

Preparing for the Century of the Region

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Regional challenges, both opportunities and threats, have exploded in the 1990s; regional cooperation is breaking out everywhere. More regional initiatives have been launched and more varieties of regional organizations have been created in the last decade of this century than in the first nine. Every indicator suggests that the next century will be the century of the region. Regions will be the basic building blocks of the global economy; and our ability to cooperate regionally will determine our ability to compete globally. Regional collaboration will have a significant influence on the quality of life in each neighborhood and jurisdiction across the country.

As John Gardner, who has had an extraordinary career in building community, through Common Cause, the Independent Sector, and the National Civic League, so wisely opines: "To think intelligently of the future is to think regionally." We would like to advance four suggestions for so thinking.

First, we need an agenda, a National Regional Agenda, formulated by all regional organizations and interests—at national, state and local levels—and presenting the priority common, national initiatives for addressing tough regional challenges. Second, we need a strategy, an annual regional action plan, which identifies specific actions, responsibilities, and time frames for carry-

ing out the agenda priorities on a year-to-year basis. Third, we need a vehicle, an alliance for the regional community, to foster cooperation among regional organizations and interests, including hosting the annual regional summits and staffing the working groups that guide the pursuit of the National Regional Agenda and action plan. Fourth, we need a call, by the president and the nation's governors, to launch a nonpartisan civic self-examination in the metropolitan areas of this country, to prepare each of our regions for the 21st century.

Pursued together, these four suggestions could help assure that priority regional initiatives receive the collective consideration and clout necessary to prepare us for the century of the region.

This article provides background on the state of the regional community and the skeleton for a National Regional Agenda and action plan, an alliance of the regional community, and the civic self-examination of regions. The ideas advanced in this article are not definitive, but are intended to stimulate discussion at the upcoming Regional Summit and among regionalists across the country. As such, these suggestions are offered as points of departure—not prescriptions—for considering appropriate processes and mechanisms for meeting the challenges to the regional community.

Challenges for the Regional Community

Regional consciousness has been converted into collective action in the 1990s. Almost all major local challenges—both those offering opportunities and those posing threats—cut across neighboring jurisdictions and sometimes transcend state boundaries. For some time, it has been recognized that these challenges require regional strategies to be addressed effectively. What has changed in recent years is the growing commitment to make regions work more effectively and equitably. Elected officials, business leaders, and other community leaders and citizens have gotten the message; cooperate to create viable communities that can compete in the global economy. Foundations are investing, sometimes heavily, in the futures of their emerging regional communities. State and federal governments are financing regional partnerships, requiring regional strategic planning processes, and even offering incentives to address cross-cutting challenges regionally. New approaches to regional cooperation are being explored by the President's Council on Sustainable Development, the Vice President, various members of Congress, the governors of various states, the National Academy of Public Administration, the Brookings Institution, and others.

As a result, there has been a matching explosion of regional organizations to design the collaborative strategies for addressing common challenges and create the partnerships for guiding them into implementation. Three decades ago, regional councils were often the only regional organizations; they were conducting area wide functional planning for various federal aid programs and reviewing proposed federally-supported projects for their consistency with these plans, at times in hostile environments.

Now, the numbers and varieties of regional organizations in some areas exceed what can be counted on one's fingers and toes. In addition to regional councils, they range from single- and multiple-purpose public authorities to regional chambers of commerce and growth associations, college/university regional studies institutes, regional civic organizations, multi-sector regional leadership forums, and a vast array of special-function organizations to address regional economic, social, and physical needs. In addition, new interests in fostering regional cooperation are emerging in other community organizations, and among civic leaders and citizens. Also, new partnerships are being formed by business leaders and local officials to address long-standing problems that have impeded the economic development and social viability of their regions.

The next generation of regional challenges are going to be even tougher, such as shaping balanced growth, dealing with racial tensions and overcoming intercommunity inequities, and promoting sustainable economic development and environmental quality. To address them effectively, community leaders and citizens will need to be more active advocates for regional partnerships to meet their common concerns. State and federal agencies and national foundations and associations will need to become more effective partners with regional organizations, offering many more "carrots" and even a few "sticks" to prod cooperative action. Elected officials at all levels will be called upon especially to provide regional leadership, to lead the "parades" being formed by community leaders and citizens to address cross-cutting challenges.

