



# Works in Progress

*Keeping the measurement of a  
community's progress community-centred*

BY SANDY LOCKHART & DON MCNAIR

**I**t comes as no surprise that to date the building of community information infrastructure is so infrequently a component of community economic development. Understanding indicators, not to mention creating the system for gathering and managing the data that they require, demands time, skill, and persistence that many community development professionals don't have available, and that few members of the general public can offer.

Every application of indicators in CED must wrestle with this paradox: the instruments that have such great promise for community development and empowerment seem to have considerably more in common with technocracy than they do with democracy. Where in the development and use of indicators does the role of the technical specialist and elected or appointed official end, and the public's role begin? Or are indicators in fact so complex that they cannot easily reflect or address citizens' priorities and perceptions?

The experience of the last ten years shows that there are ways to make strategic community information a real tool of community development. There are ways to ensure that citizens have a meaningful role in building the infrastructure, and to make that infrastructure bring about real change for their lives.

---

The anchorage at Halls Harbour in Kings County, NS, a site of Canada's premier experiment in community indicators, the Genuine Progress Index (GPI). Photo credit: Dick Killam.

*These instruments that have such great promise for community development & empowerment seem to have a lot more in common with technocracy than they do with democracy. Where in the development & use of indicators does the role of the technical specialist end, & the public's role begin?*

This article examines several applications of indicators in the Pacific Northwest to show how different places have struck a balance between demands for data quality and reliability, and for local capacity to plan and manage community revitalization.

## **Community Indicator Projects in B.C.**

In the spring of 2002 the Centre for Community Enterprise (CCE) surveyed 25 organizations in B.C. that have been using indicators in projects relating to community revitalization. Eight projects were of particular interest because their designers rooted the initiatives in the values of sustainable or multi-dimensional (i.e., social, economic, and environmental) development.

Most projects employed a process with the following sequence of components:

- Form an advisory committee with broad community representation.
- Hire technical assistance.
- Identify goals or local issues as the basis on which to develop indicators.
- Complete draft indicators, organized by theme or area.
- Solicit broader comment on the draft indicators.
- Advisory committee and technical assistance refine and prioritize the draft indicators.
- Collect benchmark data for each indicator.
- Publish a "report card" explaining the indicators and where the community currently stands in terms of each.

It is in that third component – identifying goals or local issues – that difficulties arose.

In some cases, advisory committees used the goals already expressed in community reports and documents, or identified by the project's lead organization. Fair enough.

Fully half the projects surveyed, however, did not explain how or if they defined the change that people were hoping to achieve and that the indicators would help them to track. Instead, committee members sometimes relied on their personal sense of local issues to guide their choice of indicators – a difficult process, given the range of member biases or agendas. These are projects that produced vast and perplexing collections of community data with little or no linkage to local priorities or action. Presumably, that will come later.

To be sure, every project wanted the information to be meaningful to the general public. In their selection of indicators, committees generally sought measures that were readily accessible in the present and over time, appeared valid, reliable, and understandable to the general public, and were relevant to values deemed important to the project.

Most of the projects' reports have taken pains to explain each indicator:

- its importance and how it is measured
- its current level, relative to a previous reading
- how it compares with the situation in other places
- which trends this level suggests or questions it raises
- its linkage to other indicators

Most projects involved a number of public consultations and awareness-raising activities about indicators, including workshops, workbooks, visioning meetings, on-line surveys. Public consultation usually followed the initial selection of indicators by consultants and the committee.

What is curious and troubling is the infrequency with which the reports recommend any action in response to the findings they publish. This despite the fact that many projects saw the report as a significant feature – a stimulus to action – and were concerned that it not gather dust "like other reports."

Some projects felt that the information in their reports could support a variety of conclusions, and members of the public should therefore draw their own. Others, in order to educate and inform their readers, supplied much more analysis and interpretation. Ultimately, however, only two reports actually state what action that should be taken, and neither name a local group to take responsibility for that action.

This brings us back to the question of goals. Without them, it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the importance of the data and to link it to local action. People cannot understand the significance of local data if they are not clear about what progress they are hoping to make, and why it is important to their community. Outside a framework of local and regional goals, indicators tend first to serve the interests of institutional and corporate researchers, not the desire of communities to bring about real, cost-effective change. (See sidebar, "Kings County GPI," pp. 29-30.)

