



College of Urban and Public Affairs

**Creating Used and Useful Community Indicator Systems:
Executive Summary Report**

**Prepared for the
Greater Portland-Vancouver Regional Indicators Initiative**

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Background

The Greater Portland-Vancouver Indicators initiative is an effort to provide quality information on social, environmental, and economic well-being that can help communities better understand conditions and trends, and collaborate to create a better future. This report on community indicator lessons learned was prepared in an effort to help ensure that the system developed for the greater Portland-Vancouver region is “used and useful.”

Our research included 1) an inventory of indicator systems in the region, 2) a review of literature on community indicator systems, 3) interviews with key stakeholders associated with indicator systems in the Portland metro region in order to hear lessons learned and understand how best to design and implement a useful regional indicator system. This Executive Summary provides the key themes identified. The full report includes information on the research design, summaries of the three programs identified in the region, a list of interviewees, and the bibliography.

In our search for government-based and community-based indicator programs in the four-county region we identified one city program (Vancouver, WA), one county program (Clark County, WA), and one joint city-county program (Portland-Multnomah).¹ The city-county program has been retired, though the city is in the process of creating a new system. Our review of the literature included more than sixty articles and reports. The literature review was used to inform the interview process and interpret the results.

Interviews were conducted with individuals who are or have been involved in the development and implementation of the jurisdiction’s community indicator program. Thirteen interviews were conducted, with the mix of participants including community indicator project managers, elected officials or senior staff, non-elected senior administrators such as a program manager or bureau chief, civic organization leaders, and performance management leads.

Community indicator systems are one tool designed to assist communities in assessing how they are doing. Community indicator (CI) systems go by different names (e.g., quality of life indicators, sustainable development indicators, benchmarks), and may have slightly different foci and characteristics; however, they are similar in that they are designed to provide a comprehensive or systemic view of a range of environmental, social, and economic aspects of well-being. While community indicator systems measure overall community conditions, performance management (PM) systems measure organizational

¹ In the course of our interviews we learned the Multnomah County had a parallel indicator system to the joint Portland-Multnomah Progress Board system.

effort and effectiveness toward mission, goals, and objectives.² Our focus here is on community indicators; however, given the lingering questions regarding whether and how CI and PM systems relate to each other when a jurisdiction has both, this issue is addressed as appropriate.

Creating Used and Useful Community Indicator Programs: Key Themes

The following key themes regarding what makes community indicator systems used and useful emerged in the synthesis of our literature review and interview findings.

What is Your Purpose?

A used and useful community indicator system is founded upon clarity of intention. Is the purpose of the CI system to educate (e.g., build awareness or understanding of issues), prioritize and catalyze (e.g., inform policy or program design or decisions), monitor (e.g., track performance), or engage (e.g., new or better collaboration to address an issue)? A used and useful CI system is designed to support its intended use(s). Further, the purpose needs to be clearly communicated so that the value of the initiative is understood and stakeholders' expectations are aligned with the intentions of the effort.

Remember, Data Does Not Equal Meaning

It is not uncommon for community indicator reports to prompt a sensation of “eyes glazing over” or a feeling that one is “drowning in a sea of data.” Beyond reporting an indicator’s status, communications need to contextualize the numbers. The audience needs to know the story associated with the data – why we may be getting these results, why this is relevant, and what we might do about it. Meaning-making also implies thinking about how indicators relate to each other and a desired end state. For example, the traditional list of indicators clustered by topic might be complemented or replaced by a logic model or framework that organizes factors in a way that shows their relation to a goal or outcome.

Go Small to Get Big

While community indicators need to convey the multiple and complex dimensions of community well-being, this information must be communicated in a way that helps people make sense of the situation and appropriately focus their attention. Think of it as helping folks see the forest for the trees. Related to the issue of data overload and meaning-making, it may be helpful to highlight a few key themes and smaller number of indicators and use those as an entre to conversations about the system issues that are shaping the outcome (go small and manageable in order to get to the big picture).

² For example, salmon population may be a community indicator while an organization’s performance measure may be change in water temperature after stream bank restoration; employment rate may be a community indicator while an organization’s performance measure may be the percent of its training program graduates placed in jobs.

Indicators should focus attention on big, societal goals and get people looking beyond their own organizations and sectors. They become a platform for collaboration, cooperation, and alignment.

Are you on Track to Your Vision and Goals?

Indicators are basically an accounting technology. Connecting them to an articulated vision and goals may make it easier for community members to contextualize the information and motivate action. Building onto strategic planning efforts, the indicator system can supply data to assess how a jurisdiction is meeting its goals.

Put the Community in Community Indicators

By definition, community issues are in the realm of the collective. There are two key implications here. First, a useful report will reveal how individual outcomes are shaped by collective actions – policies, programs, and structures. For example, not just reporting obesity rates but including factors that shape that outcome (e.g., walkability, food access). Second, community problems are not created in isolation, nor will they be solved in isolation. If we want the community to do better, then the range of community stakeholders needs to be appropriately engaged in the process. If indicators are to serve as beacons of collaboration the space for that needs to be created. Someone needs to play the convening and bridging role to bring diverse groups together to think about the system and connections and how they can work together to shift outcomes. And the process needs to be skillfully facilitated.

Who's at the Table and How?

