Community Indicators and Healthy Communities

Kate Besleme, Megan Mullin

A significant trend is spreading rapidly across the United States and around the world. Simply put—though not simple in practice—communities from Farmington, Maine, to Los Angeles, California, are using indicators to assess their well-being and to measure their progress toward shared visions and goals. Whether you are the director of the Economic Development Department in Baker City, Oregon (using benchmarks to monitor the success of the city's efforts to revitalize this rural community), or a member of the Sunrift Center for Sustainable Communities in Flathead Valley, Montana (facilitating the development of thirty-nine "gauges" to monitor sustainability), the need to set priorities and the desire to take actions toward a desired future are at the heart of all of these indicator projects.

Projects that are designed to measure community progress tend to characterize their purposes and approaches with terms such as sustainability, quality of life, and performance evaluation, and chances are we have all seen, used, and been confused by the terminology. Each conceptual framework establishes a unique approach for gathering and presenting information in a way that is both useful and understandable; however, the common goal they all share can easily be overlooked as a result of the labeling. In an effort to avoid getting lost in the labels, we have chosen a more inclusive term—community indicator projects—to describe the nature and common spirit of these projects.

Healthy community projects, which are cultivating a sense of shared responsibility for community health and well-being, resemble the large number of community indicator projects in several ways. They help bridge the gap between government and citizens, they build important coalitions within communities, they attempt to draw attention to problems and negative trends before they become damaging to the community, and they share an overall commitment to community betterment. In many cases, healthy communities conduct their own indicator projects in order to identify trends that will help target their action strategies. By educating citizens about the social and environmental determinants of community health, healthy community projects...
have been able to develop the strategies and political will needed to effect real change in their communities.

Because of its decentralized nature, the broader community revitalization movement as a whole must begin drawing on lessons learned as it invents new approaches to understanding, measuring, and influencing the factors that affect community well-being. As part of its National Indicators Program, Redefining Progress, a public policy institute in San Francisco, recently conducted a survey of nearly 150 community indicator projects (including healthy communities and healthy cities, sustainability indicator projects, quality-of-life indicator projects, performance evaluation projects, and so forth) throughout the United States. The Community Indicators Network at Redefining Progress has facilitated information sharing among the various projects about the processes, goals, and outcomes that each has discovered.

The purpose of this article is to draw on our observations and analyses of these community indicator projects as a way to elucidate the common goals and objectives of healthy community projects and community indicators projects and, more specifically, to better understand the role that indicators can play in mobilizing citizens to set priorities and goals and participate in community planning. The belief that indicators, in and of themselves, can mobilize change in our nation's communities is one that we must disavow. The process of indicator development enables participants to recognize shared goals and visions, as well as the limitations of existing measures of well-being. Moreover, it is this process that provides meaning and credibility to information in a way that ultimately influences action.

Revisiting the Social Indicators Movement

The current community indicators movement can be traced back to the social indicators of the 1960s and 1970s. The notion of social accounting had its genesis at the national level when it became evident during the 1960s that traditional economic indicators, especially the gross domestic product, did not accurately reflect the state of the nation. The major research and reports that emerged from this movement were national in scope and were concerned with one of the following objectives: (1) defining and collecting social information for policymakers; (2) using social information to establish social goals that would enable policymakers to set targets in specific areas such as health, employment, education, and crime; (3) institutionalizing periodic social reports; and (4) structuring information both economic and noneconomic, qualitative and nonqualitative, in some form of social systems accounting model. The social indicators movement of the 1960s was concerned with the role that social information plays in crafting the future of the nation.

A practical application of social indicators emerged during the 1970s, and much of this work was inspired by the objectives that were articulated
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throughout the 1960s. For example, the Scorecard Project was initiated in 1973 by the Fund for the City of New York to provide quantifiable, accurate, and reliable information about the outcomes of service delivery by the city. The scorecards measured results in areas such as education and parks and recreation, and they provided an objective basis for discussions between citizens and government in order to improve government performance and quality of life. The first and most established scorecard was developed with the city's Department of Sanitation to measure the cleanliness of the streets.

Another example is Putting Social Indicators to Work: An Annotated Bibliography, published by the state of California's Office of Planning and Research. It documents 134 cases of socioeconomic community indicator profiles at the state and local levels nationwide. The Office of Planning and Research researched the applications of social profiles and determined that a useful community profile "should present a comprehensive view of the community [and] should contain information on housing, crime, health, education, income, employment, and other pertinent areas. It should [also] recognize that these social conditions are interrelated and should facilitate the use of information on social conditions in policy decisions." Although many government departments and agencies, as well as many citizens, were committed to using social indicators in policy decision making, the political mood had changed by the early 1980s and the movement died out due to funding cuts and a perception that indicators had no direct and useful application.

