

6 Multiyear Global Program Roundtables

Though sharing experiences in federal governance may seem an obvious way to improve governmental systems and mechanisms, surprisingly, it has not been common practice. In an effort to create and deepen such learning processes, the Forum of Federations¹ and the International Association of Centers for Federal Studies² launched in 2002 the program “A Global Dialogue on Federalism.” To date, the program has produced more than 80 national and international roundtables, held in 20 countries, with an active network of approximately 2,000 participants and a series of 6 published handbooks and 7 booklets.³ The Canadian and the Swiss governments fund most of the program operations, which are conducted by a small staff provided by the Forum of Federations.

This learning activity entails a comparative exploration of different themes in federal governance.⁴ In this learning process, new practical and theoretical knowledge is integrated with the aim of fostering a collective vision to develop new solutions for specific problems. These solutions are then transformed into measures producing practical action. The activities must further endeavor to build enduring cross-country contacts and a viable international network of practitioners and scholars interested in federalism. The way each theme is worked through follows the exact same procedure, which is designed on the basis of the Learning Spiral template (Blindenbacher and Saunders

1. For further information about the Forum of Federations, see www.forumfed.org.

2. For further information about the International Association of Centers for Federal Studies, see <http://www.iacfs.org>.

3. The handbook and booklet series are published by McGill-Queens University Press: www.mqup.ca.

4. For the nine themes dealt with to date, see the Global Dialogue’s Program Web site: www.forumfed.org/en/global/gdparticipants.php.

2005; Blindenbacher and Brook 2005). For illustrative purposes, the theme Foreign Relations in Federal Countries, carried out from April until October 2006, was chosen to exemplify the program's learning procedure.

6.1 Theme Template—Conceptualization Stage

The Global Dialogue Program is overseen by an editorial board, which is composed of international experts on federal governance who provide policy and program guidance. This panel ensures that each theme is processed in the exact same way to ensure the consistency of the program. One further major task of the board is to select, in collaboration with the two sponsoring organizations, program themes.

This case study is of the board-proposed topic Foreign Relations in Federal Countries. This theme was considered particularly timely and challenging because constituent units in federal countries all over the world increasingly carry out relations with foreign governments at all levels. For the overall responsibility for the theme, the board appointed an international leading expert, referred to as the theme coordinator, whose major task was to draft a theme template. This template included an introduction that summarized the essence of the latest research and theory on the topic, a set of crosscutting analytical issues, and an internationally comprehensive set of questions covering institutional provisions and how they work in practice.

Among the most important issues explored in the template were questions such as the following:

- What constitutional powers do federal governments and constituent states have to conduct foreign affairs?
- To what degree are relations between orders of government regularized by formal agreements or informal practice?
- What roles do constituent governments have in negotiating and implementing international treaties?
- How are international activities and interests managed?
- To what degree are the foreign activities of constituent governments in the federal system competitive and to what degree are they cooperative?

6.2 Twelve Federal Countries—Triangulation Stage

A major task of the theme coordinator was to identify 12 federal countries whose contributions would ensure the theme's adequate exploration from all relevant perspectives.⁵ For each of these countries the theme coordinator had further to appoint one or two country coordinators whose task was to choose for each national roundtable 10–20 participants. Because the selection of these participants would have direct impact on the success of the learning process, they had to be chosen according to a given set of criteria. Rather than placing the priority on hierarchical positions, participants were selected to ensure that as far as possible all points of view and all experiences related to the given topic were represented. At least one person had to represent the executive, legislative, and civil service (in particular diplomats) from federal and constituent unit governments.

In addition, it was expected that there would also be members of civil society organizations, business representatives involved in cross-border exports, journalists, scholars, and young professionals. The last were invited to ensure the inclusion of a fresh and out-of-the-box look on the subject. The selection of participants had furthermore to reflect an accurate picture of the political situation in a given country.

