

Part II

Practical Application

To showcase the Learning Spiral's practical application in concrete governmental learning events, its implementation is demonstrated in five different types of learning settings: an international conference (chapter 5); a multiyear, global program with national and international roundtables (chapter 6); a study tour (chapter 7); an evaluation-based workshop (chapter 8); and a multimedia training and e-learning initiative (chapter 9). The case studies were deliberately chosen to prove the Learning Spiral's applicability in a wide range of governmental learning activities. Each example is introduced by a detailed description of the event organization, followed by the presentation of the operations and procedures according to the eight stages of the Learning Spiral template. Final comments, including the results of the events evaluation findings, wrap up each case study. For further illustration the studies are supplemented by six first-hand accounts written by participants who describe their learning experiences.

5 International Conference

The first application of the Learning Spiral on an international scale was at the Second International Conference on Federalism, held in St. Gallen, Switzerland, in 2002. This four-day conference was a follow-up event to a conference held in 1999 in Canada. In the first event the proceedings were structured to maximize learning from world leaders and international experts; the second conference, in contrast, focused primarily on the participants' experiences.¹

The aim of the 2002 event was to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences among practitioners of federalism from politics, civil service, academia, culture, corporate business, and other spheres of society. The Swiss federal and cantonal governments shared the basic costs of the event. The audience was composed of 600 participants from 60 countries, who were interested in a constructive exchange of experiences and information in the field of federal governance. The learning-oriented dialogue was directed to develop new federal problem-solving models, which are supposed to take into account worldwide change (General Information Brochure 2002).

5.1 Conference Reader—Conceptualization Stage

A board of directors composed of eminent Swiss nationals and a few international experts who had been involved in the organization of the first conference supervised the strategic planning of the 2002 event. A broad consortium of international practitioners and scholars directed the content preparation. For all other operational and procedural responsibilities, a project manager

1. Among the most eminent speakers of the first conference were President Bill Clinton of the United States, President Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico, and the Prime Minister of Canada, Jean Chretien. For an overview of the past and forthcoming International Conferences on Federalism, see Raoul Blindenbacher and Rupak Chattopadhyay (2007).

(learning broker) was in charge. This individual had been hired two years prior to the event and completed the work one year after the conference.²

To narrow the broad topic of federal governance and to make it manageable for the intended learning process of the second conference, the conference organizers determined a common understanding of the subject and selected a set of internationally relevant conference themes. The chosen themes were federalism and foreign policy; federalism, decentralization, and conflict management in multicultural societies; and assignment of responsibilities and fiscal federalism.³ To lay a solid groundwork of the knowledge to be learned and to provide possible solutions, a group of well-known international experts on federalism prepared concise papers regarding each theme. The content included a rationale of the theme selection, a summary of the state-of-the-art research in the field, and key questions to assist the in-depth consideration of particular cases in the conference sessions.

The authors presented the papers for the first time at a preconference, held six months before the conference. The papers were extensively discussed and validated by the authors and the conference organizers. At the preconference, the conference moderators, who had been selected to facilitate the different sessions at the main event, also attended. The purpose of this was to familiarize them with the state-of-the-art knowledge on each theme and to make sure that they understood their particular role as well as the conference process. The reviewed papers were published in a conference reader (Abderhalden and Blindenbacher 2002) and also made available on the conference Web site.⁴ The conference readers were distributed two months prior to the main conference so the participants could be properly prepared for the upcoming event.

2. For all logistical matters and the practical realization of the conference, the project manager was supported by the International Students committee (ISC), an independent initiative of students at the University of St. Gallen. For further information about the ISC, see www.stgallen-symposium.org.

3. For a rationale of how the themes were selected, see Raoul Blindenbacher and Ronald Watts (2003).

4. The conference Web site was closed at the time of publication of this book. Its content was transferred to the Web site of the Forum of Federations: www.forumfed.org.

5.2 Sixty Federal and Decentralized Countries— Triangulation Stage

The heart of the conference consisted of four-hour work sessions, which were introduced through case studies illustrating the different aspects of the theme concerned. To present the fullest possible picture of a given case, the content needed to be explored from a number of different reference points. Therefore, during the work sessions the cases (up to five) were presented by three to five individuals in short summaries detailing their responses to the questions formulated in the papers. The presenters were deliberately not chosen according to the positions they held, but according to themes and interests. All 24 work sessions held at the conference, 8 for each theme, followed this pattern.

