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Royal Roads University

## **Sustainability Indicators**

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Moderated by Ann Dale

### **Participants**

**Dr. Ann Dale**, Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Community Development, Royal Roads University

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**Gwen Colman**, Youth Program Director, GPI Atlantic

**Linda Harvey**, Team Leader, Ecological Footprint Project, City of Calgary

**Meg Holden**, Assistant Professor of Urban Studies, Simon Fraser University

**Lazlo Pinter**, Director of the Measurement and Assessment Program, International Institute for Sustainable Development

### **Dialogue**

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#### **Ann Dale**

Welcome to the panel on indicators, hosted by our Canada Research Chair Team (CRC) at Royal Roads University, in collaboration with the International Centre for Sustainable Cities (ICSC).

We have a diverse range of expertise and experience here, as well as an e-audience listening in. Our format will be to dialogue for about one and a half hours, followed by an interactive session with the e-audience trying to answer some of their questions. Could I ask each of you to briefly introduce yourself and your interest in indicators, why are they important?

#### **Linda Harvey**

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Hi everyone,

Over the spring I've seen Lazlo, Ron and Gwen so I'm looking forward to talking with Meg.

I'm interested topic for two reasons:

1. Measurement implies accountability and accountability helps ensure that things actually get tackled, and hopefully, achieved.

2. Sustainability indicators are often misunderstood and the sustainability community really does need to engage on some common understanding of what they are, and what they can be used to do.

### **Meg Holden**

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Hello everyone and thanks Ann. Meg Holden here from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. I've been studying (and more recently working on) indicators since about 1999 when I wanted a way in to studying community based sustainability efforts and the approach of using indicators was really hot -- I started studying the Sustainable Seattle project. Since then, I have started an indicators project in Vancouver called the Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory which I'll talk more about. Looking forward to our discussion.

### **Ron Colman**

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Hi Ann and all,

This is Ron Colman, GPI Atlantic. We've been working on indicators of sustainable development and measures of social progress for nearly 12 years. Our work is focused on Nova Scotia, but we have produced several reports for Halifax Regional Municipality, so we have some experience working at the city level as well. We've also been working with some overseas partners. In fact, two weeks ago I met with folk in Wellington and Auckland, New Zealand. Both of these Councils have passed resolutions to adopt a Genuine Progress Index. I am delighted to be on here with old friends and colleagues who are doing wonderful work in this area, including Lazslo and Linda.

To answer your question on importance - Indicators are incredibly powerful tools. They can actually change the policy agenda of governments and municipalities by shining the spotlight on issues that would otherwise remain hidden. They also help with visioning - i.e. setting goals - e.g. where do we want to be 20 years from now? They help identify a jurisdiction's strengths and weaknesses so it can build on strengths and overcome weaknesses. And they are important for policy evaluation - to identify which programs are working and which are not in reaching desired targets and objectives. Many other key purposes, but that's a few to get started.

### **Linda Harvey**

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Good points Ron. Given my work in Hamilton and Calgary, I'd like to add that indicators have an important role in community development, at least in terms of

motivating action on social, economic and environmental issues, and helping to establish citizens, business, government and organizations as having both an individual and collective role in building a sustainable community.

## **Ron Colman**

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Yes, Linda: We have seen the greatest interest in the indicator work being expressed at the community level. That, they tell us, is where the rubber hits the road in terms of quality of life. Provincial averages generally don't tell the whole story. So I agree on importance of indicators in community development. ALSO, there is less obstacle in moving from evidence to action at the community level than at national and provincial levels.

Ann: Re your question: I don't know of any initiative to come up with a wellbeing indicator for Atlantic Canada as a whole. I might be missing something right in my backyard, so let me know what you know about this.

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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Thanks Ann for organizing the forum and welcome to all. I am interested in indicators primarily because I think they represent a high leverage point for making positive change in systems. One metaphor I like to use for indicators is to compare them to the neurotransmitters in our body that carry essential information - without them we could not function.

I have been with IISD's Measurement and Assessment program since 1994 and over these years we have been involved in many aspects of indicator work on all levels. We moved on from simply asking the question what indicators to use to how to use them in decision-making, strategy development and implementation.