6.3 Program Manual—Accommodation Stage

A major challenge of the program was to organize in three months twelve different national and one international roundtable. It is important that these events were held under comparable conditions and that they followed the exact same procedural structure. To be familiar with their tasks, the theme and country coordinators were provided with a manual that outlined in detail the guidelines and responsibilities of running the roundtables and editing the subsequent publications. Much space in the manual was given to the description of the coordinators' role as moderators of the roundtables, as well as to the explanation of the dialogue-oriented communication rules (see subsection 2.2.2). The manual also gave precise instructions on how the roundtable facilities had to be set up, such as, the tables had to be organized in a closed circle,

5. The 12 were Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany, India, Malaysia, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States.

with no panel and no electronic appliances. Also, the theme and country coordinators got a small honorarium for their efforts; all other participants were expected to participate with no financial compensation other than a per diem to cover their travel expenses.

6.4 Country Roundtables—Internalization Stage

The national roundtable was a one-day workshop, in most cases, held in the capital of each country between April and June 2006 (see Photos 6–13). In general, the roundtables were held in the major national language.

The cross-cutting questions in the template guided the structure of the roundtables. The aim of the events was to enable participants to reflect on their own experience in light of the contemporary research and theory, as summarized in the theme template. The individual self-reflections conveyed an overall impression of how to position the different countries' policies regarding foreign relations of constituent units in the given knowledge frame.

Shortly after the event, the country coordinators wrote a short article (three pages) that summarized the individual reflections and highlighted the new insights, key issues, and items of international interest that arose at the particular country roundtable. The text had to be written in English in a readable journalistic style so it would be straightforward and accessible for everybody who would want to get an initial impression about the country's stance on foreign relations.

Photos 6 and 7 Global Dialogue Program Country Roundtables



Chicago, USA



Vienna, Austria

Photos 8–13 Global Dialogue Program Country Roundtables



Brussels, Belgium



Berlin, Germany



New Delhi, India



Zürich, Switzerland



Brasilia, Brazil



Moscow, Russia

6.5 International Roundtable—Externalization Stage

About three months after the country event, representatives from each roundtable gathered at an international roundtable held in Ottawa, Canada, on October 23 and 24, 2006 (see Photos 14 and 15). The theme coordinator, under the operational auspice of the Forum of Federations, organized and moderated the event, which was held in English. The representatives included the 12 country coordinators, one additional representative from each country roundtable, and selected members of the editorial board, International Association of Centers for Federal Studies, and the Forum of Federations.

The participants shared their varied experiences and perspectives, as well as the knowledge gained from their country roundtable, to identify commonalities and differences on the theme. The goal of this event was to have individuals become more receptive to innovative ideas and points of view so that they could see and interpret their own country's social and political realities in new ways. The diversity of the countries and internationally generated viewpoints offered participants a broad understanding of the theme, allowing for a truly comparative dialogue.

Following the event in Ottawa, the country coordinators were asked to edit a paper in English that reflected the dialogue of their national roundtable as well as the comparative exchanges of the international roundtable. Each paper was to capture the key issues, areas of consensus, and major disagreements related to the featured theme, using the theme template as a guide to



International Roundtable, Ottawa, Canada. (Left picture, from left to right) Hans Michelmann, Professor, George Anderson, President Forum of Federations, and Former President of Switzerland, Arnold Koller.

ensure comparability. This comprehensive paper was expected to be an in-depth document that followed scientific standards, which would allow readers to understand the overall subject as well as the content discussed.

6.6 Theme Paper—Reconceptualization Stage

Immediately after the event, the theme coordinator wrote a comparative overview and synthesis based on the content of the international roundtable dialogues and all the written products, including the theme template, the short country roundtable articles, and the comprehensive country papers. The core aims of this theme paper were to derive new patterns and insights and to give a prospective outlook, with new models and trends on how federal countries organize foreign relations carried out by their constituent units. This draft paper was shared with the country coordinators, the editorial board, and the two program host organizations for further suggestions to assure that everybody's perspectives were reflected in the final document.

