goals

4.0 Findings: Pathways to Policy Impact

Our findings are organized into the key policy impact categories that helped to guide our decision-making and budget allocation within the RPLC project. We then reflect on the efficacy of the initiatives and outline some key challenges associated with the partnership model in the discussion.

4.1 Engagement

Facilitating engagement served as the core mandate of the RPLC project. The project supported a variety of engagement activities, including 96 policy webinars with 2,734 participants, conference support for rural policy events nationally and internationally for 101 students, as well as faculty and student research exchanges between the 23 participating universities. In addition to these convening activities, the topic networks also served as a neutral, ongoing space for researchers, community actors, and policy-makers to work collaboratively on different issues. Numerous participants reflected that an impactful feature of RPLC was its ability to support interaction and exchange among researchers and policy actors at various events and forums, as noted by the following participants:

I know that if there was a policy impact, it was probably related to social networks more than it was a policy change if that makes sense. It would be difficult to measure, but I would feel very confident saying that the social networks between policy-makers and academics working in rural policy in Canada are more robust than they were a pre-RPLC. I say that with confidence. (participant 9, personal communication, 2021).

I think a reasonable goal of RPLC which in my opinion, I think they did do is just try to bring people in the same room and try to establish those connections, where, if there is some sort of policy idea that might come to fruition in six months or a year they have those relationships that they can call or email folks and just see what the deal is. I think that's really the first step, rather than coldly emailing a briefing note and hoping that someone takes that and incorporates that into a policy. I think there's room for both, don't misinterpret me, but I think the biggest thing is building common language and understanding and building those relationships and from where I'm sitting and how I've been engaged, I've seen those types of conversations that have taken place. (participant 4, personal communication, 2021).

Participants also noted that SSHRC deserves credit for supporting engagement funding to such a large extent. This was a topic of continual amazement on the part of many of our international research collaborators. As one participant noted,

I think one of the biggest benefits of RPLC was the financial resources to facilitate the process. Because in the last 10 to 15 years, particularly in the Canadian landscape, we do not have process funding anymore, we have project funding. So, we have funding to deliver a set of objectives and activities. We don't have funding to invest in relationship building and we don't have funding to invest in nurturing of relationships. And that's something incredibly unique that RPLC brought to the table. (participant 3, personal communication, 2021).

4.2 Comparative Research Knowledge

The comparative policy approach adopted by the RPLC network created a robust platform for learning and policy engagement. The decision of the project to focus

efforts on ‘value added’ research, instead of the production of new primary research, provided resources to support modes of exchange and interaction which facilitated comparative policy discussions (although, as we will see below, it was a challenging transition in focus for the research community). The value of the comparative policy approach was noted by RPLC members:

I think [the comparative policy] has been great because policy actors love to know what's happened in other jurisdictions, they're always a little bit afraid of being the first to do something. And if you have evidence and examples from other jurisdictions, it's incredibly powerful. And aside from that, it's just great to learn from other places that have been experiencing either the same thing, or modifications on the same challenges or struggles or problems that you're trying to solve. (participant 5, personal communication, 2021).

These sentiments are supported by specific policy actors associated with various project events:

There is value to just broadening the horizons of a bunch of people in rural development and rural policy on what's possible out there. Open people up to looking a bit more broadly than just what's done in their area. Open their minds to the idea that there might be someone, somewhere on the other side of the world doing something really interesting so maybe we should have a look around every now and then when we're doing our work. (participant 11, personal communication, 2021).

Yes, comparative policy work has been very useful, because we are always looking to see what is being done in other jurisdictions, what new ideas are out there. What's worked and what hasn't worked and try to steal from the places that have been successful. Comparing policies and programs and interventions is very useful and that's something that, as government, we're always looking at. (participant 12, personal communication, 2021).

There are clear capacity gains associated with the knowledge and skills necessary to conduct robust comparative policy analysis. The networks and collaboration opportunities were critical to the research, policy, and KM goals. Specific outcomes included initiatives such as conferences, workshops, consultation requests, student exchanges, and numerous comparative policy studies and papers. A significant academic output of the comparative policy approach was the publication of the *Handbook of Comparative Rural Policy* (Vittuari et al., 2020).

