

Developing Community Indicators

“Community indicators don’t just monitor progress; they help make it happen.”
(The Community Indicators Handbook, p 1)

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An important component of building and maintaining healthy communities is the development of a set of indicators that assess the current conditions and provide direction as the community plans its future. Similar to taking a patient’s temperature and blood pressure, health indicators we are all familiar with, community indicators provide an empirical basis for checking the health and vitality of neighborhoods, towns and regions. Properly conceived and strategically designed, community indicators will provide information on the conditions important to the local community. Based on their design they can provide feedback related to the community’s economic, social and environmental conditions. This feedback can both assess the community’s progress over time as well as provide a profile the relative stance of the community in relation to other communities.

A recent international conference, sponsored in part by the [National Association of Planning Councils](#), provided a platform to comprehensively assess the state of knowledge and the resources available for developing community indicators, as well as the art and science of applying them in various environments.

The conference covered the primary aspects of community indicators, including: selecting functional and accountable project working groups, reviewing potential data sources and selecting appropriate data items to be used, developing surveys and appropriate handling of survey results, and presenting the community indicators research in a format that tells a compelling story. Presenters included academics in fields as diverse as information technology, anthropology, business administration, ethics, federal government professionals responsible for administering statistical programs and disseminating data sets, consultants and local community activists with experience developing community indicators.

Developing Good Indicators

A few of the sessions at the conference addressed the process of developing good indicators – comments are summarized in the following bullets:

- Identifying the **scope** of the project
 - ▲ Will the project end after the report?
 - ▲ Will the project work to enact changes based on the results of the report or will it serve to just “tell the story”?
 - ▲ Will it be structured to provide a benchmark for the community over time?

- ⤴ What will the project cost?
- Identifying the **goals** of the project
 - ⤴ Will the community indicators result in a tool to market the community?
 - ⤴ Will the indicators serve to identify the root problems or challenges facing the community?
 - ⤴ Will the report serve to lobby policy makers so that they address the community's needs?
 - ⤴ Will the project build unity in the working group?
 - ⤴ What is the time frame for the project so that the results can be most clearly understood and acted upon?
 - ⤴ Are the perceived needs of the community and the goals of the project the actual needs, and will it be possible to actually develop indicators to measure those needs?
- Identifying the **audience**
 - ⤴ Who will be reading the results?
 - ⤴ Who can act to change policies?
 - ⤴ Can the audience be addressed during the entire process to encourage the success of the project?
- Identifying the geographic area that defines the **community**
 - ⤴ Will the geographic area be a larger regional area that may have more control of the economic factors that affect the region?
 - ⤴ Will the geographic area be limited to more cohesive neighborhoods that may be able to effect policy changes?
- Identifying the results in a format that tells a **compelling story**
 - ⤴ Is there a simple but compelling story that summarizes the results of the analysis?
 - ⤴ Is the presentation clear and well structured?
 - ⤴ Are the graphics used understandable to the audience?
 - ⤴ Are the next steps clearly outlined?

In addition to the principles highlighted above, careful attention needs to be paid when selecting and constructing the indicators. Inappropriately selected indicators or erroneous data can result in incorrect conclusions and the establishment of misguided policy goals. Some of the most important facets that need to be considered in selecting the data include:

- ⤴ Using consistent and non-bias data sources
- ⤴ Being aware of the quality, limitations and appropriate uses of the data including the validity and reliability of the data

- ⤴ Selecting strategically in order to effectively capture the performance dimensions that are most important
- ⤴ Being sure that measures are not duplicated
- ⤴ Showing comprehensive and conclusive results with the use of surveys to explore in depth inconclusive measures

(drawn from Municipal Benchmarks: Assessing Local Performance and Establishing Community Standards; page 13, Ammons, D., 1996)

A thoughtfully developed indicators system and process reflect the needs and interests of a broad spectrum of community users and provide a useful road map and strategy for future growth and direction. In many cases, communities can become what they measure.

For more information on the *International Community Indicators Conference – Advances in the Science and Practice of Community Indicators*, view the complete [schedule](#). You can also access a brief [summary discussion](#) of the conference.

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