

Measuring cities



Measuring cities

World Bank teams up with U of T for urban metrics powerhouse *by Paul Fraumeni*

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is the poorest city in the world. Given its geographical location at or under sea level, it is at great risk for flooding as climate change intensifies. Still, it is growing fast – with more than 12 million people, experts believe it could become the largest city on the planet.

Despite all its mighty challenges, Dhaka has an upside – it is a global leader in textile manufacturing.

"Look at what you're wearing right now. It was probably made in Dhaka. They are totally hooked into the global economy and driving an international market around the garment

industry that most people just don't know about," says urban planning expert and political science professor Patricia McCarney.

McCarney believes firmly that we should be paying much more attention to the power of cities in the new economy. In fact, she doesn't see how we can ignore them.

"Cities are vital drivers of the economy. If you look at the top 100 economies of the world, among multinational corporations, countries and cities, about 37 on the list are cities. They are generating 70 per cent of the world's gross domestic product. So when economists think about how we move forward and overcome the financial crisis, it's essential to include cities."

The problem is a lack of city data conforming to a standardized methodology that can ensure sound global comparison and learning across cities. How does domestic water consumption in Sao Paulo compare to Bogota? How is Richmond Hill, Ont., dealing with hospital care compared to Surrey, B.C.?

That was until McCarney met up with officials of the World Bank (where, before joining the University, she had worked on projects designed to strengthen city governments in Africa). The World Bank was working on developing a globally standardized methodology for indicators that would allow cities to be accurately compared and asked McCarney if she and U of T would be interested in making Toronto the headquarters for a research facility. "It seemed like such a good idea," she says.

That good idea has become the Global City Indicators Facility (GCIF), of which McCarney is director.

Working with two full-time staff (and a number of interns when they are available) McCarney has enlisted 130 cities from every continent to submit data to the GCIF website on an annual basis in key areas of urban activity. In the transportation category, for example, cities are submitting data on such important factors as the number of kilometres of high capacity public transit per 100,000 people, the number of personal automobiles per capita and the annual number of public transit trips per capita. She is working with the World Bank now to develop a mobility index for cities globally.

"We are accumulating data that enable cities to plan with the knowledge of what others are doing." To ensure cities are comparing themselves in an apples-to-apples fashion, the GCIF puts them into peer groups. "Comparing cities of similar size – such as Amman, Jordan, and Cali, Colombia – makes the measurements more accurate when they describe, for example, ambulance response times. We want cities to be able to learn from each other and this is how to do that effectively."

While building enthusiasm for the GCIF took a lot of legwork ("For the past two years, I've been on a plane visiting city officials," McCarney notes), it has its own momentum now and cities continue to sign on.

Supporting the growth of the GCIF is a blue chip team of partners on its board of directors, including officials from the World Bank, UN Habitat, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), U of T and mayors of six cities – Amman, Durban, King County (the area surrounding Seattle), Milan, Sao Paulo and Toronto. McCarney is also developing an international corporate advisory board, so GCIF can access specialized expertise such as information technology and data visualization from, for example, global industry partners such as Cisco and Philips.

"This has become a knowledge hub of 130 cities here at U of T. That's a pretty cool thing. It's gone beyond a mere database. The GCIF has also become a network of cities where real partnerships are growing. With cities playing such an important role in global affairs today, the connectivity of cities is vital. That's what we're providing."