## **Gwen Colman**

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Hello Ann and all:

I'm the Youth Director for GPI Atlantic and we are beginning work on a youth index of wellbeing--can't be sustainable without youth--and we very much want to provide training for youth in indicator-based research. We hope to raise the capacity level overall and help youth attain meaningful employment. We love the Ecofootprint work Linda is doing and see that as an excellent way to train youth.-- thanks, Gwen Colman

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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I think the point Ron makes about the connection between indicators and visioning is very important. Indicators are essential for understanding past trends and dynamics, but they are equally key to explore future alternatives and scenarios. We see increasing interest in forward looking analysis, scenarios and outlooks, and I think the indicators can be central to these processes.

## **Ann Dale**

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Okay, you have convinced me that indicators are important, and I wonder if they could help move communities towards more integrated planning? My first question is "what indicators are you using or would you recommend using to cities engaged in long-term 'integrated' planning for sustainability? And why?"

## **Meg Holden**

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I think there are clear opportunities for indicators to help in integrated and forward-looking planning, and I know that the other panelists are some of the best people to speak to that, but on the cautionary side, I'd say that the dream of using indicators this way is much greater than the reality of practice. There is a fundamental irony in addressing the holistic concept of sustainable development by breaking it down into tiny little pieces of information -- and tying these together back into the whole system is easier said than done (and easier done than communicated to the media and the public!).

## **Linda Harvey**

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I don't think you could achieve a complete integrated planning model without including an integrated set of indicators. In Hamilton, the complete set of social, economic and environmental indicators in the sustainability report formed the basis of an interdepartmental and intersectoral discussion that drew out the interconnections between the various disciplines and professions.

When we added some of the Vision indicators to some leading indicators to analyze our long-term growth strategy it was a powerful learning experience, although not without some valuable and creative conflict.

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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In measurement indicators themselves are as important as the process of exploration trying to identify them. In fact the discussion would typically start not with indicators, but much deeper about values, sustainability issues and aspirations. So we normally avoid recommending indicators and focus more on how to structure the indicator process, how to embed indicators in institutional structures etc. Having said that, it's of course possible to identify core sets around key sustainability issues and many have tried this, I could just refer to the ABC indicator model in the early nineties, UN Habitat's work or the UN CSD's.

## **Gwen Colman**

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Responding to Laszlo: Ron and I, along with a couple of members of our youth team, just returned from our second visit to New Zealand where we spent some time at a Maori university which is putting together a degree program around the genuine progress index. We were struck by the many-centuries old tradition called "kopapa" which uses the values of the people to formulate the laws and practices. The Maori have an incredibly sophisticated grasp of indicators at both micro and macro levels and we have asked for their help in creating a youth training program.

## **Ann Dale**

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Laszlo, do you have a reference for us here? Thanks, Ann

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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Page 8 of this document describes the ABC indicator approach: <http>

The salmon indicator is a great example, and it works because it is very specific to Seattle. I think there is a great potential in every community trying to identify a very few - or even one - measure that is recognized as having both a lot of symbolic value and integrates many issues. But very often these are also the indicators that would be difficult to 'transfer'.

## **Ron Colman**

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mholden: Do please let me know your first name... Thanks.

Yes - the salmon indicator is a wonderful example of an integrative indicator, but there are many others. For example, "commuting by mode of transportation" brings together environmental, social, and economic factors - including greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, access to mass transit, affordability, etc. Some of our forest indicators also really work in integrating these different elements. For example, "value-added as % of forest products" has economic implications for forest industry (moving from volume-based to value-based production), provides more jobs per unit of biomass harvested, and allows movement away from over-harvesting and clear cutting (environmental implications.) Many other examples of good integrative indicators.

## **Linda Harvey**

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Lazlo, you've hit the nail on the head in terms of process. Also, we have all been struggling with how to create a widely used set of indicators to measure what is essentially a value-based exercise (visioning). After reflecting on this for some time I'm coming to the conclusion that the Bellagio Principles for Assessing Sustainable Development are a sort of standard for creating sustainability indicator sets that could perhaps be used instead of a list of common indicators?

How important is comparability given our various baseline starting positions, and the severity of different issues in different areas?

## **Meg Holden**

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The one indicator that "stuck" in local practice and in the stories told about the original Sustainable Seattle effort was the one (out of 40) indicators that the group came up with that they could say was truly integrative. It is: the number of wild salmon returning to local streams to spawn. This indicator is fantastic because it has environmental, social/cultural, and economic dimensions for its context. This kind of indicator is very hard to find, and I would argue that not all of the important facets of sustainability that we want to cover with indicators have such a "totem" integrative indicator out there.

