

Challenges of Metropolitan Growth and Governance: A Global Summit

Ralph R. Widner and Anton C. Zijderveld

“We are seeing the emergence of a new kind of human settlement with its own distinct social and economic structures and associated physical forms,” states a summary of a recent international conference sponsored by the Lincoln Institute for Land Policy.¹ During the 1990s, survey after survey found that, despite major differences in land use controls and tax policies among countries, similar patterns of metropolitan growth and the social and economic problems associated with them are cropping up all around the world. Differences are more in degree than in kind.

This is what prompted the National Association of Regional Councils, the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, and the Institute for The Regional Community to convene a Global Summit of Regions in Washington, D. C. on March 20, 1999, just prior to the Second U. S. National Summit of Regions. Three assumptions underlay this Global Summit:

- First, that Metropolitan or “City” regions are now the main building blocks of the world economy as the perceptive urbanologist, Jane Jacobs, pointed out a decade ago in her “Cities and the Wealth of Nations.” Indeed, Jacques Delors, the former head of the European Commission, has observed that “Europe is now a continent of regions, not nations.” By this, though, he meant the urban-centered economic regions that comprise the real workshops of the European economy, not ethnic or administrative regions.
- A second assumption of this Global Summit was that few of the regions are organized to meet

the challenges of the 21st century global economy.

- The third assumption was that many of the problems and issues metropolitan regions face around the world are similar.

Intentionally, the first Global Summit was kept small so that representatives could talk with each other. Representatives from the mature metropolitan regions of Bilbao, Spain; Rotterdam, Netherlands; and the province of Alberta, Canada shared the table with representatives from the “transitioning” countries of South Africa and the Republic of Georgia, as well as regional councils along the U. S. border with Canada and Mexico and several regional councils with strong international initiatives, such as those in Atlanta, Kansas City, and the Puget Sound area.

Questions for the Summit

The questions for discussion at this first Global Summit were straightforward:

1. Some regions have taken practical and successful initiatives to meet the challenges of a global economy in the 21st century. What are they? Can they be applied elsewhere?
2. Can we identify some of the common concerns regions face around the world as a basis for an agenda of cooperative research, experiment, idea sharing, and action?
3. Can and should we measure and monitor the economic and social health of these regions through a “Global State of the Regions Report” like one proposed for regions in the U. S.? If so, what information would be most useful? What indicators should be used?

4. Should we establish a network for continuous information sharing among the world's regions?

Background from Previous Research

To spark discussion, the results of several international surveys were described briefly.

The German Marshall Fund's 1992 *European-North American State of the Cities Report*, in an impressionistic trans-Atlantic survey by journalists and urbanologists, found that the most successful regions had a strategy to position themselves in the new global economy; that their cities and suburbs cooperated in a shared economic development effort; that they focused much of their attention on modernizing the skills of their regional workforce through educational reform; and that they tried not to concentrate poverty in "pockets."²

The 1995 Lincoln Institute Cambridge Conference used case studies by a consortium of researchers in 11 regions: Ankara, Bangkok, Jakarta, Lyon, Madrid, the Randstad (Amsterdam-Utrecht-The Hague-Rotterdam in the Netherlands), San Diego, Santiago (Chile), Taipei, Tokyo, and Toronto to reach several conclusions:³

1. First, there is an inherent mismatch between the demands of the global economy and the capabilities and territorial jurisdiction of local governments in metropolitan regions.
2. Second, the predominant pattern of growth is sprawl. All but Tokyo are automobile dependent. (Auto use in Taipei increased from 11,000 in 1960 to one million in 1990.) As a consequence, social and environmental problems in all these regions are increasing.
3. While "edge cities" are still peculiar to the U. S., new towns and science centers outside the central city almost always siphon activities away from the old center. Nascent edge cities are cropping up in many countries according to the 1999 Global Summit participants. Nevertheless, except in the U. S., much of the new wealth flows into the center while decay sets in just outside the center.
4. Most new development is concentrated along transportation corridors. In between these cor-

ridors are neighborhoods and people left behind by the new development. The share of the workforce left behind by the skill demands of the new economy is increasing. Across the Lincoln Institute case study regions, the bottom 20 percent of the population receives only 5 to 7 percent of the regional income while the top 20 percent earns 40 to 50 percent. Increasingly, these disparities fuel election debates.

5. Finally, without an effective system of governance and cooperation, regions and their local governments find it difficult to respond to the powerful forces of globalization. This escalates conflicts between cities and suburbs and between social groups.