There are a number of ways that stakeholders may be engaged in an indicator process; for example, identifying and selecting indicators, assisting with data collection and analysis, communicating results, or collaborating on a response. How this involvement happens is key. Care must be given to getting the right folks to the table at the right time, and structuring the process so that they want to remain engaged. This requires addressing the question of “WIFME” (what’s in it for me?) as well as potential concerns (e.g., turf, autonomy). It also requires making sure that purpose and roles are clear, and that outreach, facilitation, and decision-making processes are skillful and culturally appropriate. Keen attention must be given to the processes for reconciling perspectives and building shared understandings and agreements. Attention also must be given to issues of exclusivity: while it is important to have a core steering group, it is also important that others who are important to the project’s success not be intentionally or unintentionally alienated or excluded.

Who's Leading the Effort?

Given that an indicator effort serves the community at large, the convener of the effort must be viewed as neutral and credible. They also should not be viewed as the sole “owners” of the effort. The program needs to be stewarded by leaders who represent the diversity of community stakeholders and who can help to raise visibility and buy-in. The stewardship effort includes ensuring adequate and stable resources to support program

effectiveness and continuity. Buy-in and support from elected officials is critical, but the viability of the program must not hinge on a singular presence. The program needs to be institutionalized in a way that does not leave it vulnerable when an elected moves on and an administration changes.

Do You Have Numbers or Do You Have Good Indicators?

Having a number doesn't necessarily mean having a good indicator. The development of good indicators requires both analytic and process skills. On the process side, it is important to appropriately engage end-users in defining what indicators are relevant and what data is useful. You need to be clear about what you are trying to measure, why it is important, and what possible avenues for addressing data gaps. On the analytic side, it is important to have a strong understanding of data availability, quality, and meaning. Good indicators are defined by engaging both "data experts" and community stakeholders and end users.

Seek Indicator Stability and Expect Indicator Fluidity

Stable and consistent indicators are necessary in order to see trends over time. At the same time, it is reasonable to expect that indicators and/or the program purpose may evolve as new information, questions, priorities, or relationships emerge. It is helpful to view this dynamism as part of the process and plan for it. In particular, it is quite common that information needs are not matched by data availability. In some cases, the indicator program can identify data needs and work to change data collection processes. One important contextual issue is the development of the STAR Community Index. This sustainable community indicator system is being developed by ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, US Green Building Council, and the Center for American Progress. It is a national consensus-based framework that aims transform the way local governments measure their sustainability performance akin to the way LEED certification transformed building practices.

Get the Report Off the Shelf

Merely issuing reports reflects a poor understanding of how knowledge gets utilized. End-users need to be engaged in the indicator process, and an effective strategy to bring visibility to the indicators must be in place. This may include inserting indicators into policy discussions and media stories, making presentations to key interest groups, maintaining an effective web presence, and creating venues for dialogue about the data, implications, and opportunities for action. Well-designed dialogic spaces in particular can be helpful for building shared understandings and agreements. Further, the system may flourish best when it is integrated into priority-setting and decision-making processes.

Link to Performance Management

While community indicator and performance management systems are both designed to measure achievement of community objectives the former provides information about overall community conditions and speaks to a scale beyond the control of a specific organization, while the latter provides information about effort and effectiveness of specific organizational entities. Given their complementary purposes, the question is raised as to whether and how community indicator and performance management systems relate to each other in a jurisdiction. Ideally, the two are linked – with organizational efforts designed to support community goals and indicators. At the same time, while performance measures should align with community indicators, they should not assign accountability for conditions that are beyond the organizational entity's control. It is also important to recognize the limits of what indicators can do: while they can tell whether conditions are improving or not they generally cannot tell whether the change in status is directly attributable to a specific program or policy intervention. Although it is useful to align community indicators with performance management, that should not be the focus. Community indicators are not an agency report card: they are used to inform agencies but not to hold them accountable for the indicator outcomes.

Cross the Lines

Community indicators address system issues. Whether the scale is city, county, or region, the indicator program must be able to cross lines to address system issues. This means bridging public, private, and non-profit sectors, and bridging disciplines, departments, and bureaus. Such silo busting often goes against the grain, but is increasingly accepted as essential for addressing system issues. Effectively crossing those lines requires the cultivation of trust, shared language and understanding. It also means helping stakeholders see the benefits of collaborating on the indicator system – benefits such as efficiencies, effectiveness, or cost savings.

Have Reasonable Expectations

Community indicators tell us how we are doing: are we where we want to be? They create a space for understanding the system and developing ideas and relations that may better our community. Their value lies in fostering a learning community – tracking whether you are moving toward or away from your goals and asking why – not to blame or suggest someone is 'bad,' but to understand what is happening and what can be done about it.

Well-designed and implemented indicator programs can have significant impacts. They can be used to identify important issues, inform program or policy design, prioritize investments, provide documentation for funding requests, facilitate collaborative problem-solving, and leverage resources. These outcomes are valuable but very difficult to document. When budget cuts are looming it is important that the value of these programs to supporting community goals not be forgotten.

Beyond having reasonable expectations about what an indicator program can accomplish, it is important to understand how long it may take for a system to be used and useful. These are long term efforts and the potential lag between start up and impact needs to be acknowledged up front.

In an interconnected, resource constrained environment, community indicator systems are an important tool for helping communities achieve their goals. Indicators can be used and useful, though there are clearly steps to facilitate or inhibit that outcome. We hope that these findings and lessons learned contribute to a successful, used and useful Greater Portland-Vancouver Regional Indicators Initiative.

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