One example that illustrates this pattern well was the work session about the theme of Assignment of Responsibilities and Fiscal Federalism. This theme had a corresponding subtheme: Problems of Equalization in Federal Systems. Fiscal equalization refers to attempts within a federal system of government to reduce fiscal disparities among jurisdictions. It is qualified as vertical when the policy is conducted by a central government and financed by the central budget. It is horizontal when it intervenes between government units at the same level, through monetary transfers from units with *high* to units with *low* capacity.

For triangulation purposes, three cases were selected to represent a vertical, a horizontal, and a hybrid type of equalization. The vertical model was illustrated by Australia, the horizontal type by Canada, and the hybrid type by Switzerland. The case presenters were a head of state, a federal minister, and a director of state government, respectively. Thus, three additional distinctive perspectives, representing different levels of executive government, were added to the mix of possible viewpoints regarding this theme.

This broad selection of different country cases, presented from different angles, allowed a comprehensive and unique understanding of the session subthemes. Copying this pattern to the 24 other work session made it possible for almost all 60 countries to present at least one case, and more than two-thirds of the participants had a prepared assignment to share their individual perspective.

5.3 Introduction of the Conference Reader— Accommodation Stage

To provide the best possible learning conditions, deliberate steps of trust building were pursued long before the conference began. On the content side, the selected knowledge was made accessible to everybody involved into the learning event. In regard to the learning process itself, participants were individually informed and updated about the conference agenda and the participants list, as well as the particular role they were expected to perform. The selection criteria for invitations were accessible and transparent. Most important among them was the rule that only primary stakeholders were invited and no self-acting replacements were accepted.

The whole conference was set up so that every participant got similar treatment. Because a dozen of the participants were heads of state, the general care of participants had to be very attentive and personal. There was a 24-hour helpdesk where the organizers offered support for participant requests. To give everybody the opportunity to know who was who, the participants got an electronic device that allowed them to identify other participants around them.⁵ This device also permitted the organizers to communicate with all or selected participants to inform them about general news or changes in the program.

The high number of dignitaries made a high level of security indispensable. However, for the comfort of the participants, there were no visible security measures in the conference compound. Security was as discreet as possible, and participants were free to move around and to approach whomever they wanted. Furthermore, there was no formal seating during any events, including meals or the different conference sessions.

In such an equalizing design, it was crucial to establish well-communicated and strictly enforced communication rules. Most important were the Chatham House Rules, which guaranteed that participants would not quote each other without permission.⁶ This rule was also standard

5. For further information about the device, see <http://www.spotme.com/>.

6. When a meeting is held under the Chatham House Rules, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. For further information see <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/>.

for journalists, who were obliged to sign a nondisclosure document. During the conference sessions it was the moderator's duty to assert the dialogue rules, such as speaking time limits, which in general were not to exceed five minutes. English was the general working language, but to facilitate communications, there were six official conference languages with simultaneous translation in the plenary sessions.

5.4 Work Sessions—Internalization Stage

As mentioned above, the center of the conference was the 24 parallel work sessions, which were held once in the morning of the second day and once on the third conference day. Four of the twelve sessions were dedicated to one of the three themes, each with a slightly different focus. Each work session was set up as a roundtable, with no front table or podium. It was not discernable which speakers were the designated speakers and which were not. The work sessions were led by a moderator who oversaw and handled the program procedures, such as setting the order of speakers, introducing speakers, and setting breaks. The moderator was responsible for ensuring that the discussion did not stray from the given theme, that the communication rules were reinforced, and that all participants had a fair chance to take part in the proceedings and contribute to the dialogue.

In all, 15 moderators were carefully selected according to their skills in group dynamics, assertiveness, conflict management, and an ability to instill enthusiasm—as well as according to formal criteria such as nationality and gender. Particular attention was also given to their records in dealing with different cultures. They all had extensive experience in facilitating political dialogues at the highest international level. To ensure impartiality, they were expected not to be actively associated with special-interest groups. The selected facilitators had proven an extensive interest in political matters. To update their know-how about the given topic, they were all required to participate at the preconference.

Each work session was introduced through cases illustrating the theme concerned; these cases served as a starting point for the learning-oriented dialogue. The cases were described in one-page fact sheets, which were distributed to the participants the first day of the conference. According to the triangulation procedure, the cases were introduced in short summaries by selected participants, detailing their responses to

the questions formulated in the papers. The selection of the speakers was made according to the specific perspective they brought to the table. It was important that as a group they represented different political levels as well as diverse spheres of society. Furthermore, they had to be recognized key players in their fields. These statements provided the vital link between theory and practice and ensured that the ensuing dialogue had its foundations in existing situations and problems.

