

The economy of a council

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The arrival of a general council transformed the economy of Basel. At its height in the mid-1430s, the Council brought several thousand people to the city: prelates with their households, envoys with their retinues, theologians, lawyers, scribes, servants and the merchants and craftsmen who supplied them. The exact number is uncertain; estimates of the total number of persons connected with the Council at its peak range from several thousand to more than ten thousand, which would have doubled the population of the city.¹

The presence of so many visitors created demand for housing, food, wine, horses, clothing, paper, candles and services of every kind. Innkeepers, landlords, bakers, butchers, wine merchants and craftsmen profited. The city's revenues from the *Ungeld* on wine and grain rose. The rents that citizens could charge for rooms and houses increased, which obliged the city to regulate prices to prevent abuses that could have damaged its reputation and driven the Council away. The council of the city established commissions to allocate lodgings, fix rents and control the prices of food and fodder.²

This experience is instructive. A host city must balance two interests. On the one hand, it wants to benefit from the spending of its guests. On the other, it must avoid excessive prices that would make the stay unattractive and damage its reputation. Basel's regulation of rents and prices during the Council anticipates the policies that modern host cities adopt for international organisations, conferences and major events: the provision of subsidised premises, special housing arrangements, fiscal privileges for officials and the control of prices during events. Geneva's policy towards international organisations, examined in the companion volume, and Basel's policy towards the Bank for International Settlements, examined in Part F, are modern forms of the same balance.

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The Council also imposed costs on the city. The visitors needed protection, which required guards and patrols. Their disputes with citizens required courts and arbitration. The influx of people raised the risk of disease and fire. And the political conflicts of the Council, between the pope and the fathers, between the rival nations and between the princes, exposed the city to diplomatic pressures and to the risk of being drawn into conflicts beyond its control. When the Council declined after 1438, the city lost its revenues, and when Frederick III withdrew his protection in 1448, the city had to ask the Council to leave.

1 Notes

1. Estimates of the number of persons present in Basel during the peak years of the Council (mid-1430s) vary considerably in the literature; see Helmraath, 1987; Wackernagel, vol. 1, 1907. Figures to be verified. ↩
2. On the regulation of lodgings, rents and food prices by the city of Basel during the Council, see Wackernagel, vol. 1, 1907; Helmraath, 1987. To be verified. ↩

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