4.3 Knowledge Mobilization

RPLC sought to raise the profile of rural issues across the country by increasing the diversity and availability of KM products and activities. This included publicizing existing research, producing policy briefs, funding KM initiatives, hosting webinars, acting as witnesses and advisors for government committees, supporting podcasts, and designing a coordinated social media campaign. The scale of the network, the multiple dimensions of engagement and KM initiatives helped to facilitate attention towards rural Canada. As noted by one RPLC member:

RPLC sent a very strong message that rural was important. It was an incredibly large investment, a public fund, into rural issues and, in many instances, it actually turned the tide in terms of the retreat from rural that we were seeing started in the 1990s; whether it was funding retreat of government, whether it was closing of the rural Secretariat with discontinuing of the Statistics Canada branch or division on rural data. This was an incredible investment in rural. And that really put rural and small town back on the agenda, it gave us a justification. (participant 3, personal communication, 2021).

There are a variety of policy-relevant lessons associated with the project's KM activities. First, there is inherent, passive value in producing the materials and seeking to share the information through a variety of mediums. In addition to the 96 webinars, RPLC supported the Rural Routes podcast to develop 46 episodes during the project and engaged 25 students to create policy, research, and video briefs which were shared through websites, social media, and newsletters. The specific policy impact of this passive activity is difficult to measure from an attribution perspective, but we received positive feedback on a variety of initiatives. For example, the dedication and allocation of resources to support webinar production held value for certain participants and policy actors:

I really liked the webinars as a way for me, as someone in the policy-making side of things to just learn more and even make some connections with a wide variety of areas. The broad nature of those worked really well for me working in a small office, where we have to be very generalist. (participant 11, personal communication, 2021).

Second, a more direct impact is the extent to which the KM activities connected several policy actors, community members, and analysts to content experts:

But one of the comments I keep hearing from government is most government policy actors aren't looking for policy briefs, they're looking for content experts. And what's more important is knowing who the content expert is and how to connect to them when that policy window actually opens. Because when the window opens, policy actors and government often are not trying to find policy briefs, they're trying to find the person who has the content expertise to pass that along. And so, the generation of these policy briefs is important. We can catalog them, they need to be searchable and easily found so that when that policy window does open, we can mobilize them. (participant 3, personal communication. 2021)

In general, I think that what the RPLC did was to allow voices of people to be amplified in the policy process. In other words, people who would not have otherwise access to or influence on policy were able to do so because RPLC created a connection between them and policy-makers. (participant 19, personal communication, 2021).

Participants tended to assume that researchers were responsible for initiating and maintaining KM. This included expecting them to “translate” research discourse to policy and community language and concerns. Unfortunately, researchers are often

ill-equipped, untrained, and institutionally embedded in ways that reduce their capacity for such activities (Reimer, 2014).

A noted challenge of the policy process is being able to find quality information that may be particularly useful to policy decision-makers at critical policy windows. This requires researchers to be more proactive in their communications, outreach, and relationship-building with policy actors (in advance) in order to have the necessary foundation of relationship and research that is packaged in the appropriate format for the appropriate time, as noted by these participants:

The other aspect is to highlight that simply having a policy brief on your website doesn't necessarily help out because a lot of that is also relational. So, are you, as an academic or a researcher, making very intentional steps to engage with policy actors? Let them know the information is valuable when an issue comes up, let them know that you know a whole bunch about it and can save them a whole lot of research work and digging? So, simply having the policy brief is a very passive act until someone stumbles upon it and really needs it, because it's a political priority. But the responsibility, also, is to actually step up your own engagement work. (participant 5, personal communication, 2021).

We're short of good policy advice and we're short of timely policy advice. There's lots of material out there and it's hard to get noticed. (participant 7, personal communication, 2021).

A second set of challenges associated with generating policy impacts includes the dynamics and metrics associated with academic promotion. KM (beyond academic article publications) and policy engagement activities are not universally valued across different academic institutions and advancement norms. This structural barrier was in many ways responsible for some of the challenges experienced during the initial stages of the project—since participants viewed their participation in the project as a research opportunity, rather than fully comprehending the goals of the project regarding the mobilization of existing research knowledge and building connections among researchers, policy-makers, and communities. Despite the increasing levels of value placed on 'engaged research' within Canadian academic institutions, it is still an emergent phenomenon.