In the example of problems of equalization in federal systems, the questions raised in the theme paper were about the issue of who funded the equalization system and who received the funding, and based on what criteria. The Australian, Canadian, and Swiss speakers were briefed to answer the questions as completely as possible, providing both positive and negative comments. Thus their presentations became the point on which to engage the other participants in the learning process; that is, others would follow their example by analyzing their own country situation in the light of the questions raised. The rationale of the presentations was therefore—besides the obvious purpose of valuable knowledge transfer—to build trust and confidence among the participants as they reflected on their own situations in an honest manner.

The design of the work sessions entitled the *Dialogue Leaders* to draw on a set of selected participants who had a designated role (see Figure 16 and Photo 1).

Figure 16 Work Session Set Up
Photo 1 Work Session Roundtable



Among these roles was—besides the *Case Presenters*—the *Work Session Chair*, whose role involved the introduction of the participants. The presence of the Chair also provided the sessions with a necessary element of formality, as dignitaries of the highest political level were among the participants. It was important that their function in government stood in a direct relation to the theme of the session. The moderators were further assisted by the authors of the theme papers: their role as *Scientific Experts* in the field and their academic knowledge enabled them to place contributions by the practitioners in a theoretical and generalized framework, putting the dialogue in a new perspective and opening up new areas.

Another role was the *Young Professional*. These individuals were expected to make statements about the questions from a perspective focusing on anticipated challenges and their methods of resolution. The Young Professionals had to be younger than 30 and were selected based on the quality of papers they had submitted prior to the conference.

And last there were the *Scientific Summary Writers*, whose role involved summing up the work sessions, paraphrasing the dialogue, and undertaking an initial analysis of its content. The writers were selected according to their academic skills in regard to the theme as well as their proven journalistic and editing skills. Together with the moderator, the scientific summary writers were the only individuals sitting at the roundtable who explicitly did not engage in the dialogue.

5.5 Dialogue Tables—Externalization Stage

The forum was held in *dialogue tables*.⁷ These tables were convened early in the afternoon of the second and third days of the conference, held after the work sessions conducted in the morning. There were three parallel dialogue table sessions, each dedicated to one of the three themes. These sessions allowed an intense interactive session devoted to small groups in which the dividing line between the speakers and those listening was deliberately removed. To this end, the participants investigating

7. *Dialogue tables* are a didactical forum inspired by Harrison Owen's (1997) open space concept. For a detailed description and theoretical explanation, see Raoul Blindenbacher et al. (2001).

the same theme were brought together in a large room, divided into small groups of eight, and seated at small tables. The dialogue tables were led by a moderator whose task was to familiarize the participants with the method, to lay down the given time frame, and make sure the session proceeded properly (see Figures 17–19).

In the first phase, the case presenters were gathered around bar tables on a small podium, where they were asked to succinctly summarize the knowledge they personally had gained from the preceding work session. Once collected, these statements gave the participants on the floor an impression of the direction in which new problem-solving models and—where appropriate—a new understanding of the theme could develop (see Figure 17 and Photo 2).

Following a brief session in which the audience had the opportunity to ask questions, the podium speakers were each asked to join one of the dialogue tables. It was important to ensure that at least one speaker was allocated to each table. In this second phase, each table had to validate the statements made and to contrast them with the individual experiences of the participants at that table. It was particularly important to reflect as a group on questions about the new knowledge and where it fit in each individual's experience. A rotation system was used to stimulate