Priority Concerns of Participants in the Global Summit

Participants in the 1999 Global Summit generally concurred with the Lincoln findings. They identified the following issues as those of priority common interest about which it is important to share ideas and experience across national boundaries:

- Infrastructure strategies—can and should they lead development, or follow it? The Lincoln Institute study found that most regions with a strategic plan want to become "beacons leading their nation in the worldwide process of integration." Many regions use infrastructure to attract communications, financial services, and advanced technology. Does this work? How are such choices made?
- Regional cooperation to modernize the workforce skills and education is a matter of high concern everywhere, but education is either an extremely localized function, or a national function.
- It was agreed that the problems of "corridor" development and the people left behind by it are among the most pressing social, economic, and political challenges local governments in metropolitan regions now face.
- A search for new models of taxation must be undertaken. The key requirement is for methods of taxation that do not set local governments sharing a common economic destiny in a region

against each other in a dog-eat-dog competition for development. Overreliance on real estate taxes is seen as one of the major factors behind such interjurisdictional conflict.

- Global Summit participants expressed some hunger for new models of organization. Perhaps we should be investigating much more deeply the possibility of organizing local government functions within regions on the basis of "spheres" rather than "tiers."
- The U. S. model of cooperation between universities and regions has won much admiration in other parts of the world. How can the isolation of universities from life around them in most countries be alleviated so that the talent and resources they harbor can be more relevant to the needs of the population?
- Participants agreed that the structure of local government in metropolitan regions does not meet the needs of 21st century governance, but they counseled pragmatism rather than top-down reform. Lessons learned from experience in such regions as Rotterdam suggest that most often success can be achieved if reform grows from the bottom up rather than imposed from the top down. Once people see a practical solution to a concrete problem, they will support change.
- Finally, successful metropolitan regions must have a strong center that radiates strength out across the region as a whole. This gives a heart of true urbanity and personality and identity to the region.⁴

Political Realities and Governmental Reform

A study of European metropolitan regions by Leo van den Berg, Erik Braun, and Jan van der Meer at the European Institute for Comparative Urban Research at Erasmus University in Rotterdam in the mid-1990s posited several questions that should be answered in the affirmative if true reform in metropolitan governance is to be achieved:

1. Are economic and social conditions such that people want and will support change? At the

time of their study, for example, conditions were so good in Munich that no one saw any reason to create new arrangements for metropolitan cooperation.

2. Is there both public and private leadership support for change? In many instances, private leadership is anxious for change, but political leaders sense no popular constituency for it and hang back.
3. Is there political and popular support in both the city and the suburbs?
4. Is there a broadly shared vision and strategy that excites people and motivates their support?
5. Is there an organization that can implement the strategy?
6. Are there near-term results that encourage continued support?

Global Sharing of Ideas and Experience Through the Internet

Participants in this first Global Summit agreed that there may be considerable merit and utility if an Internet site were established so that metropolitan regions around the world might share ideas and experience. Delegates from transitioning countries, in particular, felt that such a site could help them enormously.

On the other hand, delegates from the mature regions were much more skeptical. "We are all very busy dealing with the daily crises. We do not have time to spend mining information on the Internet," said one.

It was agreed that utility ultimately depends upon how carefully the site is designed and how simple it is to use. In addition, it must have the information needed to make decisions. If the site proves unproductive for the user after the first time or two it will no longer be used.

At the very least, it should contain the basic data people will normally want; it should have carefully-designed, practical, relevant case studies; and it should report on tested innovations that have worked.

It was agreed that careful design of the site will prove costly.

Nonetheless, it was the consensus to proceed to see if such a site could be designed and whether this initiative could lead to an enduring interchange among regions around the globe. ■

Ralph R. Widner is on the Board of the Institute for The Regional Community and is chairman of Fairfax House International. In the past, he was the first executive director of Greater Philadelphia First, first president of the Academy for State and Local Government, and first executive director of the Appalachian Regional Commission.

Anton C. Zijderfeld is professor of sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He has taught at Robert Wagner University in New York and McGill University

in Montreal. He is the author of *The Waning of the Welfare State*; *The End of Comprehensive State Succor* and of *A Theory of Urbanity; The Economic and Civic Culture of Cities*.

Notes

1. Lincoln Institute for Land Policy. 1996. "Global City Regions; Searching for Common Ground," in *Landlines*, v.8, Number 1; January.
2. German Marshall Fund of the United States and PSARAS Fund. 1992. *European-North American State-of-the-Cities Report*, PSARAs Fund, Columbia, S. C.
3. *ibid*, Lincoln.
4. Zijderfeld, Anton C. 1998. *A Theory of Urbanity; The Economic and Civic Culture of Cities*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London.