6.7 Online Discussion Forum—Transformation Stage

In an effort to have a wider audience validate the newly developed knowledge and to launch a dialogue about its application and relevance in other countries, the theme paper was posted in an online discussion forum as part of the Forum of Federations Web site.⁶ The forum was structured by concrete questions, where the participants were asked to comment on the practical implications of the new findings in regard to their domestic political context.

6.8 Handbook and Booklet Series—Configuration Stage

To ensure that the knowledge gained at the national and international roundtables did not end with only those who participated in them, all program documents were published (in English) as well as posted on the Forum of Federations online library.⁷ The short country roundtable articles were

6. This online discussion forum was launched after the second program theme and suspended after theme number six.

7. For the Forum of Federations online library see <http://www.forumfed.org/en/federalism/library.php>.

published in a booklet, together with additional educational features such as a map of each country, a glossary, and a list of the program participants (Blindenbacher and Pasma 2007). The purposes of this publication were to make the theme accessible for anybody with an interest in the topic and to provide an entry point to each corresponding handbook. Furthermore, its short length made its translation in multiple languages affordable.⁸

The revised country and theme papers, supplemented with an index, a participant list, and an exhaustive bibliography, underwent a scholarly review process before being published in a handbook (Michelmann 2009). This book conveys a profound and updated insight into the topic of foreign relations of constituent units in federal countries. It is intended to be a compendium for practitioners and academics alike. The handbook further describes relevant prospective views about new trends and practices in the field.

The posting of all the program publications on the Web site enabled additional people around the world to become involved in this global dialogue. And thanks to the online discussion forum, the newly developed knowledge got continuously reviewed and updated according to upcoming changes in federal countries worldwide.

6.9 Final Comments and Evaluation

One of the main objectives of the Global Dialogue Program from the very beginning was to stimulate not only learning but also networking among individuals with a common interest in the study and practice of federalism. The participants included almost 250 individuals from 12 countries. To increase the networking opportunities among this core group, all the names and organizational affiliations were listed so anyone—participants or readers—could get in touch whenever they wanted. Furthermore, on a regular basis, these network members received information and updates about the other program themes to interconnect the different program networks with each other. So far this overall network embraces 2,000 core members and is continuously expanding and being strengthened as individuals who get involved with the program themes also get involved in the ongoing online discussion forums.

8. The booklet “Dialogues on Foreign Relations in Federal Countries” is available in Arabic, English, French, German, and Spanish.

Theme five of the Global Dialogue Program was very well received in a Level One evaluation conducted with the national and international roundtable participants. In an independently conducted evaluation of the first five themes of the program, theme five was consistently favorably well rated, as were the previous four themes. With respect to *the overall satisfaction*, the combined average score of ratings for the national roundtables was 4.65; for the international roundtable it was 4.77, on a scale of 5. This positive feedback was supported by the qualitative feedback of the evaluation study, which makes it clear that “the overall judgment of the Global Dialogue Program from the perspective of the participants in the roundtables was very favorable” (Meekison 2007). This last conclusion is mirrored in comprehensive feedback from the former President of Switzerland three years after completion of the program portion. He was a participant at the Swiss theme country roundtable as well as at the international roundtable (see Box 3).

Box 3 Reflections from the Former President of Switzerland

As a member of the government of Switzerland, the first step I would take when contending with a political or constitutional problem was to always see how other countries had approached similar issues. Then I could determine how the solution for Switzerland should be tailored. In this light, I have been a great supporter of the Global Dialogue Program. Its approach is designed to develop comparative knowledge about federal countries and good federal practices that are unique in scope, up to date, and cover the practices of federal systems not only as they are written, but as they are implemented. To some extent, participation in the program is like listening to the wisdom of experience that other countries have to offer.

