

# Missed opportunities for democratic engagement: the adoption of community indicators in local government

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Community indicators, as a framework for the measurement of community wellbeing and progress established in collaboration with the community itself, have more than three decades of history in the United States. Although community indicator projects developed in Australia from the 1990s onwards, particularly by local governments, they have primarily been used as a reporting tool rather than as an instrument for democratic engagement and evidence-based policy development. In this article, an analysis is provided of the range of approaches to community indicators in Australia and the United States. The argument is made for the use of community indicators to enhance the democratic capacity of local government. The aim is to stimulate discussion about the potential benefits of community indicator projects for local government in Australia and increase understanding of the possible extent of their application.

**Keywords:** community indicators; local government, democratic engagement; community engagement; community strategic planning; Australia

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## **Introduction**

Community indicators are a framework for measuring community wellbeing and progress. Originally developed in the United States and Canada from the mid-1980s, community indicators were generally projects of the non-government sector. They attempted to build a statistical picture of a healthy community – with economic, social and environmental themes based on a community derived visions – towards which progress could be charted over time through the collection of data by communities using indicators as educative tools (Gahin & Patterson, 2001; Cobb & Rixford, 1998; Wiseman & Brasher, 2008).

A number of community indicator projects have developed in Australia over the past 20 years, generally by governments or government authorities, and particularly by local governments. In most cases, however, they have not evolved beyond a simple reporting tool and some of the original aspirations have been lost. Mostly absent is the use of community indicators as an expressly democratic tool for engaging citizens and communities in informed discussions about shared goals and priorities, and as a policy tool for guiding evidence based planning to address issues identified as important by communities.

Using community indicators as a democratic and policy tool offers local governments a strategic planning instrument to better understand progress and well-being from the perspectives of their own communities. Their use can inform communities and enable community support for resourcing decisions. Community indicators offer local governments a process for collecting local evidence to support policy and planning

decisions which will enhance their strategic capacity; the opportunity to increase their citizens' capacity for democratic engagement and understanding of the policy process and respective governments' roles; and a mechanism for communities to set service levels and the scope and type of responses required by the community.

### **Positioning, defining and categorising community indicators**

Often linked to factors such as globalisation and demographic shifts, debates on new forms of governance and the significance of community have emerged. Governance in this instance refers to structures and processes through which power, influence and authority are exercised, along with considerations of who participates and how (Kernaghan, 2009, p. 252; Ryan, 2014). This notion of governance involves governments sharing power with civil society and market actors within inter-organisational networks (Treib, Bahr, & Falkner, 2007). Governments need to adopt different ways of operating, which often include more influencing through steering and less through actually doing (Stoker, 1998, p. 24; Denters & Rose, 2005).

In this context, community and community indicators include ideas and developments concerning liveability, wellbeing, quality of life, triple and quadruple bottom lines, and sustainability (Morton & Edwards, 2012). More specifically, community indicator frameworks ideally include organisational decision making processes and are formally linked to and drive strategic planning processes (Morton & Edwards, 2012; Tan & Artist, 2013).

For over two centuries, statistical indicators have been a powerful influence on public attitudes and policy, often used as a tool for political control, but less often for open-ended social investigation or community development. The post-war development of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) powerfully linked state policy and ideas of societal wellbeing to economic output. In response, the 1960s social indicators movement rejected economic growth as the main measure of social progress, emphasising instead self-development, democracy, community health, localism and the integration of economic, social and environment wellbeing. But the movement as a whole failed to develop measures of overall community wellbeing (Burke, Ryan, & Salvaris, 2001).

Community indicator projects became the next development, particularly in the United States and Canada. These projects focused on measuring systems which were designed, developed and researched by community members themselves, with attempts being made to build a three dimensional picture of a healthy community: economic, social and environmental. The systems were like instrument panels providing citizens with clear and honest information about past trends and current realities, as well as assistance in shaping and clarifying community priorities (Cobb & Rixford, 1998; Sustainable Seattle, 1993).