4.4 Networks and Institutional Capacity

The network approach of RPLC produced several ebbs and flows over the course of the seven-year project. This is to be expected over such a long period, as research interests shift, network membership changes over time, and individual participants engage with the project with varying levels of energy. However, the project was designed to accommodate these changes and managed to realize several significant collaboratively-oriented successes. Two examples include the creation of the Aashukan Declaration with the support of the Indigenous Transformations network (Aashukan means bridge in eastern Cree). RPLC provided funding to support the convening of international Indigenous leaders with the goal of creating a new conversation that reconciles the development and the protection of Indigenous culture and lands. The event produced the Aashukan Declaration:

I would think back to the Aashukan Exchange; this was the international exchange that we organized back in 2017 with financial assistance from all the teams. We brought 20 Indigenous leaders from different countries up to James Bay in Northern Quebec for a three-day exchange with local community members and then tied that into the International Association of Impact Assessment conference. It was also funded by the board of directors of the IAIA, as well as a lot of different private and public partners, as well as the Hydro Quebec organization. We could point to the fact that out of that three-day exchange, we came up with a declaration on indigenous rights, the Aashukan Declaration (<https://aashukandotcom.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/the-aashukan-declaration.pdf>) which was then presented to the board of directors of IAIA and to the conference itself at a special session on the first day of the conference. It was then taken up by the board of directors and framed in the head office of the IAIA. (participant 20, personal communication, 2021).

A second example concerns the rapid mobilization of researchers and resources surrounding the rural impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The RPLC-CRRF Alliance network quickly mobilized researchers from across the country to produce a series of Rural Insight papers associated with different dimensions of the pandemic (e.g., economic impacts, mental health, the digital divide, shovel-worthy recovery, rural health impacts), totalling 19 briefs. In addition to the posting of the material, the network also conducted a survey of rural Canadians and conducted a coordinated policy-outreach campaign to promote the research materials, culminating in the convening of several roundtable discussions with policy actors in multiple provinces (see: <http://crrf.ca/covid19/>).

5.0 Discussion

The RPLC project sought to mobilize and promote the considerable amount of rural research in Canada and connect that work and the people who generated it with policy actors, international colleagues, and community actors. The project mobilized and generated a massive volume of research information over the course of seven years. This production and organization of policy-relevant research provided a consistent gateway for community organizations and policy actors to access information (and in a variety of formats). The project was mindful from its inception that the existence of research information does not in any way guarantee policy influence or result in better policy decisions (Evans & Cvitanovic, 2018).

The project was designed with two features to help overcome the evidence-to-policy barriers. First, it adopted a comparative policy focus to help facilitate policy transfer (Howlett, M., & Mukherjee, 2018). This proved to be a powerful point of interest to policy-makers (in addition to informing the research community of different contexts, methods, and forms of policy engagement). As noted above, policy actors appreciated seeing the application of resources to support rural development in different contexts. Being able to point to other examples also helped to alleviate concerns regarding the efficacy of different policy interventions. Policy actors are generally more comfortable going second rather than being first with initiatives. In fact, one participant noted that the project could have gone much further to explore

other relevant (and culturally different) jurisdictions to expand the comparative scope of the project:

I think we've done our work with fairly traditional comparators. We haven't done them with non-traditional comparators, so we don't have very many comparisons with Asia, for example. We've ignored Kazakhstan, no Mongolia, and no Siberia. We like to focus on places we want to go visit. So, everybody wants to go to Ireland, nobody wants to go to Siberia. And so, our research has been focusing on areas that aren't always as much like us as we think they are. Our comparators have to have really cold weather, they have to have lots of dark winters, they have to be really rural and isolated. And so, when I hear and see people writing and saying, “lessons from rural Ireland.” Rural Ireland is like 45 minutes from downtown Dublin, for crying out loud. I'm not talking about rural northern Saskatchewan, where you're five and a half hours away from Saskatoon or the highlands of Vietnam, where you're, again, three and a half hours into the mountains from the closest town of 1000 or 10,000 people. So, I think we pick our comparators to suit our own cultural backgrounds and interests and we haven't really looked for real partners that would, that might revolutionize what we do. (participant 7, personal communication, 2021).