And who better to delineate these goals than the citizens themselves? The selection of indicators can often be a complex and technical task for the ordinary citizen, and may at times best be left to a small working group. A far better role for the public lies at the front end of the process, in the development of local priorities or goals, with all the clarification and balancing of values and competing interests that entails.



*The selection of indicators can often be a complex & technical task for the ordinary citizen, & may at times best be left to a small working group. A far better role for the public lies at the front end of the process, in the development of local priorities or goals.*

## Community Resilience

In its Community Resilience Project, undertaken with the support of Forest Renewal B.C in the late 1990s, the CCE developed, field-tested, and refined a method by which the public could engage in the development of indicators, and indicators could become integral to the community's strategic planning.

Community Resilience is a 3-step self-assessment and capacity-building process through which small communities use indicators to learn how local abilities and resources compare with towns that have prospered despite adversity. These indicators can then guide people as they decide which actions will best address local weaknesses and build on local strengths.

Instead of gathering vast amounts of data on the basis of hunches, the Community Resilience process focusses public attention on the factors known to be critical to community health and welfare, given a generation of experience on the part of small towns in America and Canada and community and economic development practitioners.

The first step involves preparing a community "portrait." But it is not a portrait rigidly confined to individual or family living standards. It depicts the community in terms of four dimensions:

- The residents' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour in matters of leadership, initiative, education, pride, co-operation, self-reliance, and participation.

- The scope, nature, and level of collaboration among local organizations, institutions, and groups.
- The diversity of the economy in terms of sector and ownership, local interest in economic alternatives, and attitudes towards external resources, opportunities, and competitors.
- Local practices and attitudes in economic development planning, participation, and implementation.

These dimensions are broken into a total of 23 characteristics, the presence of each of which is signaled by one or more indicators. Some of these are footprint indicators (see glossary, pp. 8-9.), but unlike other portraits, many more are perceptual in nature and must be gathered in a local survey. This involves expenditure, but it is also an investment in both ground-floor collaboration and valuable information. CED practice shows that the residents' state of mind is as much an asset (or a liability) to a town's survival as other, more tangible realities.

The second step is the point at which residents apply their insights and knowledge to the community portrait and rank in order of importance the weaknesses that have been brought to light. This is, in short, the point at which the community begins to establish its goals. In our experience in nine test communities, it is likely to culminate in the naming of one priority that, once addressed, will significantly increase the community's capacity to effect social and economic change.

In the third step, citizens decide what action to take. Again, rather than guess at a course of action, they may make their decision with reference to tools and techniques that have proven effective in other towns and neighbourhoods – "CED Best Practice," as it is called. The CCE publication *Tools and Techniques for Community Recovery and Renewal* describes these practices in detail, who applied them, and how to get additional information about implementing them. The community can then track its progress by means of the same indicators it used to establish the original portrait.

Is this just one more layer of planning and consultation to add to a municipal agenda? No. The Community Resilience process enhances whatever planning a small town is currently doing with critical information about the local social and economic structure. It engages a broader range of local citizens in the planning process, and supplies them with a reliable framework for analyzing their situation and options. It offers no simple solutions and it is no mere research methodology.

## Oregon

The Community Resilience process presents small communities with a set of indicators "off the shelf" of community and economic development practice across North America. That becomes the lens

(above) The public discusses responses to a tobacco survey in Glace Bay, NS, another town piloting the development of a Genuine Progress Index. Photo credit: Glace Bay GPI.

*Oregon's approach avoids the error of facilitation programs that attempt to refocus & straitjacket local remedial action according to pre-conceived notions. This is especially important when success hinges on co-operation between higher & lower level initiatives.*

through which the public collects information, considers it, and sets goals.

The Oregon Benchmarks (see also p. 11, this edition) takes a dramatically different tack to arrive at the same conclusion, that is, widespread citizen buy-in to the use of indicators to inform planning. In Oregon's case, however, the process has been "top-down," starting with action at the level of the state, but refined and reinforced by widespread public discussion and feedback.

In 1989 the Governor of Oregon established a special economic development committee to draft a strategic plan for overhauling the state economy. For nearly a decade, institutional rigidities had constrained both the public and private sector from responding effectively to the decline of the primary resource and agricultural sectors. By empowering this elite committee to define developmental goals and to recommend ways to achieve them, the governor hoped to overcome the blockages to innovation.

