Regional development has found its significance renewed as the global scene is characterized by rising inequality resulting in local economic insecurity which has been compounded further by new global threats through unregulated markets and climate change, not to forget the continuing impact of the recession of 2007-2008. Underpinned by the themes of underdevelopment, uneven development, and globalization, regional and local economies are discovering the need to reduce regional disparities by supporting economic activities (employment and wealth generating) in regions. Given the fact that development tends to be spatially and temporally uneven due to socioeconomic and physical variations and because past policies have failed to reduce regional disparities significantly at meso- and regional levels, “regional development” has assumed core significance and thus calls for policy action and hence warrants intensive conceptual and applied research. This context of unequal distribution of welfare among regions and/or cities has been a source of concern for both policy makers and researchers.

This special issue has contributions from economists, geographers, and planners who bring the theme of regional development alive at different scales—core-periphery, regional, and neighborhood. In the process, these authors examine issues (through five articles and seven book reviews) such as the relationship of social institutions and development processes, policy mechanisms and special border economic zones, new regionalisms in Africa, the boom-and-bust landscape in California, craft breweries’ influence on local economic development, regional and urban policy of the European Union, Latin American politics and development, and impact of economic development on its environment in northwest British Columbia.

In the first article, Michael Woolcock examines the role of social institutions on economic development process from an interdisciplinary perspective. According to Woolcock, understanding the role of various social institutions such as kinship structures, systems of rules, civic organizations, religious sensibilities, identities, norms, and networks have been very crucial to the development aid processes, however, it has been a challenge to engage with them as they represent a non-linear trajectory. Readers will find this article
illuminating as the arguments have been developed over a long period of time and it serves to provide the big picture account of the role of social institutions in the development process.

The second article by Choen Krainara and Jayant Routray deals with the emergence of border economic zones in Thailand in response to evolving and facilitating policy instruments and trade agreements with neighboring ASEAN countries for mutual benefits and overall regional development. This study is significant as it recognizes gaps in policy for both economic efficiency and social equity reasons.

The third article by Timothy M. Shaw draws our attention to the evolution of new regionalisms in Africa as governments restructure under the pressures of neoliberalism and globalization. The politics of regionalism often does not distinguish between the regional economic policies and regional political identity. Shaw’s observation that Africa grew very fast in the first half of the decade, but seems to be waning from that trend is significant. His narrative coaxes us to revisit how the state and supranational institutions shape economic processes in multiple ways within its territory(s), recognizing the different kinds of states within the global economy and appreciating the changing role of the state in an era of globalization. Inadvertently, Shaw also demonstrates why geographical scale matters in the reconfiguration of regional spaces and spaces of regionalisms and thus must be viewed as a political process involving conflict and negotiation.

The forth article by Myles and Filan unpacks the evolving dynamics of policy making in a boom-and-bust economic landscape of California’s Sierra Nevada region. This article will also help the reader understand how resources drawn from the natural environment become incorporated into economic processes and get assigned an economic value. Myles and Filan also draw our attention to the need for reframing and rethinking the regional development problem as part of an entangled multi-scalar process that has shaped and continues to shape the Sierra Nevada region.

The fifth and last article in this special issue, by Neil Reid and Jay Gatrell, is about how the evolution of craft breweries are asserting their role in local economic development. Reid and Gatrell observe that the United States is witnessing a grassroots reaction with the emergence of nearly five thousand craft breweries. According to them, new information and transportation technologies have made it possible to decentralize production operations to “cheaper” locations (lower wage bills, etc.) or ones with special advantages in terms of access to
technology, labor skills, or markets. The authors agree that the local geographies of beer are indeed part of the process of a “decentralized economy,” however, is incredibly volatile.

Collectively, these articles draw our attention to the need for reframing “regional development” through the lens of evolution, innovation, and transition. Readers will also find it interesting that the seven book reviews of recently published works echo some of these sentiments.

The first of these reviews is by planner George Pomeroy, who reviews The Regional and Urban Policy of the European Union, which indicates that European Union Cohesion policy is undergoing change. These developments are driven by the enormous transformations in European regions and by shifts in thinking and analysis. In the second review, Christopher Cusack, a geographer, reviews Dorothy Hodgson’s and Judith Byfield’s Global Africa: Into the Twenty-First Century. This volume of analytical studies tells us that Africa is changing very fast, fast enough to reconsider conventional wisdom on the matter. In the third book review, political scientist Kathleen Morrison reviews Karvey F. Kline, Christine J. Wade, and Howard J. Wiarda’s ninth edition of Latin American Politics and Development for this special issue. This book continues to provide a comprehensive overview of the region from the perspective of comparative politics. Discrete chapters present a rich array of insights about institutional variation and cooperation in Latin America.

The next three book reviews focus on “city-regions.” Reviewing Governing Cities through Regions: Canadian and European Perspectives, edited by Roger Keil, Pierre Hamel, Julie-Anne Boudreau and Stefan Kipfer, Baleshwar Thakur, an urban geographer, demonstrates that region is back on the stage. In the reviewer’s opinion, the book is an important contribution to the literature on regional governance. Through their review of Ipsita Chatterjee’s Spectacular Cities, Bikramaditya K. Choudhary and Sonali Yadav draw our attention to socio-religious dynamics in spatial policy explaining the consolidation of commodification of urban landscapes in certain places (which may be a global land grab). Neoliberal Chicago, edited by Larry Bennett, Roberta Garner, and Euan Hague, is reviewed by Donald Planey, whose observation is interesting that Chicago is an overanalyzed city. This edited book will make good reading for anyone who wants to understand how Chicago has been impacted by the pursuance of neoliberal philosophy—from parking meters to schools.

The last book review, by the guest editor, an economic geographer, reviews Jonathan Peyton’s Unbuilt Environments, where the author’s aim has been
to show that the conditions of development are critical to understanding how and why environmental change occurs and to detailing the breadth and depth of those changes.

I hope this special issue will provide an illustrative perspective to “regional development” through case studies from across the globe, even as the current global economic turbulence is radically altering the global landscape and companies, countries and communities are being forced to review their assumptions about the future and to rethink their strategies in light of the global transformation taking place.