Most importantly, regional councils and their sister regional organizations, which historically have provided the brains and backbone for addressing regional chal-

lenges, will need to “ratchet up” their capabilities, capacities, and courage to address them. Collectively, regional organizations will need to provide the critical connections in the regional decision-making network required to address the tough issues confronting the regional community. The time for regional organizations is now; *carpe diem!*

A National Regional Agenda and Action Plan

Building a National Regional Agenda enables us to enter the next century drawn together by consensus initiatives, not driven apart by divisive crises. Such an agenda needs to be intergovernmental and intersectoral, tying together the national, state, and local initiatives needed to provide the collective capacity to address tough regional challenges.

For example, federal and state governments, along with national foundations and associations, could provide the matched set of tools and incentives—a “regional toolbox”—required to foster regional cooperation. Federal and state government initiatives could include providing funding and enabling legislation, issuing presidential or gubernatorial executive orders, proposing interstate compacts and agreements, and offering other initiatives for regional cooperation. National foundation initiatives could include providing seed monies to facilitate regional collaboration, innovation, and testing. National association initiatives could include developing common support systems such as a national regional clearinghouse or webpage—a regional course—that would provide immediate access to the latest experimentation in regional cooperation and showcase successful regional collaboration efforts in their annual conferences and publications.

Individual regions could also contribute to the National Regional Agenda. Each re-

gion needs to create its own unique regional decision-making network—an integrated set of regional problem-solving and service-delivery mechanisms—and fashion a regional compact—the combination of protocols, practices, and programs needed to address tough challenges. Individual regions could advance suggestions for national and state support for their regional decision-making networks and compacts. Moreover, they could prepare periodic state-of-the-region reports, possibly in a common format, so as to facilitate the preparation of national state-of-the-regions reports, another candidate initiative for the National Regional Agenda.

College/university research institutes could serve as forums, facilitators, and researchers for dialogues, debates, and decision making as to the future directions of the regions in which they are located. Nationally, a network of “regional observatories” could be established in colleges and universities, modeled on the urban observatories of earlier decades, to serve as information clearinghouses on collaborative efforts to compile data and conduct applied studies, to monitor progress and evaluate results, and to build regional awareness in their classes, another candidate initiative for the National Regional Agenda.

All levels of government and other sectors could propose initiatives for recognizing and rewarding the success achieved in fostering regional cooperation, in individual regions as well as at the state and national levels. Recognition could be provided at regularly-scheduled events, such as at annual gatherings to update the National Regional Agenda, or at special ones, such as a White House Conference on Regional Excellence.

The February 8, 1998 Regional Summit brings together regional leaders, citizens, and organizations to identify and select the first set of priority common initiatives in a National Regional Agenda. Whereas gather-

ings of "budding" regionalists have been sponsored by the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) and others in recent years, this could well be the first attempt to develop a National Regional Agenda in terms of both "product" and process. All types of regional organizations and other friends of regional cooperation are co-sponsoring the Summit.

NARC has already begun to receive suggestions for initiatives to be considered at the Regional Summit. Some of these are shared in this special issue of *The Regionalist*, for which Neal Peirce is the guest editor. Others are being presented in the report on the national census of regional organizations that NARC is conducting with the National Academy of Public Administration. Ideas already recommended range from issuing a presidential executive order to direct federal agencies to foster cooperation; to applying ISTEA-type regional planning processes to other areas, such as water management, reinstating state and regional clearinghouses to review projects of regional significance, providing state incentive funding for regional partnerships, and sponsoring regional excellence days and innovation awards.

During the morning of the Regional Summit, this vast array of provocative ideas will be shared with participants. In the afternoon, participants will explore the options in small groups and suggest priority initiatives for the first National Regional Agenda, along with suggested actions for guiding it into implementation. Following the Summit, a report will be prepared on the results, circulated to all participants and presented to the President and Vice President, the governors, congressional and state legislative leaders, and national associations of state and local officials.