*Oregon Shines*, the strategic vision document, contained both conservative and radical elements. On the one hand, the committee recited well-worn homilies about the need for a concerted leap to a manufacturing and service economy driven by high technology. This was to be achieved by a major initiative to attract outside investment to the State's major population centre. Through "spin-offs" and "trickle-downs," new wealth would then find its way to the economic periphery. Pretty standard stuff.

Luckily, there was more. In addition to this economic goal, the committee identified goals in environmental protection and social development. Then came the clincher. The Committee established the Oregon Progress Board (OPB) in order to develop the means for

measuring and reporting progress toward all the recommended goals.

What followed was an extraordinary example of how indicators can be developed, tested, revised, and ultimately made highly functional for monitoring and evaluating progress at the macro level and within a wide range of efforts at the micro level.

The original list of indicators were not derived from theoretical presumptions, nor were they stickhandled onto the roster by community activists and other lobbyists. They originated in strategic goals that include, but also transcend conflicting perspectives. OPB had on staff technical experts in indicator construction and application. But it also had facilitators of public input, well-versed in abstracting the essence from public debate and interaction. These two groups were able to reduce a truly massive number of suggested data sources into a relatively small number of indicators that could be used measure progress along Oregon's now widely discussed paths of development.

So what had begun in an elite club turned into a genuinely public process, and acquired along the way significant public support and involvement. The strategic vision evolved into a master plan for balancing economic, social, and environmental values and outcomes, applicable in both the public and private sectors and at the regional and community levels.

This is particularly relevant to situations where development decisions are taken at a high level in order to influence and facilitate regional and community level development. It avoids the error of facilitation programs that attempt to refocus and straitjacket local remedial action according to pre-conceived notions. This is especially important when success hinges on co-operation between

higher and lower level initiatives and an effective division of labour between them.

## Conclusion

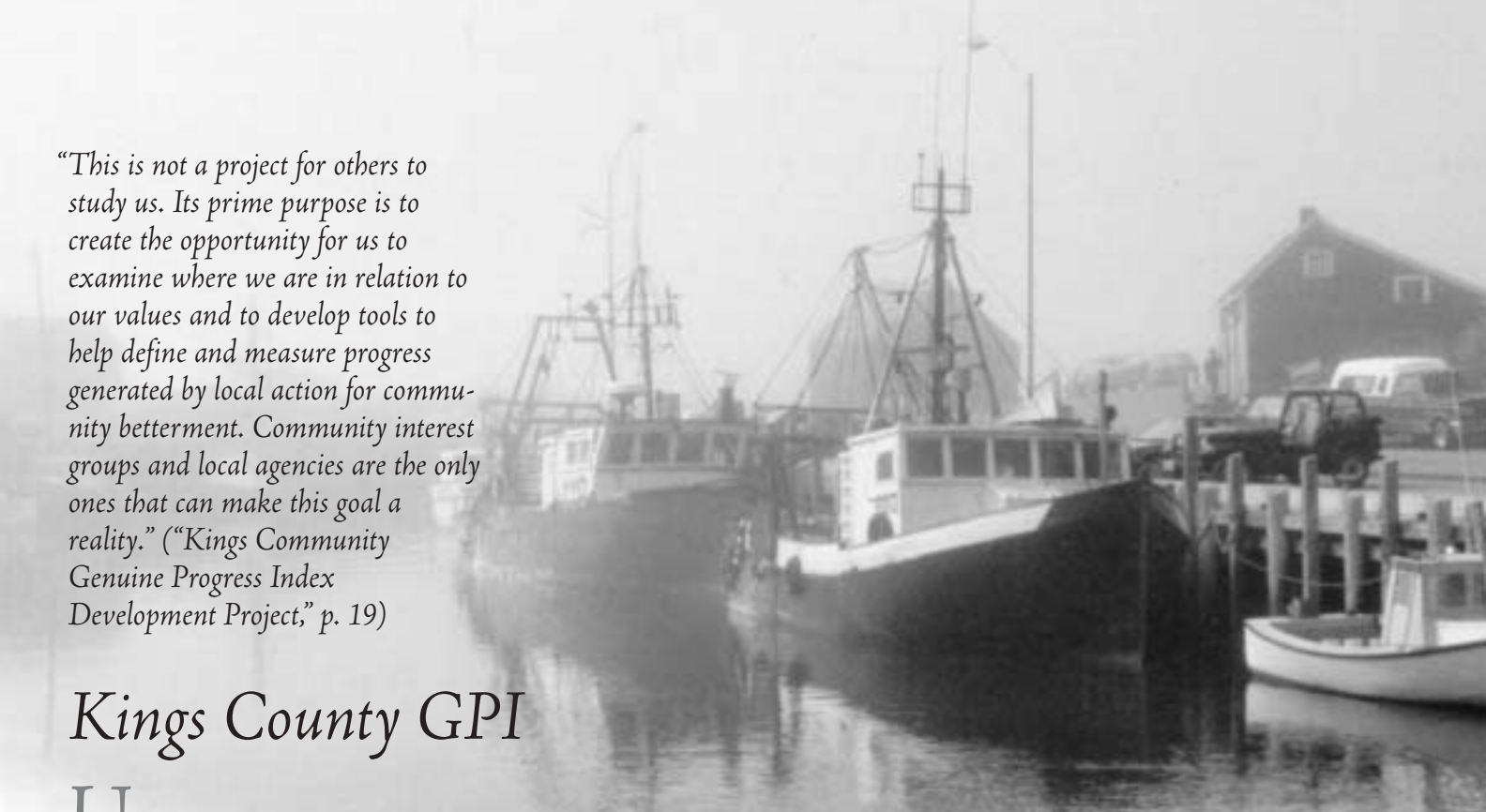
High technical standards and mistaken notions of sound fiscal management can assume such prominence in the design of community information infrastructure that communities get shunted to the sidelines. Understandably, people want to use public resources to generate information of indisputable scientific value. But this laudable endeavour can tempt designers to isolate the process by which indicators are developed: to shut it away from the public and moreover, to disconnect it from any local or regional revitalization planning.