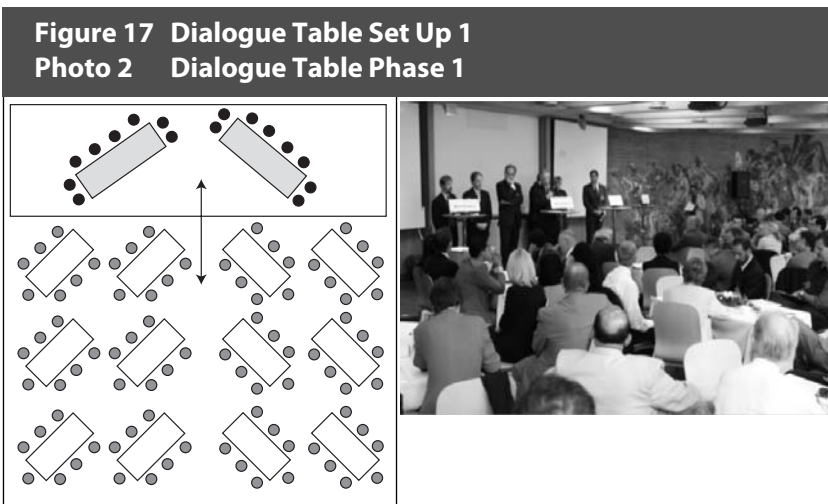
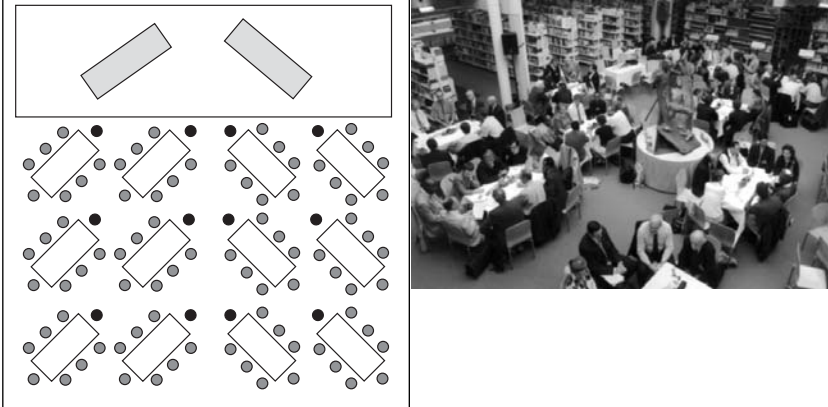


Figure 18 Dialogue Table Set Up 2
Photo 3 Dialogue Table Phase 2

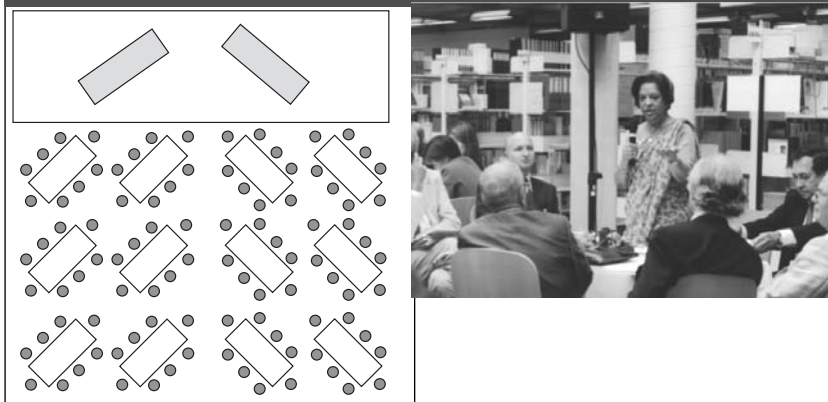


the dialogue tables, whereby the podium speakers had to leave their table and join a new one (see Figure 18 and Photo 3) at regular intervals.

In the third and final phase, one participant (*not* the podium speakers) from each table was asked to share with all the participants the most important information they had acquired from the group dialogues (see Figure 19 and Photo 4).

To capture the essential content of the dialogue table sessions, several scientific summary writers paraphrased all the statements made

Figure 19 Dialogue Table Set Up 3
Photo 4 Dialogue Table Phase 3



by the presenters in the first and third session phases and summarized them in a comprehensive paper.

5.6 Expert Summaries—Reconceptualization Stage

On the fourth and last conference day, the authors of the three original theme papers in their concluding remarks outlined new insights and emerging trends that they had observed over the course of the work sessions and dialogue tables. In these presentations they framed the lessons learned as well as new patterns from a theoretical perspective and extrapolated their impact on each of the three themes. All the speakers of the interactive plenary panels were advised to make their presentations as freely and spontaneously as possible. The conference organizers had offered to the speakers a team of advisors who helped them finalize their presentations.

5.7 Interactive Plenary Panels—Transformation Stage

In the final conference session, selected heads of government and state were asked in an interactive plenary panel to react to the proposed new thematic outlines presented in the previous session. They were invited to share their thoughts on how the newly framed knowledge could impact their respective countries and to what extent they could anticipate

implementing some of these new considerations in their own political strategies. By asking eminent participants to do this, conference organizers expected that the issues raised by the speakers would get additional attention among the other participants and would thus motivate them to follow their example (see Photo 5).