Government agencies, private research organisations and academic institutions experimented with economic, social and environmental indicators up to the 1970s; but it was the grassroots interest by business leaders, not-for-profit organisations, educators and concerned citizens in providing information for policy makers and empowering and engaging citizens that led to the development of community indicator frameworks in the decades that followed (Burke, 2001; Johansson, 1991). The result in the United States and

Canada has been the trialling of over 200 community indicator projects from small towns to provinces, virtually constituting a social movement (Salvaris, 1999).

Community indicators are connected to democracy and community building. Both process and content are important. The process aims to be open, inclusive, community-based and cross-sectoral in recognition of democracy and political accountability being essential components. Such a process enables local citizens to identify areas of community concern, to determine themes in community development, and to set goals for community improvement over time (Salvaris, Hogan, Ryan, & Burke, 2000). Thus, the development of indicators in terms of content is not just a technical exercise requiring statistical or social theory expertise. Rather, it seeks to reflect the political and philosophical values of a community in the forging of a long-term vision for its future. To achieve this, a community participatory process is required (Memon & Johnston, 2008, pp. 71-73).

Community indicators are designed not to measure current conditions, but to shape and guide progress over time towards achieving community goals (Salvaris, Hogan, Ryan, & Burke, 2000). The development of a suite of community indicators can play a significant role in activating citizens to participate in priority setting, community planning and problem solving, as well as playing a function in social learning and behavioural change (Memon & Johnston, 2008, p. 73). The process of establishing community indicators offers citizens a mechanism for defining mutual goals and taking action together towards a better collective future (Swain & Hollar, 2003).

The use of community indicators seeks to improve governance and improve democracy. It needs to be practical and task-oriented, while keenly appreciating that

community indicator frameworks must reflect local values, aspirations and wellbeing priorities which vary across cultures and societies (Cox, Frere, West, & Wiseman, 2010).

Although there is a common thread among approaches to community indicator projects, choices are made about their conceptual frame, sponsoring organisations, and purposes. The choices influence the direction of projects at a community level, creating patterns of approaches which allow the classification of projects according to four interrelated types of community indicators – as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Four interrelated types of community indicators

<i>Quality-of-life indicators</i>	Basic economic indicators are involved, with the list being broadened to include indicators relating to all other social, health and environmental considerations that influence a community’s quality of life.
<i>Sustainability indicators</i>	An environmental perspective is essential, while recognising that wellbeing is also influenced by social and economic factors, with the environmental, social and economic interlinked, including ideas about triple and quadruple bottom lines.
<i>Healthy community indicators</i>	While focused on health, the underpinning concept of “community health” recognises the influence of social determinants of health, including economic prosperity, social wellbeing, environmental quality, and public safety.

*Benchmarking and performance indicators*

A holistic, outcome-based appreciation of the other types of community indicators and their significance in influencing specific public policy changes.

Source: adapted from Swain and Hollar (2003, pp. 719-794).

### **Community indicators in Australia: limited and patchy experience**

In 2001, community indicators were trialled in Australia through an Australian Research Council (ARC) Project, *Community Indicators and Local Democracy* (Burke, Ryan, & Salvaris, 2001). Since then, their use by state and local governments has not been widespread, although many councils have used some parts of the approach, particularly the use of survey data as a form of tracking progress in the context of their strategic planning. A range of councils, including those in the original ARC project, have continued with their use in a more or less comprehensive way, using them to underpin conversations with the community and driving their strategic planning processes. These councils have included Geelong, Moreland, City of Sydney, Waverley and Wollongong (City of Sydney, 2012; Waverley Council, 2013; Wollongong Council, 2012).