As a consequence, enormous investments can get made to create what is essentially a data-generating machine whose output is chiefly of interest to the students of community, not to the residents of communities.

This is more than just a waste of money. It is a waste of a remarkable opportunity to gather people of dissimilar interests around the building of a common information infrastructure. It is a waste of the potential of indicators to focus public attention and resources on initiatives that bring measurable change to living conditions.

This does not have to happen. The technical demands that indicators pose can be overcome by an appropriate division of labour, that places the technicians at the service of the public after it has determined results and goals it wishes to realize. One must also be wary of simply setting technical standards too high, especially in the design and use of perceptual data. The interests of the residents of communities must remain uppermost, not the interests of an academic and political elite.





*“This is not a project for others to study us. Its prime purpose is to create the opportunity for us to examine where we are in relation to our values and to develop tools to help define and measure progress generated by local action for community betterment. Community interest groups and local agencies are the only ones that can make this goal a reality.” (Kings Community Genuine Progress Index Development Project,” p. 19)*

## Kings County GPI

Unquestionably one of the more ambitious attempts to develop a set of indicators relevant to local community well-being is that of the Nova Scotia Citizens for Community Development Society: the Kings County GPI (Genuine Progress Index) Development Project, undertaken in association with GPI Atlantic. Technical assistance has been provided by Statistics Canada and Acadia and Dalhousie universities, and a number of government agencies have provided funds, including the Canadian Rural Partnership.

The objective of the Kings Project is “to develop and test a prototype Community Genuine Progress Index and to organize its use as a powerful tool for communities striving to gain greater control over their own destiny.” Kings County GPI advocates see it as a way to answer the question, “What quality of life will our children have?” and contrast the comprehensive portrait it draws of local life with the gross inaccuracies to which measures like the Gross Domestic Product give rise.

An extensive respondent survey of two rural communities in Nova Scotia is the primary means by which the GPI is taking shape. No less than 40 community organizations took a hand in naming local priorities, selecting indicators, and developing the questionnaire. They form the steering group to which, in addition to GPI Atlantic, responsibility for overall management falls. The survey itself has been professionally validated and research professionals will manage the data and undertake data analysis.

So the project strikes a compromise between a very high level of technical rigor in research design and analysis and stringent concern for wide participation by local organizations.

