

Indicators At Work

Big or small, indicator systems share the same 5 key tasks

By MICHELLE COLUSSI

I have to say, alarm bells start ringing in my head when I hear people talk about the “indicator project” they’re doing. Why name our work by the tools we use? Groups say they are undertaking a “mapping project” or a “social enterprise” project, a “co-op project” or an “entrepreneur mentoring” project, as if the tool was the focus of their attention, not the outcome that people are trying to achieve.

It makes about as much sense as calling an effort to build affordable housing a “hammer” project.

This Name Game is especially suspect when it comes to indicators. They are, after all, the very tools that are supposed to measure how our actions are (or aren’t) changing things. When we weave together the mapping, the social enterprises, the co-operatives, and the entrepreneur mentoring into a strategy of local revitalization, it will be the indicators that will tell us if all these initiatives are really issuing in the higher quality of community life we are ultimately after. If there is one “means” not to confuse with the “ends,” it’s got to be indicators.

I’ll say this much, though: like any powerful and flexible tool, indicators have to be selected, designed, managed, and used with care and skill. That’s not to suggest that they are beyond the ability of your local development society, co-op, small business, or community coalition. On the contrary, I recommend them to any organization that seriously aspires to help improve living conditions, whether local, regional, or national. I’m just saying that to use indicators well – that is, to employ them as part of a learning feedback loop that helps focus energy and attention on what people really want and what really works – you have to be systematic, attentive to detail, and “stick-to-it-tive.”

Here’s what that looks like in terms of process and structure. Whether it’s a king-size, sophisticated tracking system for whole regions, or just something for a neighbourhood association, effective use of indicators involves five tasks.

1. Begin at the End

Ultimately, whether our interest or forte is business development, housing, or tourism, the end we desire is some change in community conditions. Whatever we do, we want it to result in more local ownership, spending, stability, or jobs, perhaps. The first task therefore is to determine which conditions are of concern, so we can improve things or at least prevent further decline.

2. Map Out the Route

Specify these ends in terms of more measurable goals and figure out the strategy (or strategies) that we intend to employ to reach these goals. We design the measures that will “indicate” the progress we are making or not making over time.

3. Build the Engine

Create a mechanism to implement this plan – organizations, systems, and leaders to facilitate action, collaboration, and the monitoring of results. That includes delegating people to bring together stakeholders to create the vision or goals, think about the results, learn from them, and revise the plan as necessary over the long-term.

4. Tank Up (on data analysis)

Foster a culture of learning and thinking about technical data and its uses, especially among the people responsible for collecting and interpreting it. There are as many ways to misinterpret, misuse, and confuse indicators, as there are to use them effectively. People have to know how to ask practical questions of data, that is, questions that the data can reliably answer and that are informative about the effects of the action people are taking. Of course, people also need to know when the data is merely signaling a need for more or different information.

5. Get Technical

An engine for collecting data is wasted if we haven’t the software and hardware to store, share, and use it in a variety of ways. To get the most information out of each datum collected, individually and in relation to other data, we need computer systems and technicians who understand databases.

When people thoughtfully address all five of these tasks, indicators can be incredibly valuable tools for rallying companies, communities, even whole regions behind a long-term investment to bring about real change.

Here are two examples of how people have done it, both from the United States. The first shows how low-income neighbourhoods in big cities have learned how to create and use strategic information to empower themselves and improve their living standards. The second shows how an entire state has been using indicators to inform learning and strategic action at a variety of levels: state, county, sector, and municipality. Both display, in their own way, an on-going commitment to all five of the tasks.

The National Neighborhood Indicator Partnership

NNIP is an undertaking of the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. and an array of other organizations in 21 cities: community councils, municipal departments, foundations, and research institutes. All are committed to setting up and operating indicator systems for use by community leaders in building the capacities of institutions and residents in poor inner-city neighbourhoods. In other words, the information's prime value lies in its application – in local planning, policy-making, and community building. All the partners built computer-based neighbourhood indicator systems in the late 1980s. The pilots moved into full-scale implementation in 1996.