Over the last several years I participated in several national and international Global Dialogue roundtables. Through those experiences I came to the conclusion that what makes the program unique and effective is its comprehensive process; national and international roundtables motivate the participants, who represent diverse viewpoints about a given topic, to share with and learn from each other in a nonpoliticized environment.

(Box continues on the following page.)

Box 3 (continued)

Thus, it was with considerable anticipation that I looked forward to participating in the fifth theme of the Global Dialogue Program, that of Foreign Relations in Federal Countries, as it was considered to be a timely topic. As a member of the Swiss government, I faced mounting tensions between the federal government and the constituent units, called Cantons. At the time, Cantons were requesting increasingly a say in foreign policy, especially when their internal powers were concerned.

Foreign policy had traditionally been the responsibility of central governments. However, the scope and nature of constituent unit involvement in Switzerland and in many other federations has grown as the volume of international transactions and the number of international treaties and international organizations has increased dramatically in the last half century. These changes led in turn to ever-growing cross-border relations and to numerous interferences of the federal governments into the competencies of the constituent units. As a result, constituent units in many countries have become more engaged in international activities because the exercise of their constitutional responsibilities has been increasingly affected by globalization.

This is in particular true for Switzerland, and it was one of the reasons I insisted that in the revision of the federal constitution in 1999 the principle that foreign relations are a federal matter was repeated, but that the Cantons shall participate in the preparation of decisions of foreign policy that concern their powers or their essential interests and that the Cantons may conclude treaties with foreign countries within the scope of their powers.

In this light it was interesting for me to explore with my Swiss colleagues at the Global Dialogue roundtable issues such as: What constitutional powers do the federal governments and constituent states have to conduct foreign affairs? To what degree are relations between orders of government regularized by formal agreements or informal practice? What roles do constituent governments have in negotiating and implementing international treaties? How are international activities and interests managed? To what degree are the foreign activities of constituent governments in the federal system competitive, and to what degree are they cooperative?

As a former Minister of Justice of Switzerland, I was particularly interested in constitutional issues, and I was curious to learn, at the international roundtable, the broad spectrum of how other countries deal with these

Box 3 (continued)

questions. For example, at one end of the spectrum are Canada and Australia, in which constitutional conventions and court rulings define the terrain and give constituent units significant scope for action. In other countries, including India, Malaysia, and South Africa, the constitution explicitly assigns powers over foreign relations only to the federal government. At the other end of the spectrum are countries whose constitutions assign explicit powers to the constituent units—Argentina, Germany, and Belgium. At our national roundtable we concluded that Switzerland belongs to this latter group and it is important to keep a balance between the participation of the constituent units and the necessary freedom of action of the federal government in foreign policy.

One of my further conclusions was that both orders of government have their particular expertise, and both contribute to the development and maintenance of an effective foreign relations policy. Governments of constituent units on one hand do have a detailed understanding of the cross-border interests and concerns and do have much relevant technical expertise. On the other hand, federal governments do bring greater experience to bear in dealing with the international environment and wield greater political and economic clout than single constituents or groups of constituent units do. Their cooperation requires consultation through durable and adequately conceptualized institutions of intergovernmental relations, and it requires the willingness to make compromises.

In summary, I learned a lot from participating in Global Dialogue roundtables as well as from the publications emanating from the program, and I was not surprised when a recent independent evaluation of the program concluded that the roundtables and the resulting materials are of great value for states that are designing their federal system or struggling with developing new policies, because they get an opportunity to learn how others have resolved similar challenges. It is therefore not surprising that the program has become a useful tool for practitioners and academics alike to acquire a comparative view of a variety of solutions to problems federal governments typically encounter. The program encourages participating practitioners and scholars to use the knowledge they gained to inspire new solutions, thereby improving democratic governance, and to join the many active participants around the world in expanding and strengthening the growing international network on federalism.

Arnold Koller, Appenzell, Switzerland, December 8, 2009