A state-wide initiative – *Tasmania Together* (Salvaris, Hogan, Ryan, & Burke, 2000) – began with a broad ranging brief from the state Premier’s office to report on the best forms and processes to develop benchmarks and measures of progress to inform a community- developed strategic plan for Tasmania’s progress and wellbeing for 20 years. The plan was to encompass social, economic and environmental goals, along with direct budget and policy priorities, and to be underpinned by extensive community engagement and regular public reporting and evaluation. It initially sought to use community indicators

as a tool both for building democratic capacity and for strategic governance; but after a number of iterations, it was put aside by a new government, as the process was strongly linked to the previous political party in power.

Another state-wide initiative is *Community Indicators Victoria*. This has struggled to establish ongoing funding and has largely become a standardised survey tool to be used for comparative data collection purposes. It receives support from universities, but relies on local governments to pay for the use of the state-wide dataset. There has been very little involvement by the community and related non-government entities.

In similar initiatives in New South Wales and Western Australia, there are strategic planning processes that aim to create a vision for the localities involved, which then comprise a process of assessment that underpins an assessment of whether things are getting closer to, or further way from, the desired situation. The resulting community strategic plans, as plans for the communities rather than the councils alone, require delivery by various contributors – other levels of government, business and the community – to enable the desired outcomes to be achieved. But, unlike that required by a community indicators process, the communities involved do not play an active role in the collection of the relevant data and, thus, do not acquire an immediate understanding of the factors which lead to particular decisions and outcomes.

The lack of widespread community indicator initiatives has, at least in part, to do with the effects of infrastructure privatisation, demographic changes and economic restructuring which have brought about cuts in social and physical infrastructure, reductions in funding, powers and functions, and greater state agency control reflected in



rate caps across a number of jurisdictions and forced amalgamations (Dollery, Grant, & Korrt, 2012). There has been pressure to become more managerialist by replicating the private sector emphasis on efficiency over other potential priorities (Ryan, 2014).

Yet local government still enjoys more citizen support than other levels of government (ACELG, 2015), and is still the most accessible avenue of political participation for ordinary citizens. Its weakening affects democracy at every level of government (Burke, Ryan, & Salvaris, 2001).

There is no agreed solution to democratic problems in and beyond Australia. Writers have long pointed to the need for local, participative, deliberative processes aimed at overcoming widespread alienation and, recently, as a counter to managerialism by putting an emphasis on social inclusion rather than mere legal equality (Marshall, 1950; Aulich, 2009); for meaningful, co-operative governance that builds social trust and strong communities (Etzioni, 1994; Stoker, 1998; Denters & Rose 2005); for the establishment of strong local assemblies (Barber, 1984, 2013); for open, deliberative democratic forums to resolve conflicting interests (Habermas, 1996; Aulich, 2009; Ryan, 2014); and for democratic participation at different sites and levels, not just formal government processes (Bobbio, 1987). Others argue that intractable issues facing governments will be best solved through the co-production of solutions with citizens (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 79).

### **Community indicators in the United States: significant projects with lessons for Australia**

Three of the most well-known community indicator projects in the United States are *Jacksonville Community Council Incorporated*, which is an example of a quality-of-life indicator project; *Sustainable Seattle*, which is the original, much copied and very influential example of a sustainability indicators project; and *Oregon Benchmarks*, which comprises a set of benchmarking and performance indicators through which communities are engaged in setting institutional performance standards. These ground-breaking community indicator projects illustrate some of the common approaches and common challenges that are inherent in such projects – with some lessons for Australia.

### ***Jacksonville: a quality-of-life project***

The *Jacksonville Community Council Incorporated* (JCCI) traces its history back to 1883 through a continuous line of organisations and citizen committees working for the health and welfare of the city of Jacksonville in Florida (JCCI, 2015). The organisation is privately funded by individual donors and corporate sponsorships, with the objective to “bring people together to learn about our community, engage in problem solving, and act to make positive change” (JCCI, 2015). There is an annual programme of community consultation to select two significant community problems for study; a collaborative, committee-driven process to consider findings; and a citizen’s implementation task force to get the issues on the community and business agenda by encouraging further deliberation, increased public awareness and action by public officials (Swain & Hollar, 2003, p. 799). JCCI launched the world’s first community quality-of-life indicators project in 1985; and, in 2013, it published its 29th annual *Quality of Life Progress Report for Jacksonville and Northeast Florida* (JCCI, 2013).