## **Ron Colman**

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Several key points have been raised here:

1) Yes Lazslo. I entirely agree. When we work with communities, we always start out with values and vision: Where do we want to be 20 years from now, for example? Based on that, the indicators naturally fall into place. Measures of progress are always about "progress towards what?" So they are necessarily value-based by definition.

2) Integration vs bits and pieces: The entire purpose of sustainability measurement is to point to the LINKS between the parts and to point towards the interrelated nature of reality. If we only produce bits and pieces and lists of numbers without presenting an integrated picture, then we are misreporting and there is something wrong with our structure and framework. We have a section on this very point in our latest GPI forest report posted on our website at [www.gpiatlantic.org](http://www.gpiatlantic.org). See the note on integration near the end and also in the press release.

3) Re Ann's question on "what indicators"? The ones we use are posted on our website at [gpiatlantic.org](http://gpiatlantic.org). I do believe that it is possible to come up with an integrated set of common indicators for cities, while allowing each jurisdiction to add particular indicators suitable to its unique circumstances.

## **Meg Holden**

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Linda, I agree that the Bellagio Principles are the best set of ideas for how to construct a useful community indicator system. The report is posted at: <http://www.iisd.org/pdf/bellagio.pdf>

On the subject of comparability, we are finding in the Vancouver region in talking to municipalities about the potential of using indicators that they don't care so much about comparability -- what they would like to have is information that is able to be disaggregated to scales more localized than the municipality as a whole. These are very few and far between in Canada! The comparable indicators from standard sources are what we are often left with by default, and they are insufficient for community planning.

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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I don't think so much of common indicator sets, but common indicator MENUS. The UN-CSD has tried, among others, compiling common indicator sets at the

national level and the set was 'tested' in a number of countries, but the overwhelming experience is that once people look at these sets their next question is OK, what applies and what doesn't from this us, and what other measures do we need that address our unique priorities. And because everyone is unique in one sense or another, you end up with partially overlapping, but non-identical indicators. Actually, I think this is OK, but we still need commonality on some core, globally important matters.

## **Ann Dale**

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Laszlo, I know that there has been excellent work done by many people on developing indicators for sustainable development, but there is such a huge implementation gap which has always puzzled me, and you have answered my problem. It seems to me that indicators as so many of you are alluding to, must be locally meaningful and identified (which then involves a community engagement process). When we were developing our template for community integrated sustainability planning, we developed both the content and the process, form and function, that is, what are the basics in such a plan and what are the basic elements of a community engagement process ([www.crcresearch.org](http://www.crcresearch.org))?

## **Linda Harvey**

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Ann, in my experience the implementation gap rests firmly on the development process. If we aren't able to create multi-sectoral ownership and confidence in the indicators in the development phase we can expect that the indicator program will be vulnerable to the reporting organizations current priorities. If our system is broadly owned, one partner's interest can wane while another waxes eloquently. In Hamilton, it was alternatively the community or the City that led the parade.

In Calgary, embedding the Footprint into community values is meant to ensure implementation long after the Footprint Program per se, has vanished. Actually, the long-term success of the Footprint Program is stated as becoming redundant over time.

## **Ann Dale**

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So, it seems to me that the indicators you would recommend using need to be community-based and locally grounded, so the question of scale is very important. As well, they need to be an integrated set of indicators, they cannot be

disaggregated and then aggregated, or we will not achieve sustainability? The process of developing the indicators is critical, a values-based exercise using visioning is key, but before I move on to our next question, Linda has raised a key issue, How important is comparability given our various baseline starting positions, and the severity of different issues in different areas?

Linda Harvey

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Responding to Ron and Ann's question regarding which indicators are being used: Please refer to [www.hamilton.ca](http://www.hamilton.ca) and search for "Vision 2020" to find the last report. We took a lot of time to integrate the results of each indicator into related indicator areas (e.g. talking about human health in the transportation indicator section).

In Calgary, we are using Ecological Footprint to implement critical goals and strategies from imagineCALGARY. Beginning with an input-output Footprint calculation by Global Footprint Network we've added a set of Key Local Indicators to the discussion to ensure that we were able to measure something where the community could actually see change over a shorter period of time (e.g. vehicles kilometres traveled, residential energy consumption etc.) The value in the Footprint calculators stems from what it adds to the sustainability indicator discussion: it brings in the concept that we're living within limits, it focuses examination on human activity rather than environmental condition, and it broadens the scope of analysis in terms of timeframes and life-cycle rather than singular analysis of a single issue.