The Regional Summit could produce a National Regional Agenda that begins to tie together the critical national and state sup-

port and local actions that are needed to tackle the tough regional challenges. It could also help preclude the development of self-serving special interest demands that could undermine the national, state, and local collaboration needed to develop successful regions. Finally, the Regional Summit could serve as a valuable forum for exchanging ideas and information on cutting-edge experiences as well as building a broad-based network of "committed" regionalists.

To advance the National Regional Agenda, and to assure that its priority initiatives meet the needs of individual regions, an action group, composed of Regional Summit participants, could be created to guide the implementation of priority initiatives and prepare for a second Regional Summit in 1999. Since not all important regional challenges can be addressed in a single regional summit, future ones could be conducted on an annual basis to update the National Regional Agenda and develop annual regional action plans.

Specific steps to advance Regional Summit priorities could be identified by the action group as well as responsible parties, timetables, and benchmarks. The action plan strategies could be linked to pending federal congressional legislation and executive orders, proposed interstate compacts and agreements, policy positions of national associations, and initiatives in individual states, regions, and localities. Strategies for engaging NARC and other national associations of state and local officials, regional organizations, civic groups, and other regional "stakeholders" also could be developed as part of the action plan. A progress report on the action plan could be presented at the 1999 Regional Summit. As a result, the Regional Summit would not be a one-time event, even though the meeting lasts but a day. Through the action plan, an ongoing process would be in place to advance the priorities agreed upon at the Regional

Summit, monitor results, and prepare for the next Regional Summit.

An Alliance of the Regional Community

Creating an alliance of regional organizations and interests could help “breathe life” into the National Regional Agenda and action plan. Whereas an action group of Regional Summit participants could initiate the implementation of the National Regional Agenda, an alliance of the regional community could enhance the capacity to hold annual regional summits and oversee the implementation of priority initiatives to help regions prepare for the next century.

When the National Association of Regional Councils was created over three decades ago to represent regional councils, it was a lone voice in the regional wilderness. Over the years, it has not lost its primary purpose—to foster cooperation in addressing cross-cutting interjurisdictional, regional challenges. Now, the regional stage has become crowded with new regional organizations, and not only regional councils, but a vast array of other public, private, academic, nonprofit, civic, and multisector organizations and interests are providing the genius for addressing regional challenges.

NARC has always strived to include the full range of regional organizations and interests in fostering regional cooperation.

- Individual regional councils have taken the lead in developing many of the partnerships to address regional challenges, including assisting in creating many of the regional organizations in their regions.
- NARC has created coalitions of national associations to advocate for national legislation addressing regional topics, such as creating and reauthorizing the Intermodal Surface Transportation Ef-

iciency Act (ISTEA) and the Economic Development Administration and Appalachian Regional Commission. In addition, NARC has an affiliate—the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations—to represent the interests of transportation-planning organizations.

- NARC has conducted research on regional topics and organizations, such as currently conducting the first phase of a national census of regional organizations with the National Academy of Public Administration, and disseminated information to regional organizations and interests, such as through its monthly newsletter, *Regional Reporter*, and quarterly journal, *The Regionalist*, which is co-sponsored with the Schaefer Center for Public Policy at the University of Baltimore. The *Regional Reporter* already provides column space for regional civic organizations and academic regional studies institutes and will be providing similar space for other regional organizations in upcoming issues. This issue of *The Regionalist* presents the boldest initiatives of approximately two dozen regional experts for a National Regional Agenda.
- NARC has created the Institute for The Regional Community, composed of regional experts from all sectors, to exchange information on the latest developments in the regional movement and guide NARC’s future research and technical assistance activities. The Institute has taken the lead in conducting the February 8, 1998 NARC Washington Policy Conference.
- Finally, NARC has just created an associate membership for regional organizations and other regional interests so as to foster broader involvement in NARC publications, conferences, and activities. Moreover, it is creating a Fund for The Regional Community to generate seed

capital to launch new regional initiatives.