In the Jacksonville project, community indicators are seen as a tool by and for the community to educate itself, map its future priorities, advocate for change, and tell its own story about progress towards a vision it has set for itself. A strong commitment to involving the community, coupled with the JCCI's financial independence from government, has contributed to its longevity and ongoing relevance.

Participation of the community in developing indicators takes time and requires considerable resources. In 2000, the process to update the Jacksonville indicator framework included 90 meetings of various working groups and steering committees over a six-month period. While this investment led to broad community acceptance and use of the indicators, some citizens expressed frustration over the lack of a direct mechanism for the indicators to influence the decision-making process of the city government and other entities in the region. In response, the criterion for the selection of indicators was expanded to include an increased focus on policy relevance (Swain & Hollar, 2003, pp. 800-805).

### ***Seattle: a sustainability project***

*Sustainable Seattle* was established as a not-for-profit community organisation in 1991 to work with the community to establish indicators that would measure progress towards sustainability, defined as the “long-term health and vitality of a region, including the cultural, economic, environmental and social aspects as one whole” (Sustainable Seattle, 2015). The project pioneered the use of sustainability indicators. It created a framework that “recognises the importance of understanding the interconnectedness and linkages among various aspects of human well-being” by including environmental, social and economic measures, and recognising that trends over time and between geographic areas

can have opposite impacts – such that what is a good result in one place may have negative consequences for another area or at a later time (Swain & Hollar, 2003, p. 792).

The project was intended to influence urban policy and practice towards a system with an “emphasis on measuring and monitoring, collaboration between citizens, experts and decision-makers, linking indicators into a holistic framework, and the sharing of decision-making power via better information, communication and dialogue” (Holden, 2006, p. 254). Thus, a key objective was to improve the quality of democratic debate about issues of urban sustainability.

An indicator that measured the number of wild salmon returning to King County to spawn captured the attention of the public and local media. This indicator received the highest number of votes in the founding workshop. The salmon are beloved, are a valuable resource in the Northwest, and reflect both the quality of the water and the integrity of the ecosystems involved. As a single indicator, salmon numbers have been able to speak to a number of linked concerns for the community (Measuring Community Health, 2015). The 1993 report on indicators explained that “the health of the salmon runs is linked to the economy as well as the environment: tourism, recreation and food production are all affected”, with the wild salmon habitat and survival impacted by urban and industrial growth, forest practices, agricultural practices, municipal, industrial and agricultural diversions, and hydropower (Sustainable Seattle, 1993, p. 7).

After releasing the first three indicator reports in 1993, 1995 and 1998, *Sustainable Seattle* returned to the “drawing board” in 2005-2006 by further engaging with the community to develop the fourth set of regional sustainability indicators, with a

strengthened objective that they be actionable at both the personal and the policy level (Sustainable Seattle, 2015). Then, in 2011, the fifth set of sustainability indicators developed into a national “happiness index” project, which was spun off as its own entity called *The Happiness Initiative*.

A study on the impact of *Sustainable Seattle* found that opinion leaders and elected officials in the Seattle area considered the indicator framework to be a credible source of information, with its politically neutral mission of fact-finding for the public benefit improving the quality of policy debate (Holden, 2006, p. 267). The indicator reports interested “conservative and liberal politicians alike” and provided a “set of information based on which we could at least start the conversation”, with the resulting conversations between city and county governments about social and health issues being a major positive outcome of the project (Holden, 2006, p. 268). Yet questions remain as to their direct impact on, or relevance, to specific policy developments

### ***Oregon: a benchmarks project***

The Oregon Progress Board was established by state legislation in 1989 as an independent state planning and oversight agency responsible for implementing *Oregon Shines*, the state’s 20 year strategic plan. A community indicator framework called *Oregon Benchmarks* was developed in 1991 to report on outcomes against the three key goals of the strategic plan: quality jobs for all Oregonians; safe, caring and engaged communities; and healthy and sustainable surroundings (Oregon Housing and Community Services, 2015).