**Meg Holden**

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I know that the UN-Habitat effort to come up with a set of comparable measures for all their member cities (in developing countries) in the late 90s, that I think Lazlo referred to, essentially fell apart because statistical and measurement systems around the world do not support comparability. This does not answer whether comparability is desirable! But UN-Habitat from my observer's perspective is now getting mired into nitty gritty details on how to measure specific indicators in cities (as basic as population, for example).

**Ann Dale**

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So, Meg, we look at a common framework, the Bellagio Principles, which ideally will ensure a sufficient and necessary integration, and then communities will tailor them to their specific circumstances, an aggregation and then a de-aggregation?

## **Linda Harvey**

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I agree Lazlo we do need indicators that show progress on key global issues. Footprint is working nicely for this in Calgary as it forces the comparison of how Calgary is contributing (or reducing) global overshoot on areas within our influence. It is a good integrative indicator that crosses geographic barriers (e.g. no salmon or trees in Calgary, but a growing population and economy in a semi-arid climate).

## **Ron Colman**

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Yes Linda - Footprint is a great example of an integrative indicator, bringing together social, economic, and environmental factors, allowing comparability, and yet able to be disaggregated into components to allow analysis of which factors are contributing most to the Footprint.

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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While difficult in many cases for reasons Linda mentions, I think comparability is still important. But it's not the only thing that is important - we also need comparability over time - where was the community ten years ago vs. today? And we also need to have the ability to easily aggregate as well as disaggregate measures, because people are always interested in both. when I refer to 'indicator systems', I like to think of an information system not necessarily in the technical sense) having these multiple functions.

## **Ron Colman**

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Meg and Ann: I want to address two key questions that you have raised:

1) Yes Meg. You are quite right that Statcan data generally does not go down to the local level in sufficient detail to allow their use for community planning purposes. That's why we found we had to do our own survey work in two Nova Scotia communities to get the required data. Newfoundland and Labrador is the only jurisdiction I know that has made an effort to provide data right down to the local community level. See [www.communityaccounts.ca](http://www.communityaccounts.ca).

2) I want to make a case for comparability. I DO think this is possible for two reasons, so long as we are not rigid about the effort and so long as we leave space for unique indicators particular to particular jurisdictions:

(a) Most basic indicators (and the values from which they flow) are common to all human beings - everyone wants better health, livelihood security, safe communities, reasonable level of educational attainment, clean air and water, etc. So the fundamentals transcend circumstance and culture;

(b) communities DO want to know how they are faring compared to others. In fact, comparing is one of the best ways to identify relative strengths and weaknesses, which is vital for policy planning purposes. So there is a very strong case to be made for striving for comparability to the extent possible

## **Meg Holden**

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Ron, I had heard about the community accounts work and am envious! Great job getting StatCan to partner so usefully!

Ann, I think what you describe is close to the ideal, and I don't want to sound discouraging from the great work at GPI and elsewhere, but to achieve this ideal in implementation I think you would need to see broad-scale institutional change in local governments. Staff positions are still in segmented depts and the responsibility to implement change toward eg. increased bus ridership falls to transportation planners more than housing planners 95% of the time.

Ron, the forest sector in BC is still struggling with defining the boundaries of what to consider in the bounds of social indicators, having finally been persuaded that these have some importance in addition to environmental indicators.

## **Ron Colman**

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Hi Meg. Again two points on what you write:

1) Re Implementation. From my experience, indicators have somewhat limited policy traction and that is largely because "measurement" does not happen by indicators alone. GDP, which is the basis for our dominant measures of social progress ("Is the economy growing...?") is not an indicator but an accounting system. Until we take aim at that (and go beyond indicators) I think we'll have limited success in moving the policy arena, because the GDP steamroller will still be rolling down the main highway, while our social and environmental indicators are confined to the side streets. The most traction we have had in the policy arena is in the economic valuation dimension of our work. That seems to get the attention of policy makers more than indicators.

2) Re integration: Our land use planning indicators and recommendations are at

the core of our transportation indicator studies. So indicators can help break down the housing vs transport silos by showing the intimate connection between the parts. The last place I'd expect to see initiative on appropriate forest indicators is from the forest industry, sadly. But please do look at our most recent forest report (released just last week) on our website (gpiatlantic.org) for some examples of integrative indicators.

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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Further to Ann's point on engagement, I think it is at the heart of the process. Let me try adding a document related to the Winnipeg Community Indicator System process we are developing with the United Way, see circular diagram with engagement in the middle. A very similar diagram came out of a comparative analysis of three community indicator initiatives we did in the mid-nineties with Sustainable Seattle, ProHabitat in Guadalajara and Winnipeg. Will find link.