One of the keys to NNIP's success has been to start small and develop each system in step with increasing public support for the investment. Partners typically begin by collecting and applying a

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small amount of data. All have found that once they demonstrate to themselves and to others how practical the information is, the demand and ability to gather more information increases.

Most partners operate a “data warehouse” or collection that can be drawn on in creative ways as people look to get informed about new issues. They are like libraries in that sense, rather than mere publishers of pre-defined reports. Like a library, every warehouse maintains some data that is standard, and some that is unique.

The focus of each NNIP partner is to make the information accessible to local and city leaders for use in policy and action relating to distressed neighbourhoods. So even though many of the partners are themselves researchers or planners, they have avoided writing reports or developing plans themselves. Instead, says G. Thomas Kingsley, NNIP's director, they help relevant community groups use and think about the information themselves. They function as facilitators of policy analysis by local stakeholders and thus, have a critical role in “democratizing information.”¹

Democratizing information is what NNIP is all about. Partners supply technical assistance and training in the collection and use of data, in building and sharing tools and information, and in policy initiatives and other actions with other partners. They also play a role in the monitoring of each project or initiative that is undertaken.

As well as increasing the skills of others, the NNIP's partners are engaged in their own learning. The NNIP has developed several training programs for the purpose of “Building Community Capacity to Use Information.” Reporting on these programs, Terri J. Bailey recommends them highly:

“They are all targeted although the target may differ. They all meet a specific identified need in the continuum of efforts to build community capacity to use data. They are all learning (and adapting) over time.”²

The non-partisan role of the partners is another important aspect of NNIP's success: “Whether the institution is public, private or non-profit is not as important as how it behaves and the reputation it develops,” says Kingsley. “The NNIP partners are very careful about cleaning data, maintaining confidentiality, and guiding responsible use of their data. While they advocate using data in policy debates that are often controversial, they avoid taking sides in those debates.”³

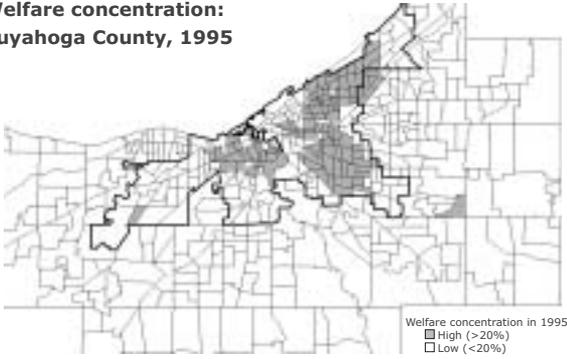
NNIP's experience highlights the role of the information itself in bringing together erstwhile antagonistic organizations. Evidently, when the facts are clear and misconceptions are laid to rest, many disagreements disappear. As Kingsley concludes, “Something is needed at the outset to shake up the old ways of looking at things.... NNIP partners have been able to use fresh presentations of data on local conditions and trends to accomplish that.”⁴

What sorts of “real change” have the NNIP partners helped bring about? Have they in fact managed to get information used for policy and action initiatives in poor neighbourhoods? Unequivocally, yes.

To take just one example, NNIP's partner in Cleveland put together a team to work with data on welfare cases and entry-level job openings. (See diagrams, p. 11.) The analysts mapped welfare recipients by census tract. They then used geographic data on employment to analyze and map spatial patterns of recent entry-level job openings. The data showed that while welfare recipients were concentrated in a few inner-city neighbourhoods, the job opportunities were largely in metro fringe areas.