Largely as a benchmarking indicator project, *Oregon Benchmarks* sought to take a holistic approach by applying outcome-based concepts of other community indicator frameworks to an entire state. As it came out of a large-scale strategic planning process, the benchmarks framework was conceived as a way of indirectly influencing specific public policy changes (Deliberative Democracy Projects, 1997; Swain & Hollar, 2003, p. 794). Driven by the government, the benchmarks were created by six steering committees involving a process of community consultation, and included some ambitious targets to be met (Moore, 2013, p. 295).

Moore (2013) describes the challenges that faced Jeff Tryens, the new Director of the Board in 1995, as he tried to secure funding beyond the final two years guaranteed by the legislation that led to the board's creation. The analysis by Moore (2013) illustrates the difficulties of maintaining bipartisan government support for an indicator framework which is driven by government, with fears by the left that it is purely a government accountability measure, and views of the right that the indicators reflect a liberal social, environmental and political agenda. The analysis also demonstrates that indicator frameworks need to do more than re-package data available elsewhere in order to avoid being labelled "irrelevant", and that having too many indicators stops the framework being workable and meaningful (Moore, 2013, pp 298-302).

As new Director of the Board, Tyrens realised that in order for the benchmarks to secure a future, they "had to have a use above and beyond measuring government performance" by calling "into existence a public that could understand and act on its own interests, both independently and through the agent of government" (Moore, 2013, p. 306-307) – a sentiment which is reminiscent of the original intentions of community indicator

projects. Moore's (2013, p. 308) analysis therefore speaks of political work needed for community indicator projects to find a way to "attach political pressure to the measures" without having formal authority or being aligned with the executive power, and to adapt through consultative processes with citizens that allows them to set goals for both the government and private sectors. In this way, indicators "may hope to survive" a "political authorising environment" that is in a constant state of change, which would normally be a risk for the longevity of any measurement system (Moore, 2013, p. 313).

After delivery of the 2009 indicator report, the state discontinued funding and disbanded the Oregon Progress Board, and also discontinued the tracking of state and county indicators (Weber, Worcel, Etuk, & Adams, 2014, p. 2). Since then, a partnership of community organisations and universities led by the Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) has announced a new indicators project – *Tracking Oregon's Progress* (TOP) – which builds on the discontinued *Oregon Benchmarks* data collection reporting (Weber, Worcel, Etuk, & Adams, 2014, p. 2).

Although the benchmarks of *Oregon Benchmarks* have been adopted by the private not-for-profit sector, the OCF recognises the importance of fostering a broad buy-in from government, business and the private sector in order for the indicator project to drive change, meet multiple needs, and have a sustainable future. Project Director Sonia Worcel has said that TOP hopes to achieve future state government financial support through a private-public partnership, including funding from philanthropy, the state, and the private sector through business associations, with the TOP project overseen by a board of individuals that represent the funding partners. She has also said that the OCF chose to make this initial investment in TOP as its Board of Directors was concerned that the value

of the longitudinal data set collected by the Progress Board over a 20 year period would be lost (personal communication 12 June 2014).