NARC, through its Committee on NARC Structure, has been exploring options for bringing regional organizations and interests together to strengthen their collective capacity to foster regional cooperation; to advocate for federal and state government and other initiatives that foster regional cooperation as well as develop the capabilities and capacities of regional organizations and interests to address regional challenges. Most importantly, this alliance of organizations and interests—an Alliance of the Regional Community—could guide the development and implementation of the National Regional Agenda.

To begin exploring this alliance, a working group of representatives of national regional associations—national associations that represent regional organizations and interests, such as state and local officials—could be convened. It could build upon the working group of national regional associations that gathered in November 1997 to discuss the national census of regional organizations.

This new working group could explore options for implementing the alliance during 1998. Initially, it could focus on a variety of tasks. First, it could pursue strategies for guiding the implementation of the initiatives in the National Regional Agenda, especially the priority ones that emerge from the February 8 Regional Summit. Second, it could explore other opportunities for collaborative activities among national regional organizations, such as hosting regional confabs on the latest experimentation in addressing tough regional challenges.

Finally, it could explore creating an alliance of regional organizations and interests. Such an alliance could offer membership for any regional organization or interest. Existing national associations of regional organizations could stay independent

or become affiliates of this new alliance of regional organizations. The Institute for The Regional Community could continue to share information on the regional movement and chart future directions for the alliance and its members; the Fund for the Regional Community could help finance the alliance's initiatives. NARC is offering to assist in creating a new alliance of regional organizations and interests.

Civic Self Examination of Regions

John Gardner's modest suggestion, in a recent letter to one of the authors, proposes the noblest of initiatives for regional leaders, citizens, and organizations to pursue during the remaining years of this century—one that could be the premier initiative in a National Regional Agenda and one that could command the primary attention of an alliance of the regional community. We quote from his letter:

President and Mrs. Clinton have issued a broad invitation to the American people to think about the new millennium and come up with ideas for it. I propose that NARC (National Association of Regional Councils), in collaboration with NCL (National Civic League) and perhaps others convey to the White House—preferably in person—the following message.

We can—with your help—launch an unprecedented wave of nonpartisan civic self examination in the metropolitan areas of this country. We stand ready to help communities define the issues in such self examination; and we will show them how to proceed.

This would give the White House the opportunity to associate itself with a positive grassroots effort—an opportunity that rarely if ever presents itself outside the context of a World War or a Great Depression. And it would give us the opportunity to frame the issues in a regional context.

Consider the possibilities: President Clinton and the nation's governors could issue a call for civic self examinations in each region. They could back up the invitation with a number of actions, such as creating a blue-ribbon panel to foster the development of the "regional toolbox" of federal and state government and national and community foundation tools to support these regional self examinations, or jointly funding a liaison with each region to monitor the use of existing tools and recommend new ones. NARC, NCL, and other national associations and foundations could assist community leaders and citizens to pursue regional self examinations and develop and implement the "regional compacts" to address tough regional challenges. College/university research institutes could assist in compiling periodic state-of-the-regions reports, and foundations, associations, and political leaders could recognize regional excellence through national awards, such as an All-American Region or Innovations in Regional Governance Award, or a periodic White House Conference on Regional Excellence.

Nothing would more effectively generate timely ideas for the National Regional Agenda than simultaneous self examinations in each region across the country. If we can tie together the "bottom-up" initiatives from individual regions with the "top-

down" support from national and state levels, select common priority initiatives for a National Regional Agenda in annual Regional Summits, and collectively pursue action plans for their implementation, our regions, and nation, could be prepared for the century of the region.

The growing scope and energy of the regional community suggest that the time is opportune to translate dialogue and discussion into decisive action to advance our regions, and through them, our nation as we enter the 21st century. We can capitalize on exciting opportunities and prospects by building a common National Regional Agenda and action plan, creating an alliance for the regional community, and launching civic self examinations of regions.

Together, we can do something now that no one of us can do alone.

Join us in preparing for the century of the region! ■

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