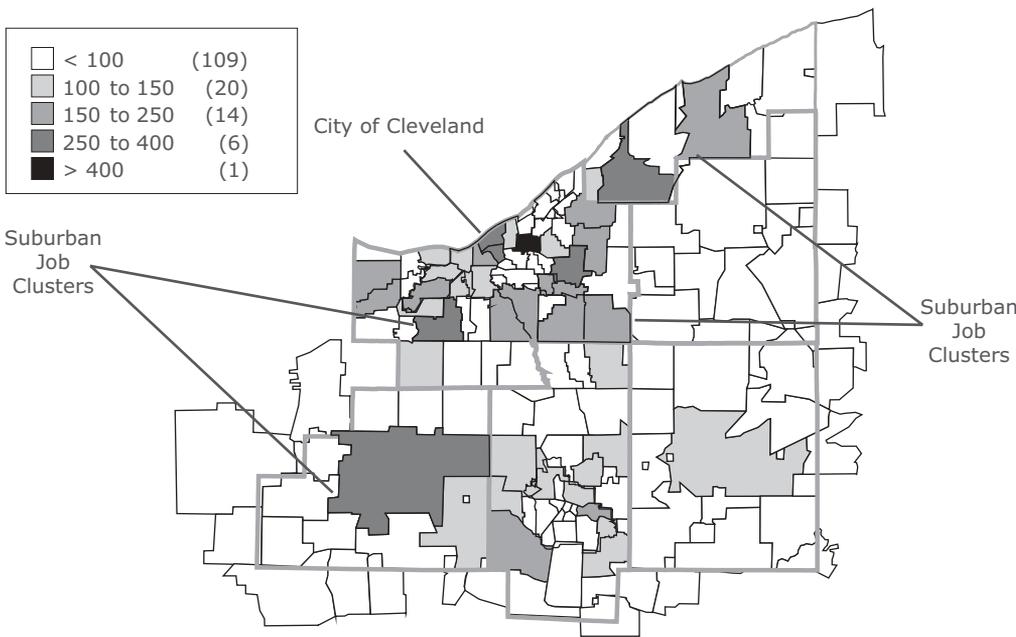
The analysts then examined income losses under welfare reform cutbacks. They also calculated the time it would take welfare recipients to commute to the new jobs. Because the mismatch between jobs and job seekers was mapped and hard numbers provided, it captured the attention of local media and policy-makers. The state has now allocated money to cover transportation costs in welfare-to-work programs. Local planners are working with the NNIP analysts to test ways to get vulnerable recipients to jobs more rapidly.⁵

Diagram 1
Welfare concentration:
Cuyahoga County, 1995



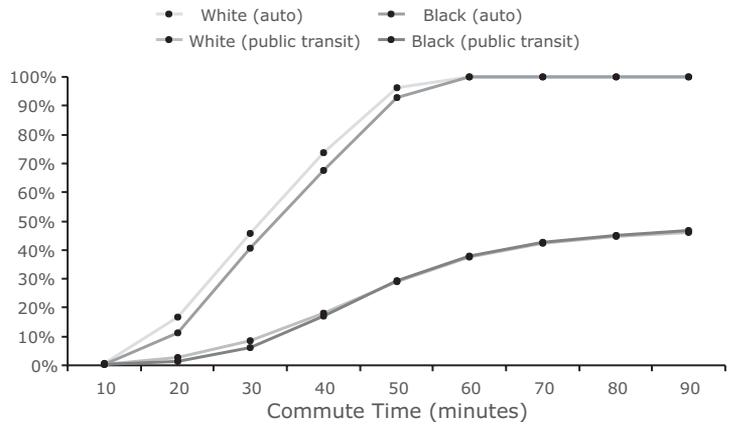
Source: Urban Change Neighborhood Indicators Database.
 Analysis: MDRG (Oakland, CA.), Project on Devolution and Urban Change

Diagram 2
Projected Annual Job Openings
in Entry Level Occupations, 1995-2005
 Cleveland-Akron Metropolitan Area by Zip Code



Source: Laura Leete, Neil Bania, and Claudia Coulton, "Welfare Reform: Using Local Labor Market Data for Policy and Analysis and Program Planning" (July 1998).
 (right) Photocredit: Greater Cleveland RTA

Diagram 3: Average percentage of entry level job openings accessible to welfare leavers by mode of transportation & race



Analysis by: Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, Case Western Reserve University (MSASS CWRU), Cleveland, OH

The Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, a NNIP partner, had the residences of Clevelandites on welfare mapped (Diagram 1), and compared them to the locations of entry-level job opportunities (Diagram 2). The geographical distance between welfare recipients and many suburban job clusters was unmistakable. Further analysis of actual travel time by car and public transit (Diagram 3), showed how inaccessible many entry-level jobs were to welfare leavers, black and white, who depended on public transit. (Less than half the jobs could be reached with even a 90-minute bus ride.) Information is power - so a transportation subsidy was born.