In the second part of the final session, the participants were encouraged to comment on and complement the issues raised by

Photo 5 Interactive Plenary Session



(From left to right) Belgium Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, former Swiss President Arnold Koller, Yugoslavian President Vojislav Kostunica, and Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel

the previous speakers and to exchange their thoughts how the new state-of-the-art knowledge could end up being transformed and implemented in their own particular political environment.

A rather unexpected side effect of the conference was that a number of participating countries ended up organizing national follow-up events, where the application of the newly gained knowledge was further discussed in the context of the respective countries.

5.8 Conference Proceedings—Configuration Stage

Shortly after the conference, the authors of the theme papers revised their original documents according to the results of the conference process. Concurrently the scientific summary writers finalized their notes about the work sessions and dialogue table proceedings, and the plenary speakers edited their speeches from the interactive plenary panels. Subsequently, all this material was archived by the conference organizers and published in a conference book (Blindenbacher and Koller 2003), as well as made available on the conference Web site.

In a final step, the publication was sent to every participant and was made available in bookstores for the public. However, and most important, its content became the background material for the third and fourth International Conferences on Federalism, held in Brussels, Belgium, in 2005, and in New Delhi, India, in 2007. Thus the new knowledge in federal governance became the basis for the newly selected content to be learned in a next spin of the Learning Spiral process.

5.9 Final Comments and Evaluation

The Second International Conference on Federalism was the first major event where the eight stages of the Learning Spiral template were almost fully applied. The conditions under which the conference was organized were exceptional: The conference management was well staffed and funded, and it had all the necessary political support to do its work

freely and independently. The time frame of almost three years from the first planning until the publication of the conference proceedings was sufficient to properly carry through all tasks for each stage and allowed a well-carried-out transition to the follow-up events in Brussels and New Delhi. The direct involvement with the follow-up events paid off particularly well because the new conference organizers adopted the same learning concept, which in turn secured the continuity of the learning process.⁸

The conference was rated by a Level One evaluation (see subsection 4.3.2): 81 percent of the participants appraised the overall quality of the event in regard to content and organization as excellent, and 19 percent rated it as good. Ninety-one percent appraised the quality of the dialogue in the work sessions as excellent, as did 88 percent for the interactive plenary sessions and 70 percent for the dialogue tables. More than 250 participant letters and e-mails sent after the conference are testimony to the impressive level of substance at the event (Koller 2003). This positive impression about the event appears to have been long lasting, as reflected in two testimonies made eight years after the event was held: one is written from a participant who was involved in the subtheme on fiscal equalization (see Box 1) and one discusses the learning process itself (see Box 2).

A last, rather surprising characteristic of the conference was that 92 percent of the confirmed participants ended up attending—even though many of them had to pay a conference fee as well their own travel costs. Possible explanations for this unusual occurrence include that most participants had a well-defined role to perform and therefore felt obliged to attend, and that nobody wanted to risk missing a unique opportunity to have access to and to learn about the latest knowledge on governance in federal systems.

8. For the description of the proceedings of the conference in Brussels, see Frank Geerkens (2005); for the New Delhi description, see Rupak Chattopadhyay et al. (2008).

Box 1 Reflections from the Deputy Chief Financial Officer and Chief Economist of the Washington, DC, Government

There are four fundamental questions of fiscal federalism: Which type of government performs which spending functions? Which government raises which revenues? When one adds up the franc (dinar, zloty, euro...) amounts in answering the first two questions and finds an expenditure-revenue gap for some local, cantonal, provincial, or municipal governments, how shall gap-closing intergovernmental transfers be designed and implemented? And fourth, what is the institutional setting within which the preceding questions are answered and implemented?

This note focuses on the third question the design of intergovernmental transfers, which was a subtheme at 2002 International Conference on Federalism of the dialogue and work sessions: Problems of Equalization in Federal Systems.

The capacity and willingness of governments to learn the topic of transfers is most important. For many federal systems, a well-designed system of intergovernmental transfers provides a vehicle for achieving a society's broader goals, which range from poverty reduction and the efficient delivery of public sector services to maintaining social cohesion and, for some countries, avoiding conflict. But if designed poorly, intergovernmental transfers worsen the fiscal position of local government and thus undermine or even undo the federal partnership.