Within a few years after the fading of social indicators, the healthy communities movement emerged as a new, participatory approach to public health. The healthy communities movement, like the earlier social indicators movement, seeks to broaden the conventional measurement of progress. In the case of social indicators, the intent was to expand the lens of national accounting to include social, as well as economic, indicators in order to comprehensively measure national well-being. The healthy communities movement applied the same logic to public health. With increasing inequity in the delivery of health care and with a deeper understanding of the many physical, environmental, social, economic, and behavioral determinants of health, emphasis started to switch from the individual, treatment-based public health model to a more comprehensive, community-based approach.

The movement, though widely dispersed and disparate, continues to maintain a single overall goal: to use a collaborative problem-solving process that allows a broad spectrum of community members to create a common vision of health and to implement a plan to turn the vision into reality. With this unifying goal and a set of commonly accepted principles, healthy community projects have started to spring up in communities all over the world. Each different in its methods and spirit, all the projects that have been developed over the past ten years have been united in their commitment to an inclusive process and to action for community improvement.
Healthy Communities

As part of their overall strategy to improve the public health of communities, healthy communities have redefined traditional measures of health and well-being. Healthy communities have been very effective in the ways that they have utilized indicators in their projects. Although indicators are not a necessary part of a healthy community initiative, they can play two important roles in a larger action project: They help identify priorities when a project is first starting out, and they provide feedback later on to help evaluate the effectiveness of the project's work. First, before any action plans can be developed, a community must assess its current health status. Even if a pilot knows the coordinates of her final destination, she cannot determine the direction of travel until she locates her current position. A community will not know whether to focus on groundwater pollutants or delivery of emergency services until it carefully evaluates the status of both. Indicators can clearly identify which areas a community is adequately addressing and which areas require additional attention.

Once an action plan has been developed and implemented, indicators can then be useful for providing feedback on the efficacy of the project’s initiatives. Data for the original indicators can be updated in order to track the success or failure of specific actions. Are conditions in the targeted area improving? Are negative trends emerging elsewhere? Indicators can provide clear and concise information about whether the community's needs are being met and whether there are new problems that need to be addressed.

A healthy cities project that has developed quality-of-life indicators as a long-range planning, priority-setting, and resource allocation tool is Pasadena, California. In 1992, 150 citizens and civic professionals comprising a cultural cross section of the city's diverse neighborhoods were called together by the Pasadena Public Health Department to help identify priority community health objectives. The result of their work was the "Quality of Life Index for Pasadena," a tool for increasing awareness about the healthy cities concept and for informing the public about actions to improve quality of life in Pasadena. The index has assisted both the city and community agencies in establishing human services priorities, and it has guided policy development in tobacco control, alcohol availability, and infant health. The project recently developed the Quality of Life Community Planning Matrix, and it now aims to design and implement the Pasadena Healthy Cities Communication Strategic Plan in order to communicate the findings and uses of the planning matrix to city staff and the community as a whole.

Community Indicators

While many healthy communities are using indicators as part of their overall action strategies, over one hundred other communities nationwide have taken on their own indicator projects as a means to accomplish their goals. Just what
is so attractive to communities about indicators? After all, indicators, by definition, are simply measurements that reflect the status of larger systems. Communities have long used indicators to measure their well-being. Traditional examples of community indicators include average income, housing starts, and high school graduation rate. What is happening now, though, is a rethinking of these traditional ways of measuring progress in favor of new indicators that more fully and accurately reflect the values and character of individual communities. Communities have started to realize that improvement on a traditional measurement does not necessarily indicate a positive step for the community. An increase in housing starts, for example, might mean the loss of open space and the development of urban sprawl. Out of this concern, citizens have taken their futures into their own hands and are creating new means for tracking their performance.

Community indicators are being developed by a wide variety of actors for a number of different purposes. For the most part, though, indicator projects emerge out of an inclusive process that reflects the diversity of the community itself. Like healthy communities, community indicator projects attempt to include as broad a spectrum of the population as possible in order to accurately reflect and consider the interests of the communities' citizens. In many projects, citizens and government collaborate in order to set a common agenda for their future.

Our survey indicated that there are three primary conceptual frameworks, each representing a distinct purpose and approach, that have influenced the development of the recent community indicator projects. In the following discussion, we highlight each of these three frameworks, as well as new projects that have used the framework, in order to demonstrate the diversity of purposes for which indicators serve as an effective tool.

**Sustainability**

Many projects are developing indicators in order to measure the sustainability of their communities. According to the landmark project of this kind, Sustainable Seattle, sustainability can be defined as “long-term health and vitality—cultural, economic, environmental and social.” Sustainable Seattle was inspired, in part, by the U.N.-sponsored World Commission on Environment and Development, which defined sustainable development as “development that meets that needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” What characterizes sustainability indicators is their future focus and the linkages they establish across issue areas.