The Oregon Benchmarks

NNIP projects have grown from the neighbourhood level up. The Oregon Benchmarks have spread from the state level down. But the essential tasks remain the same: determine outcomes; specify goals, strategies, and indicators of progress; create an organization to run the feedback loop; learn and keep learning about the use and abuse of indicator data; and invest in essential hardware and software.

In Oregon's case, the outcomes were delineated in *Oregon Shines*, a state-wide, government-sponsored, strategic vision for the state's economic, social, and environmental conditions in 2010 - fully 20 years in the future at the time of publication. The document established goals and some broad (but critical) strategies.

But here's the kicker. Following the recommendation of the writers of *Oregon Shines*, the state legislature went on to create a caretaker for the vision. It was the responsibility of this Oregon

Progress Board (OPB) to specify targets and then design measures by means of which the public could track progress, focus efforts, and monitor program effectiveness.

Establishing these measures was a 3-year process in itself. The OPB's first cut suggested no less than 274; after consultation with community, business and institutional leaders and the public, the number had fallen to 254. By 1999, the process of trial and error had established 92 of these "benchmarks," from which the whole process, "Oregon Benchmarks," has taken its name. (Note that in Oregon they apply the term "benchmarks" interchangeably to both indicators and to targets. I would sooner reserve it for reference to a particular type of indicator. See the glossary to this edition, pp. 6-7.)

Although the OPB was a means to put stewardship of the vision at arm's length from the state government, its existence was government-sanctioned and -funded and has remained so through the terms of three different governors.

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Now, 14 years after its founding, the OPB continues to steward the vision and the benchmarks. It collects and manages all the data that relate to the benchmarks. Its staff train state agencies in linking their performance measures to the benchmarks. They work with NGOs and local governments to foster the connection between community priorities and state-wide goals and benchmarks whenever possible, but they also promote strategic priorities in and of themselves as a way to allocate resources locally.

The OPB has also learned about what role they need to play, and what roles they must steer clear of. One of the latter is partisan intervention:

“If the OPB were to involve itself in advising how to solve a particular issue, ... it would become trapped in the wrangling associated with clashing political philosophies. This would destroy a critical feature of its operation and effectiveness, that

is, its ability to keep Oregon Benchmarks focused on helping all Oregonians better understand how they are doing as a society in terms of meeting the goals all Oregonians say are important.”⁶

One role at which OPB staff has become particularly adept is that of fueling and guiding the learning process. They have developed a singular ability to ask the right questions about the information they receive and then to gather more information in order to arrive at satisfactory answers. So raw data acts as a stimulus to additional thinking and research around “what’s going on here and what needs to be done differently.”

An example of this is found in *Oregon Shines II*. In 1996 the governor formed a new task force to work with the OPB to assess the extent to which Oregon had achieved its targets. The task force was also to recommend changes to the vision to accommodate new realities. As the basis for their deliberations the task force used the benchmark data and a thorough process of public consultation.

What did they learn? Looking only at the indicators touching on Economic and Social Performance, they could see the following:

- “A” for efforts to attract new companies and transform the dying resource-based economy into one driven by technology and internationally competitive industries.
- “B+” for efforts to attract the professional services essential to the high tech business environment.
- All the other economic indicators received only a “C” (marginal improvement) letter grade, and “F” for employment dispersion.
- “F” for crime statistics, child abuse, affordable childcare, juvenile arrests, drug use, elder abuse, and urban congestion, and similar failing (Ds) grades on others.

It was apparent that the benefits from high tech industry were not widely shared throughout the state. In fact, many counties showed declines in family incomes during this same period of macro-level “economic success.” As a consequence, the revised strategic vision, *Oregon Shines II*, gives clear priority to community-based development principles and practices. They also learned that some of the benchmarks were not instructive, so these were dropped and others were added to capture performance pertinent to the new targets.