To sort out the various policy and administrative options in answering the transfer question, there is a knowledge overlapping of (i) *own* country experience and (ii) sorting out the lessons of other countries (*learning from each other*). In the case of transfers, which was the major discussion point of the work session, the methodology of the Learning Spiral's eight stages provides a stylized framework for what, in practice, governments do if they are willing to institutionally and organizationally *learn*. For sure, the terminology will differ between the Learning Spiral and the practice of government. Thus, for example, the conceptualization through configuration stages of the Learning Spiral may be thought of as a *sequencing* of tasks. This is not to suggest that either the eight stages or sequencing occur in a smooth step-by-step manner.

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Box 1 (continued)

There are many good books and conferences on the topic of intergovernmental transfers. But what makes the Learning Spiral important and different—as was demonstrated in its framing of the organization of the 2002 conference, which had a component of a large face-to-face convening activity in St. Gallen—was that it imposed the learning process on the content of the topic. In the case of the conference subtheme of fiscal equalization in the federal system, the content neatly mirrored the methodology of the triangulation step of the Learning Spiral. An equalization system can be qualified as (i) vertical when the policy is conducted by the central government and financed from the central budget; (ii) horizontal when the intervention is among governments, with the transfers being made from *high to low* fiscal capacity governments; or (iii) a hybrid of the first two. The vertical approach was illustrated by Australia, the horizontal by Canada, and the hybrid by Switzerland. When the participants in the conference met face to face in St. Gallen, the case presenters were a head of state, a federal minister, and a director of a cantonal government. Learning method, content, and institutions converge—voilà!

To be clear, the conference and the interface among learning methodology, content, and institutional practice were not just about St. Gallen. Rather, it was learning-from-each-other series of activities that, as with the content illustration above, *mapped* the Learning Spiral to a systematic set of knowledge sharing events. That is, the 2002 conference entailed much more than a *one-off* event whereby one convenes practitioners and policy makers for a few days of discussion. Rather, it was a series of learning stages that began with a series of *premeeting* knowledge-sharing activities, most electronically, which were followed by a series of electronic post-St. Gallen meetings and the publication of the conference book *Federalism in a Changing World*.

Robert D. Ebel, Washington, DC, USA, March 5, 2010

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Box 2 Reflections on the Conference Process from the Former Premier of Ontario and Current Member of the Parliament of Canada

The Second International Conference on Federalism at St. Gallen, Switzerland, took the Spiral of Learning concept to a new, practical level, where both the journey and the destination mattered. There was inevitably a tension between *experts* and *practitioners*, but that is in the nature of the beast, and both benefited from their necessarily different perspectives. The conference was a determined effort to put the medium and the message together. More rigorous structure and a greater effort at training facilitators meant that from the small group sessions to larger forums there was a constant effort to assemble conclusions and make sure debates and discussions didn't just drift off into the air (although there was inevitably some of that!).

One of my central beliefs is that the sharing of experiences provides one of the best ways for people to learn. What was happening in this conference was more than just conversation, or listening to speeches. It was at once more organized and focused than that, and took dialogue to a new level. The different work and dialogue sessions were forums in the true sense, a place where exchange and learning takes place. The idea was that practitioners needed to talk to each other, that those involved in the theory of federalism needed to talk to practitioners, and that young people needed to be brought into the mix to reinforce the sense that learning never stops and the next generation has an assured place at the table. The way federal governance got discussed in this event has been a reflection of the federal idea itself: a dialogue of equals, respectful, civil, around a common focus of interest. The principle of every exchange was to learn how to improve, based on the simple premise that we all have something to gain from an exchange that is at once focused and tries to reach conclusions.

The series of international conferences has now grown to a well-respected triennial event series whose participants span the globe, and whose venues—so far Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, India, and Ethiopia—reflect the same diversity. None of us, either individuals or countries or organizations, are islands unto ourselves. We learn from others, and that process of

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Box 2 *(continued)*

learning needs a little structure and discipline to be effective. Our mistakes can be even more important than our successes, and a real conversation around a common problem can be more effective than a self-indulgent speech. But the key to effectiveness is follow-up and follow-through, not just the epiphany of discovery, but seeing how discovery and insight can actually be applied in the real world—and how the effort of applying these insights itself produces new ways of seeing the world.

Bob Rae, Toronto, Canada, December 21, 2009