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**File attachment** [leave behind 31 01 06.pdf](#) (345.13 KB)

## **Ann Dale**

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Ron and Meg, I think that comparability is critical to meet all three imperatives of sustainability--we need to know ecologically at different scales how we are performing, we are social creatures, we compare ourselves to the rest of the pack and ideally learn from that, and economically as well. For indicators to be a real measure, would they not reveal whether or not a community, for example, has been 'growing' economically at the expense of the ecological capital? I think we should move on to our next question, if you will, "What challenges have you faced applying your set of indicators?"

## **Linda Harvey**

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In response Ron, I agree that action does not stem from indicators, but from the discussion and learning that occurs out of a measurement process. I've attached Calgary's Footprint program model to show what this looks like here.

When we tackled TBL in Hamilton, we used indicators and evaluation to aggregate a mountain of information into a synthesis based on multi-disciplinary evaluation of the same data. The real work on sustainability came from workshopping the results of the data with those multiple sectors so that learning

could emerge out of the process, not the numbers.

In Calgary, when we measured the impact of infrastructure and planning decisions on the size of our Footprint now and in the long-term, it provided a strong basis for Planning to move forward to Council with some smart-growth scenarios where the co-benefits could be illustrated and quantified locally and globally.

## **Ron Colman**

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Linda: In fact, your wonderful Hamilton Vision 2020 work was one of our key starting points when we began our GPI work in Nova Scotia. Very inspiring still.

RE question on Newfoundland Community Accounts: YES - this IS being replicated. Nova Scotia has now adopted the system. See Nova Scotia Community Counts (you can google it), and PEI is considering it too. It's a very elegant reporting mechanism at the community level. Thanks to Alton Hollett and Doug May for fabulous pioneering work in this area. Malcolm Shookner heads up our Nova Scotia version.

RE Ann's question on challenges: (1) Money - always on the edge and it hasn't gotten any easier. Many components of our GPI are hard to get funding for - specially anything that deals with equity issues. Also we have the unfortunate situation in Canada where anything east of Montreal is not seen as having national significance, and there are very limited funding possibilities in Atlantic Canada. Sorry for that gripe, but I have had enough experience to know that there is some truth to this.

(2) Data availability: If we want to move things forward in a creative and innovative way, we simply cannot rely on existing data sources (many of which are based on the old paradigm). We had some dramatic examples of this recently in our efforts to construct meaningful measures of educational attainment - the existing measures for which data are available are largely worse than useless.

Other challenges too, but these two will do for a start.....

## **Linda Harvey**

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I share Ron's frustrations regarding lack of money and data. Also with process to create a companion to GDP. The FCM Quality of Life Indicators were a good start but have been silent for awhile, and the Atkinson Foundation GPI process is still ongoing after many years. What can we do to build on existing work while

accelerating the process?

<http://crcresearch.org/edialogues/eforum/index.php?sid=8d6ba568df6e639fe9d0ba6358d27266>

For a template on how to do things at a state of the art level, I have to say that ImagineCALGARY is really the gold standard. Key elements: based on a system approach, extremely wide community engagement in development and implementation, and strong focus on embedding the vision and goals in City governance.

Vision 2020 in Hamilton was done many years ago and it's architecture is still relevant as it includes these elements also. Our friends in Australia at the Public Sector Reporting Agency are also doing very good work.

## **Meg Holden**

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The Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory (RVu)'s methodology for indicator selection has gone through a process of evolution since we started on this path in 2005. Our motto is "measures that matter" – so our approach has consistently been to find indicators that are relevant and meaningful to citizens above all. This translates into a somewhat different approach than one that focuses primarily on indicators that are either scientifically valid or comparable with those of other regions first and foremost (although the result is sometimes the same, eg. The GDP).

In 2005-2006, we designed and ran a public indicator selection process in Vancouver. It was based on the citizen's panel model pioneered by Sustainable Seattle with some adaptations, drawn from the experience of our fellow observatory in Curitiba, Brazil. We convened large group events with open invitations and got 150-200 participants from different walks of life in the Vancouver region, and we brought in academics and community-based researchers to introduce "the state of the debate" on current measures and conditions in trends from housing and homelessness to water quality, as well as politicians to speak to the need for better measures. And then we spent a lot of time in small study groups, talking through the issues in different realms of the sustainable development puzzle and coming up with new indicators. I will attach a document that discusses the process in some detail.