***The three projects: attributes and challenges comprising lessons***

The three projects profiled above show some of the key attributes and challenges for community indicator projects. First, in all three, high level community engagement to choose and develop indicator frameworks took considerable time and needed to be supported by a sponsor capable of harnessing technical research and expert knowledge and actively driving the process. Next, each adopted a holistic approach to wellbeing, incorporating environmental, social and economic themes, regardless of the mechanism through which the framework involved was created and how its objectives were expressed. Over time, all have needed to wrestle with finding a balance between reflecting the breadth of community aspirations and developing a small enough list of indicators to be effective. Also, they have struggled with determining the degree to which indicators should have direct policy relevance. The struggle has been maximised if the project is a government one, as in the first phase of the Oregon project, with the challenges being greater in this respect for the Jacksonville and Seattle projects and the second phase of the Oregon project.

The projects illustrate that indicator frameworks are not fixed, but need to be revisited and upgraded over time to maintain relevance and community support. The most politically vulnerable of the projects – the Oregon project – was actually a project of government. This demonstrates the problem of changing political and financial landscapes and the tension between engagement with, or sponsorship by, government in order to



impact public policy directly, as well as the advantages of remaining independent as in the Jacksonville and Seattle projects. Also demonstrated is that the means by which indicator frameworks and resulting data are communicated to decision-makers, media, activists and the general public have an enormous effect on their relevance, impact and value to each group involved.

These and other indicator projects in the United States have been criticised for failing to have a strong influence on policy (Gahin & Paterson, 2001, p. 354). This criticism, while valid, neglects the influential developmental aspect of community indicator frameworks. A review of indicator projects in the late 1990s found that the learning and change that takes place during the development of indicators is of considerable value to policy change and development, and is more important than the reports of information gathered as a result of having a measurement framework (Gahin & Paterson, 2001). Indicators are value laden, and their meaning is determined in a contested ideological space; they require a clear conceptual basis; they are often symbolic indicators rather than literal measures; and their development can be about challenging prevailing wisdom. Therefore, indicators are most influential on future policy when their development is a collaborative learning process between the community and government (Innes & Booher, 1999, in Gahin & Paterson 2001; Cobb & Rixford 1998).

It follows that for indicators to be used and influential on an ongoing basis, there must be “a requirement to report and publically discuss the indicators in conjunction with policy decisions that must be made” (Innes & Booher, 1999, in Gahin & Paterson 2001, p. 355). Indicators revealing causes, rather than just counting symptoms, are more likely to impact on policy action. Also, there is more likelihood to be a move from indicators to

outcomes when the body responsible for the indicator framework has control over essential resources (Cobb & Rixford, 1998).

More specifically, indicators must resonate with the community and reflect their priority concerns, with their development being as much an art as a science to ensure strong resonance and engagement. Essentials include:

- (1) indicators that reflect a holistic understanding of wellbeing as understood by the community;
- (2) a small, focused set of indicators, linked to policy relevance, meaningful to the community, and regularly revisited to maintain currency;
- (3) a community based process that is reflective of community values and vision and measures progress on the community's terms, with adequate time allowed for their development;
- (4) a collaborative learning process, increasing the capacity for democratic engagement of citizens and debate, with interaction between governments and government departments to address complex issues and a mechanism which supports social learning and behavioural change;
- (5) a comprehensive, strategic and ongoing communications plan for all stages of the project; and
- (6) a sponsor (not-for-profit or government) with the expertise to drive the process and implement or influence policy, and preferably with control of the financial resources.

## **Conclusion**

Community indicators are a potentially powerful mechanism for enhancing democratic engagement, setting strategic priorities for public policy and service delivery, measuring progress towards a healthy and sustainable community, and encouraging social and behavioural change. The experience of community indicator projects in the United States provides a number of lessons for their implementation according to the conceptual frames, the sponsoring organisations, and the purposes of the project. Australian local governments, while having some experience with indicators, could valuably consider these projects and the assessments of their processes and impacts as a basis for expanding their conception of the place and value of community indicators in their governance role. With the increasing relevance of concepts such as public value (Moore, 2013) and the recognition of the challenges of city and metropolitan governance (Frug, 2001; Katz & Bradley, 2013), community indicators as a strategic tool for enhanced democratic governance can offer more than is generally seen in their current application.

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