Second, the convening functions of the project were important for connecting the rural research community and establishing relationships with different policy actors (Sohn, 2018). The project nevertheless encountered a variety of capacity barriers associated with this strategy. The institutional expectations on academics, in many ways, discourages relationship-building, particularly external to the academic community. Beyond delivering papers in traditional conference forms, the metrics for advancement do not adequately incorporate KM and policy outreach. Similarly, on the government side, capacity limitations related to staff numbers, expertise, and budgetary limitations on networking place downward pressure on the ability to establish relationships outside of the bureaucracy.

Despite these limitations, the availability of information, the ability to quickly mobilize the research community, and the large number of policy-actor relationships allowed the project to engage with and respond to a number of policy windows (including Canadian senate procedures on the state of rural infrastructure; the design of rural appropriate broadband policy, programs; rural impacts and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as mentioned; Indigenous engagement on major project impact assessment as mentioned; the rural immigrant experience; and others). The resources of the project were critical for mobilizing responses quickly to meet policy demands—and helped to raise the profile of rural more generally (Storch & Winkel, 2013).

The deficit of rural policy attention served as one of the guiding motivations for the project. As one participant noted, “There is no audience for rural policy in Ottawa. You can keep writing rural policy until you're blue in the face, but nobody wants to hear about it (7).” Through its direct engagement with policy actors, efforts to facilitate researcher, policy actor, and community interactions and relationships, RPLC sought to raise the profile of rural and seek out policy interest. The significance of the investment in RPLC to support rural was noted by participants:

RPLC sent a very strong message that rural was important. It was an incredibly large investment, a public fund, into rural issues and, in many instances, it actually turned the tide in terms of the retreat from rural that we were seeing started in the 1990s; whether it was funding retreat of government, whether it was closing of the rural Secretariat, with discontinuing of the Statistics Canada branch or division on rural data. This was an incredible investment in rural. And that really put rural and small town back on the agenda; it gave us a justification. (participant 3, personal communication, 2021).

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the project, and a lesson for other large partnership initiatives, concerns finding the right balance between breadth and depth. The project adopted a distributed leadership model as a governance regime to manage the project and distribute resources. This helped to facilitate broad engagement but also diffused resources and attention into arguably too many different directions. Challenges of the approach included difficulties with coordination and increased project complexity that inhibited cohesion and limited participant (and external actor) knowledge about the project whole. Numerous participants also commented on how the diffusion of networks within the project fractured the budget into pieces that were too small to support substantive work.

RPLC structural challenges underscore how, at an institutional level, off-loading attention for rural policy to a short-term academic network is insufficient, despite the ongoing capacity of the CRRF network. At the time of writing, Canada maintains a federal ministerial role for rural economic development. We would argue, however, that re-instating a rural secretariate office, that may offer durability beyond the shifting priorities of Ministry portfolios (and with greater institutional capacity), would be an asset for rural development in Canada. Such an office may then also help to coordinate the various provincial and territorial government rural units, offering significant potential for true policy coordination so critical to the enterprise of rural development. The complexity of rural futures demands a commensurate policy response.

As we continue to sift through project results and metrics and seek to maintain the many relationships of our collective experience, we recognize that the greatest legacy of RPLC is likely associated with the capacity-building of faculty and students engaged throughout the seven-year project. Capacity is a critical factor in ensuring policy robustness and the ability to sustain policy attention. Fortunately, this accomplishment has been sustained by the project's collaboration with the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (<http://crrf.ca>). All RPLC participants were engaged in a critical discourse related to the relationship between research, knowledge mobilization, and the policy process. Coinciding with efforts within higher education to ensure the relevance and engagement of research activities, there is now a strong expectation and corresponding skill set to ensure that research work achieves relevance beyond traditional academic outputs. Through student participation and training, RPLC participants relay a confidence that the project has built capacity that will benefit the rural policy process for the next generation.

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