



Conference was an experience in shared learning

An analysis of the results of the last international conference reveals many common values among participants from around the world

BY **RAOUL BLINDENBACHER AND ANDREA IFF**

Editor's note: The first international conference on federalism took place at Mont-Tremblant, Canada in 1999 and the second in Saint Gallen Switzerland in 2002. The executive director of the second conference, Raoul Blindenbacher, and project manager Andrea Iff undertook a detailed survey of conference participants and an analysis of their feedback. A summary of that work follows.

The results from the International Conference on Federalism 2002 in Switzerland spoke volumes about citizens of federal countries. One finding from conference research was that every individual or group in a federal system enjoys more than one identity, and these identities almost always overlap. This can extend as far as a sense of different nationalities – one nation with several nationalities. India, Belgium, Switzerland and Canada provide living examples of these multiple national identities.

At the St. Gallen conference, participants from all over the world discussed federalism and foreign relations; federalism, decentralization and conflict management in multicultural societies; and assignment of responsibilities and fiscal federalism.

Learning began before the conference

The structure of the conference was designed to stimulate dialogue in a “knowledge spiral”, using a process in which participants expanded their individual as well as their institutional knowledge. This was accomplished in four stages, which began before the conference and ended a month afterward.

Before the conference, eminent international scholars prepared scientific background papers and presented information in a series of papers published as a conference reader sent to all participants.

At the conference, scholars, politicians at the federal and state levels, administrators and business people presented case studies on sub-themes in a series of work sessions.

Towards the end of the conference, dialogue tables brought together all participants from each of the three themes to

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debate the issues that had arisen and to formulate new ideas and solutions.

After the conference, reflections from the work sessions and the new insights gained at the dialogue tables were integrated into a coherent whole.

How the work was analyzed

Summary writers were present in each work session and dialogue table to record what was discussed. Their reports were published in full together with the scientific background papers and the plenary speeches of the heads of states in the conference book, *Federalism in a Changing World – Learning from each other*.

These reports recorded the work of 600 decision makers and opinion leaders from over 60 countries in the fields of politics, administration, science, and economics who participated in the conference. The reports were analyzed openly and without any given theory or model of federalism in mind.

Results show common values

The research showed that the 300 most recurring statements could be organized into four categories: *identity, responsibility, mutuality and pragmatism*. Below, readers will find one representative statement for each category.

Identity. *Every individual or group in a federal system enjoys more than one identity, and these identities almost always overlap. This can extend as far as a sense of different nationalities – one nation with several nationalities.*

Responsibility. *“Whoever pays, decides”. There was consensus during the dialogue that the level of government responsible for a particular service should have the capacity to raise taxes to pay for that service.*

Mutuality. *The process of developing a constitutional compact must be inclusive in order to develop a common identity that undergirds nation building. The larger the number of people involved in consultations or negotiations leading to new laws, and the better informed they are, the more motivated they will be to implement those laws. This is also true of the involvement of subnational units in the federal decision-making process.*

Pragmatism. *During the process of decentralization, the emergence of parallel administrations and bureaucracies at central, regional, and local levels often leads to a more complex system in which there are no clear-cut allocations of responsibility. This is the price that some federal countries have to pay in order to live together.*

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Conclusions

Political culture and attitudes matter. Whether in the conduct of foreign relations, the management of decentralization and conflict in multicultural societies, or in the financial arrangements, effectiveness in practice has depended not just on appropriate institutions and processes, but even more upon widespread respect for the values inherent in federalism. Many participants mentioned the importance of respect for regional and cultural differences, for inclusiveness, for trust, for balance, for acceptance of flexibility, for pragmatic responses to particular circumstances, and for genuinely democratic practices.

In addition, a major theme was the importance of financial arrangements, which is partly a question of economic efficiency. It also relates to equalization arrangements and the extent to which they contribute to, or undermine, the preservation of regional and linguistic identities and the promotion of "solidarity" within federations.

To read the entire paper and full results of the research, go to www.forumfed.org/federalism/pdfs/StGal-ch-Blindenbacher.pdf 