

News / GTA

## Toronto-based data institute puts cities in their place

Respected local data gatherers compile the information needed by cities around the world to plan a way forward.

By: **Christopher Hume** Urban Issues, Published on Sat Feb 1 2014

If knowledge is power, then data is control.

No one need tell that to Patricia McCarney: as founder and director of Toronto's [Global Cities Institute](#), she has devoted years to gathering the sort of information that enables analysts to make sense of the urban world.

She and the institute have always enjoyed widespread support in every part of the globe. In the past few months, however, they have achieved new levels of attention.

McCarney has managed to attract significant corporate sponsorship from the start, but now some of the largest corporations on earth have come calling. At the same time, she has also forged close working partnerships with many of the world's most important agencies, including the United Nations and the World Bank.

The game changer was a recent agreement with ISO, the [International Organization of Standardization](#), to establish a worldwide city rating system.

But long before that, McCarney had created an unprecedented global network of cities and data that offered something that until then had not been available: an international context.

"Cities come for different reasons," she explains. "But what they want is data we've been gathering for years. For the first time, we have standardized urban indicators for hundreds of cities around the world. And it's all happening here in Toronto."

From her offices at Bloor and Avenue Rd., she oversees a staff of 10 and an ever-expanding intellectual network that encompasses 254 cities in 81 countries. (In addition, another 300 Chinese cities belong to the network, though for political reasons they cannot report individually.)

Of course, humans have been gathering information for as long as they've been around. McCarney's contribution has been to bring order to the field and standardize the data so that cities everywhere can plot themselves against cities anywhere.

McCarney, who launched the project in 2008 with funding from the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, waded into an ocean of data made up of more than 1,100 indicators from nine cities. But only two were directly comparable. The rest were apples and oranges.

McCarney gives the example of a "dwelling unit," which means different things in different parts of the world. (Interestingly, Toronto experienced similar difficulty in the aftermath of amalgamation when it found itself with six legal definitions of a dwelling unit.)

"If we don't have good data," McCarney says, "how can we measure our own performance?"

Suppose you want to see how Toronto rates against its peer cities in terms of aging, education, children, health, quality of life, safety, housing or resilience; the necessary information has now been collected, collated and can be accessed. The data is also useful for cities seeking to learn from other communities.

Global Cities' indicators are organized around 20 themes and, as McCarney notes, "they measure a range of city services and quality of life factors that provide a framework for measuring performance standards and planning for sustainability."

The need for this sort of data goes beyond municipal egoism. These days, one of the main drivers is the insurance industry. In 2013, weather-related claims in Canada hit \$3.2 billion, which made it the most expensive year on record in this country. Theoretically, insurers could offer discounts in the future to cities that do well on the rating system or, conversely, charge more to those cities that fare less well.

"We're at a pivotal moment in our development," McCarney says. "We've reached a plateau. We now have so much traction internationally and a lot of interest from global corporations and major international bodies. This is a critical moment in how we can help cities.

"We've been building all these indicators — we apply about 100 indicators on city service and quality of life — and now we're the first through the gate with ISO, which has tremendous potential for cities."

The ISO provides the "third-party verification" that allows cities to use data to leverage their budgets as well as benchmark themselves. Once a city gets its rating — ISO 37120 — it represents a stamp of approval.

"ISO didn't know where to put us," McCarney recalls. "We went to Geneva and positioned ourselves with a technical committee. We had tested the data with over 100 cities. That took us about a year and a half."

Underlying the project is the inescapable though often ignored fact that the changes sweeping the planet are being played out largely in cities. That's why urban information is more useful than that gathered at the national or provincial levels. Whether the issue is health, aging populations, extreme weather damage or growing income disparity, it's cities that bear the brunt.

Given the chronic underfunding of cities everywhere, there will undoubtedly be some who see McCarney's data as a basis for demanding more from so-called senior levels of government.

That has yet to occur, but she does talk about how her figures can be used as the basis for a more regional approach to governance. She has come up with what she calls the Toronto Urban Region, which extends from Niagara to Clarington and north to Barrie. It isn't the same as the official Greater Toronto Area, which is smaller.

"The uneven distribution of characteristic across the region can point to areas where improvements can be made to increase the competitiveness of the region as a whole," McCarney wrote in a recent newsletter. Keeping in mind that cities generate 70 per cent of global GDP, it only makes sense to understand as much as possible about cities and city-regions.

"Cities are centres of economic activity, culture and education," says Art Eggleton, the former Toronto mayor and Liberal senator and now Global Cities chair. "As cities go, so goes the country. National governments have been very slow to recognize this. In Canada, the federal government looks at municipalities as a provincial responsibility."

He also says that the Toronto-based organization, which sits at the heart of a worldwide network, will help boost the city's fortunes, both financially and intellectually. Indeed, it is putting together a major conference to be held here in May.

GCI has reached a crossroad. The province has been generous, but to fulfil its promise the institute needs to take itself to another level. McCarney is naturally optimistic. Success has increased the pressure, but also the possibilities. Every day brings new opportunities.

Just last week, Istanbul joined. Who will be next?

**Christopher Hume** can be reached at [chume@thestar.ca](mailto:chume@thestar.ca)

---