*Sustainable Seattle*. Recently acknowledged for “best performance in the community sector” at the U.N. Habitat II conference in Istanbul, Sustainable Seattle has inspired dozens of communities worldwide to assess their progress toward (or away from) long-term sustainability and to identify key steps to improve their progress. In 1990, a group of volunteers decided to
assess Seattle's progress toward sustainability in order to identify key steps that could be taken to improve its performance. Over two hundred community members participated in the Seattle process, which identified forty key indicators of sustainability. The indicators were used primarily for education about sustainability and Seattle's performance in that area. Over half of the community indicator projects we surveyed looked to Sustainable Seattle as a model for developing a process for community dialogue and indicator development.

**Sustainable San Francisco.** In 1993, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors established the Commission on San Francisco's Environment, which was charged with, among other things, drafting and implementing a sustainability action plan for the city of San Francisco. Knowing the process would only be legitimate with participation by the wider public, several commissioners and others citizens in the community formed Sustainable San Francisco, a collaboration of more than 350 individuals representing city agencies and local organizations who have volunteered to develop a plan for the city's future. Sustainable San Francisco recently finalized its sustainability plan for the city of San Francisco, which establishes broad goals, sustainability objectives, and specific actions to achieve the objectives. Sustainability indicators are included in the plan, though they are not its primary focus. Sustainable San Francisco will soon be presenting the plan to the Board of Supervisors for its endorsement. The organization will work with various city agencies and the private sector on implementing the plan.

**Quality of Life**

Quality-of-life indicators differ from sustainability indicators in that they focus on a more immediate time frame and make fewer linkages across issue areas. In practice, though, quality-of-life and sustainability indicator sets have similar approaches and goals.

**Quality Indicators for Progress: Jacksonville, Florida.** In the early 1980s, there was little activity around comprehensive indicator sets at any level. Most of the local economic and social indicator projects developed by planning departments in the 1970s had faded away, and the few that remained received little attention. *Life in Jacksonville: Quality Indicators for Progress*, developed by the Jacksonville Community Council, Inc., is largely responsible for renewing interest in comprehensive community indicator sets, and for drawing attention to the social qualities as well as the economic strengths of a city.

In 1985, a group of about 100 concerned citizens gathered to raise their concerns about the effect that regional growth was having on the quality of life in Jacksonville. They decided to develop indicators for measuring these effects and created a set of seventy-five indicators that has since been updated annually to monitor Jacksonville's progress on community improvement. The chamber of commerce was a partner from the beginning and provided the initial
funding for the project. Although it took a few years for the indicators to get noticed by the press and used by the community, in 1991 JCCI, with the support of the chamber and the city of Jacksonville, initiated the Targets 2000 project, a strategic planning process involving another 140 volunteers in setting targets for the established indicators. The success of this collaboration earned widespread attention for the Quality Indicators for Progress, and dozens of projects measuring local quality of life have emerged in the early 1990s. Now JCCI is teaming with the local government to link the indicators with a performance-based budgeting effort for the city.

**Quality of Life in the Truckee Meadows: Reno, Nevada.** In 1989, the Nevada legislature created Truckee Meadows Regional Planning (TMRP) to develop a plan for the future growth and development of Reno, Sparks, and Washoe County. TMRP decided to use indicators as part of the plan, resulting in an indicator set that is updated annually, has official status, and belongs to the entire community.

TMRP worked with Truckee Meadows Tomorrow (TMT)—a nonprofit organization composed of nearly fifty local clubs and organizations—as well as a government-appointed task force and technical advisory committee to begin developing quality-of-life goals and indicators. In the summer of 1993, over four thousand people in the community contributed to the development of the indicators. In 1996, the Regional Planning Governing Board approved the revision of the regional plan. TMT is now working to promote the indicators; as part of its outreach and education strategy, the organization has created an “adopt-an-indicator” program designed to increase business and nonprofit involvement in using indicators to monitor programs.

**Performance Evaluation**

Performance evaluation is a method for determining how efficiently a jurisdiction is delivering a particular set of public services. The process is designed to yield information so that decision makers can tell how effectively a program or service has used its allocated resources. Performance evaluation indicators are almost always initiated and developed by government.

**Oregon Benchmarks: Oregon.** Oregon Benchmarks was initiated by the state in 1989 to examine the demands of a global economy and to measure Oregon’s progress in creating a skilled and competitive work force. The legislature mandated the development of the Oregon Progress Board to translate the strategies of “Oregon Shines,” the state strategic plan, into measurable goals. The board, with the cooperation of many public, private, and nonprofit organizations, developed benchmarks to establish budget priorities. The benchmarks represent the work of thousands of citizens who participated through public meetings and written comments. At the local level, fourteen community progress boards have been developed and have adopted the benchmark program to monitor the success of local efforts. Oregon Benchmarks has
received national attention from academia and the federal government, and fourteen states have used Oregon as a model in creating similar comprehensive benchmarking programs.