The effective use of indicators, then, is not just about the indicators themselves. They are one critical piece of the puzzle. The success of the Oregon Benchmarks is also due to organizational stewardship, to a culture that promotes on-going learning, and to the legislative framework which supports the Benchmarks while relying on them to change the way Oregon “does business.” Thus, the Benchmarks’ tremendous impact on communities and organizations within the state, as well as government itself. In essence, a cadre of bureaucrats and agencies mobilized around the vision and the benchmarks and have supported and disseminated it right through the system, so a remarkable range of groups and organizations now use it as a tool for learning and strategic action.

Back Home

What meaning for our own work can we find in these stories? Most of us are not connected with an organization equivalent in capacity to any of the NNIP partners. Most of us do not live in a province or state that has legislated anything like *Oregon Shines* (the plan), the Oregon Progress Board, or the Oregon Benchmarks (the measures).

I am no indicator specialist. As a planner, facilitator, trainer, and organizer, however, I know the value of reliable, valid data to help me “tell the story” about what is going on and to track change. Although they are time-consuming, complex, and costly, I think that indicators hold such potential for us and for communities that we are crazy not to make the effort.

Apart from the five tasks essential to effective use of indicators, here are some other points to keep things in perspective.

First, the use to which people are going to put the data must drive the effort to collect it, and that use must involve what Kingsley calls the “democratization of information.” Integral to any effort, from the get-go, must be the commitment to improving the conditions in which people live, and to empowering people to understand and use information for that purpose.

Second, choosing indicators, mapping, evaluating progress, etc. are difficult. That’s a given. But there is enormous value in the very process of working through these difficulties. As the coordinator of one project told me, “It’s what we learn ... about each other, our community and what measures are meaningful ... as we struggle with this that is the point right now.” This learning requires a collective, long-term commitment.

Third, start small. While the NNIP data warehouses store huge amounts of data, they often apply it in small bits to a specific neighbourhood issue. It may be better to apply measures of progress on small projects until we learn more and build community support for a more comprehensive application.

Fourth, maybe building the organizational “engine” for indicator collection and management should take precedence over creating a comprehensive set of indicators. Does your community have an OPB in the making? A civil servant in Oregon said this of the Oregon Benchmarks:

“The outcome is the port, and while the courses different ships may take are different, the key for all of us is that we have the beacons that will help us comprehend what mid-course adjustments we need to make.”⁷

For him, the Benchmarks and their linkage to his agency and his role created a sense of direction, coherence, and meaning. Indicators can help us do that too, if that is what we intend for them to do from the start. Meaning and direction – outcomes worth the time and effort perhaps?

References

¹ G. Thomas Kingsley, “Neighbourhood Indicators: Taking Advantage of the New Potential,” (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1998), p. 11.

² G. Thomas Kingsley, “Building and Operating Neighbourhood Indicator Systems: A Guidebook” (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1999), p. 2.

³ Terri J. Bailey, “Building Community Capacity to Use Information: Four Training Options from the Experience of NNIP,” Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2000, p. 20.

⁴ Kingsley, “Neighbourhood Indicators,” *op.cit.*, p. 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ Mike Lewis, Sandy Lockhart, and Dave de Montreuil, “The Oregon Benchmarks: Changing Systems by Stealth - A Success Story in the Making” (Victoria, B.C.: Department of Community Development, Volunteers and Co-operatives, 2000), p. 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.



MICHELLE COLUSSI is Manager of the Technical Assistance Division of the Centre for Community Enterprise and team leader of the CCE’s Community Resilience Project. Contact Michelle at (tel) 250-724-1675 or (e-mail) colussi@shaw.ca. For further information on the National Neighborhood Indicators Project, and links to all the partners, visit NNIP’s website www.urban.org/nnip. To learn more about the Oregon Benchmarks, download “Oregon Benchmarks: Changing Systems by Stealth” from the CCE website www.cedworks.com (go to “Benchmarks & Indicators”).

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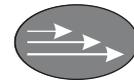
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