The survey itself, to which 1900 respondents devoted two hours of their time to complete in 2003, is remarkable for the

ground it covers. Here are just some of the data collected in seven categories of questions:

- Demographics and Employment: in addition to vital statistics, includes types of jobs, benefits, work schedule, job security, underemployment, and job sharing.
- Health and Community: values, volunteer work, mental health, social supports, smoking, physical activity, pain, disability, medication.
- Peace and Security: neighbourhood safety, self-protection, opinions about police and community problems like drinking, bullying, and drugs.
- Time Use Diary: household work, paid work, caregiving, education, leisure, travel.
- Environment: personal energy use, transportation patterns, water quality, recycling, waste, food consumption.
- Agriculture: viability of farming, soil quality and productivity, biodiversity.

The next steps involve building a community infrastructure to access and facilitate widespread local use of the data, to guide the prioritization of these indicators and the creation of new ones, and to identify priorities for policy and action.

But what action? Since no indicators (as opposed to data sources) have as yet been published, the process and methodological progress reports are all there is to go on. Unfortunately, they point to trouble on the horizon.

Given the survey, Kings GPI seems intent on collecting great amounts of personal data that will enable analysts repeatedly to take panoramic “snapshots” of the local quality of life. This

---

Halls Harbour, Kings County, Nova Scotia. Photo credit: Dick Killam.

portraiture will not tell us a great deal, however, about the locals' capacity to mobilize resources and apply them, persistently and strategically, to weaknesses in their economic and social structure or to strengths and opportunities.

People will indeed get a refined idea of the results they've got, and the results that at least some undoubtedly will want – but will they have any better notion of how to get from “A” to “B”? A basis for setting realistic goals and targets does not seem to be sought. The action that the data might prompt, as the scriptwriters for one GPI PowerPoint presentation offer by way of example (“Measuring Wellbeing and Development in Kings County,” June 5, 2003), is of a rather *re-actionary* nature:

- School programs regarding teenage smoking, weight, and physical activity
- Identification of counselling and health screening and counselling needs
- Education with regard to nutrition, recycling, energy use
- Alerts to vandalism and other security problems

Is GPI Kings collecting data relevant to community-based planning? Or is it in effect collecting data relevant to institutional and corporate researchers – to government departments and agencies, students of sociology and psychology, and corporate market researchers? As a local agency announced last October, “more information is now available about life in Kings County than any other community in Canada.” Is such an achievement really a reflection of the interests of the local steering committee and survey participants?

It would appear that some project supporters had an inkling this might happen. In the report “Kings Community Genuine Progress Index (GPI) Development Project – Phase 3: Survey, Final Report” (L. Poetschke and Dr. R. Coleman, November 2002) it was observed that,

“While the major funders have all expressed their interest and concern to see the data used by communities ... none except the Canadian Rural Partnership consider the capacity for much improved community action as the primary outcome of this work.” (p. 19)

This is a well funded, widely partnered, and professionally designed indicator-based study that is relevant to community-based development. While its payoffs and applicability have yet to be demonstrated, its existence is a positive evidence of the healthy experimentation that is taking place in community indicators.



Engaged in northern development for the first decade of his working life, SANDY LOCKHART got first-hand exposure to the negative impacts of megaprojects on community life. Now Professor Emeritus of Trent University, he is still searching for answers to the developmental conundrum. Having for 25 years divided his time between academic research and practical application testing in social, economic, and crosscultural areas relating to CED, he has been fully occupied in CED practice since 1994. Reach him at [ralock@shaw.ca](mailto:ralock@shaw.ca). DON MCNAIR is managing editor of **making waves**.



SCP has been working with Inner City Renovations, in the north end of Winnipeg, since 2001.

## Growing the Double Bottom Line

Social Capital Partners provides a wide range of investment options and expertise to existing and start-up CED and social enterprise ventures. Our mission is to help create and grow a new breed of social enterprise with a vision for strong financial growth and social returns.

If you are looking for flexible capital that gives you the freedom to operate your business and address your social mission, contact SCP at

416-646-1871 ext.106  
[info@socialcapitalpartners.ca](mailto:info@socialcapitalpartners.ca)  
[www.socialcapitalpartners.ca](http://www.socialcapitalpartners.ca)



Social | CAPITAL  
 PARTNERS

*Investing In Social Enterprise*