**King County Benchmarks: King County, Washington.** The Washington State Growth Management Act required in 1991 that King County and its thirty-five cities adopt a countywide vision for growth for the next twenty years—the Countywide Planning Policies (CPPs). Each jurisdiction in turn was required to develop a comprehensive plan consistent with the CPPs. In 1994 the King County Growth Management Planning Council (GMPC), a group of elected officials representing the 1.6 million people in King County, adopted the CPPs and mandated the creation of a monitoring program, which would include an annual benchmark report that would tell the GMPC whether the policies were achieving their intended outcomes. If not, the system would provide early warning and sufficient information to enable policymakers to determine whether different actions to implement the policies were needed, or whether minor or major revisions to the policies were required. Appointed by the GMPC, the Benchmark Committee, which includes representatives from the GMPC, business, nonprofits, and citizen groups, reviewed the CPPs and selected forty-five indicators in the categories of land use, affordable housing, economic development, environment, and transportation to track those policies. Data results for the indicators were disaggregated by city wherever possible. Thus far, the committee has set quantifiable levels of achievement or targets for two indicators: the number of new housing units and the percentage of new low-income housing units per city for the next twenty years. The first annual benchmark report was published in December 1996. Human services indicators will be added to the 1997 benchmark report.

**Healthy Communities and Community Indicators**

Now that the process of indicator development has demonstrated success in building coalitions and painting new portraits of community conditions, many community indicator projects are expecting actions to follow. So far, though, project leaders tend to feel that they have had limited success in this effort. The influence of information is almost always indirect, and it may take a fair amount of time before the information becomes manifested in actions, initiatives, or policy agendas. In terms of inspiring debate, however, both healthy communities and community indicators have demonstrated that goals can be set in a way that leads to community change. Indicators are an excellent tool for communities working toward a common goal. When properly designed, they can forewarn a community about a potential problem or negative trend before its effects become irreversible. They can demonstrate the linkages among large social, economic, and environmental systems and help to identify the causes of complex problems. They can measure the effectiveness of poli-
cies and projects. Most of all, they can simply, yet comprehensively, track a community's progress toward its goals.

For an indicator set to be properly designed, though, it must be focused on a clearly stated purpose and incorporate the values of the community. Some communities initiate indicator projects without a strong reason or purpose; they recognize the need for new measurements of progress but are not clear on what to use the new measurements for. Other projects are developed without careful consideration of the priorities and values of community members. The resulting measurements are therefore of limited use to the people who need them.

Healthy communities seem to have escaped some of these pitfalls. Because their goal is to create healthy and livable communities, and not to simply develop new indicators, their purpose is clear from the start. Further, the projects recognize that creating healthy communities depends on balancing conflicting values and addressing the needs of diverse populations. They carefully consider the values of the community as a whole, and, as a result, the indicators reflect that consideration. Healthy communities are unlike most other community indicator projects in that they have taken on indicators as one part of a larger action strategy. By working closely with the organizations and groups that are able to take action in the community, an indicator project can effectively serve as a feedback mechanism that, first, identifies community needs and then measures progress on meeting those needs. Other community indicator projects might look to healthy communities in their own efforts to generate action from their measurements.

Both community indicator projects and healthy community initiatives can be grouped into the broader framework of a movement toward citizen participation in community betterment. Both types of efforts unite government agencies, private citizens, businesses, and community organizations in searching for common values and in improving social, environmental, and economic conditions in communities. Both are working to create healthier, more livable communities that represent the values of their residents.

Healthy communities and community indicator projects cannot be examined in isolation from each other. Many healthy communities are initiating indicator projects as part of their larger action strategies in order to identify issues that need attention and to track their success in their action programs. And community indicator projects that are not part of healthy communities projects—those that address sustainability, quality of life, performance evaluation, or some other purpose or value—nonetheless share many common goals with healthy communities.

As the development and use of community indicator sets continue, it is important to remind ourselves and one another what indicators can and cannot do. Indicators do not substitute for action, and they also should not be expected to cause change in and of themselves. Indicators are simply measurements
showing time-series data that reflect trends in community conditions. In the process of their development, indicators do serve to stimulate community visioning and unite different interests, but they cannot single-handedly bring about change. Indicators are nothing more, nor should they be anything less, than the information base for a larger advocacy and action strategy that utilizes existing resources in a community.

Notes


Kate Besleme is program associate at Redefining Progress, a nonprofit public policy institute in San Francisco that seeks to stimulate public discourse on the type of future that Americans desire and how best to achieve it. She also coordinates and maintains the Community Indicators Network.

Megan Mullin is a former research intern at Redefining Progress.