Our project has fallen flat locally. One recommendation I would make to other groups is to spend significant time cultivating political support. We thought we were pretty successful at getting political support pledged up front, but the political tide had turned by the time our report was released and we were left

stranded for political allies because we had not done enough to maintain the interest of our political supporters. Our view was that working too hard in this direction could compromise our ability to do justice to the citizens' bold recommendations, but when we released our report to a political audience, current and former politicians made some very discouraging and surprising comments. So for us, the perception of not being "owned" by anyone has come at significant expense and I think is a big part of why we have been unable to consider updating or doing more with the report to date.

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**File attachment** [Holden-Mochrie RISTH.pdf](#) (456.38 KB)

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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Further to Linda's point on embedding indicators in communities, in Winnipeg we are aiming to create what we refer to as a 'new piece of community infrastructure'. This has wide ranging implications ranging from how we engage the community and leadership, the relationship of the indicator systems with the municipal government (which is NOT the community), to how we fund the system.

For the same reason we are also looking for strong linkages between indicators and other strategic processes, such as the budget cycle and sustainable development or sector strategies. I see a growing interest.

## **Linda Harvey**

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Hi Lazlo,

Good to hear Winnipeg is taking that path. It's critical. In Calgary's three year business planning cycle is linked to imagineCALGARY outcomes, and we've been engaging the business planners and Council on what the budget and 2009-2011 plan will mean to iC and the size of our Footprint.

## **Ann Dale**

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Key points have been raised about the need to 'embed' sustainability indicators themselves into existing institutional structures, ideally, changing the rules of the game, the almighty GDP. It seems to me, however, unless we get GPI or other indicators being published at the same time as the traditional agencies publish their indicators, how do we get the political currency and funding for ongoing

initiatives? Maybe we need organizations like IISD or ICSC to take the lead, decide on three indicators they are going to measure, at what scale and publish it annually, pick three, make them work, and then pick three more? Or pick from the excellent examples you have provided, aggregate three common indicators (if they exist) and publish widely?

## **Meg Holdren**

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Ann, I've been thinking about this approach and think it's a clear way forward. With for eg. the Canadian Index of Well-Being project, which I have only peripherally been involved in, I am hopeful that leverage could be created to generate new data. Or possibly via the Community Foundations of Canada's vital signs projects.

Linda, your work in Calgary sounds so progressive and full of promise. I wonder what insight you have into how this all works in the context of a different(?) (antagonistic?) provincial agenda?

## **Linda Harvey**

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I assume you're talking about Alberta?

One thing I've learned since I came here in 2006, is that Calgary has a very strong voice, often independent of the broader Provincial message. the Mayor has worked hard here to negotiate and convince the Provincial Government on what Calgary needs. There is also a Calgary Regional Partnership that does amazing things without there being any level of Provincial Regional Planning since it was disbanded around 1994.

Since Calgary has its own commitment to sustainability and has been actively pursuing and resourcing SD issues for quite a few years, it's easy follow local leadership that is proud of what it can accomplish. Recent polling and surveys also help by giving us a sense of what the community wants.

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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Further to Ann's point about impact I would mention some ongoing work with our provincial treasury, trying to link some priority indicators to the budget process. The question is how can the budget be used so that it helps move a certain indicator towards its desired target. As the budget is a high leverage instrument,

this puts the indicator at the heart of public policy. I see an increasing amount of interesting experimentation in this regard.

## **Ann Dale**

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In fact, indicators linked to integrated community sustainability plans, embedded in electoral and budget cycles?

## **Ron Colman**

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Thank you all. So many important and provocative points emerging here. Can't type fast enough to keep up..... Just 4 quick responses:

1) I entirely agree with emphasis by Lazslo and Meg (I know Linda agrees too) on good community engagement process in visioning and indicator selection. We spent a whole year working with two communities just on that process, before we constructed and administered the survey. That engagement process does produce buy-in that's crucial.

2) I am actually more optimistic about policy traction than my earlier comments indicate. If you compare where we are now compared to 10-15 years ago, we have made some genuine progress, so to speak. I think the key thing is a process of "infiltration" over time. We just patiently and continuously and regularly keep putting out the results and numbers, and gradually they do "embed" themselves into the policy dialogue. We have begun to see that happen here in Nova Scotia. I don't think it's necessarily a matter of reporting annually, but continuously inserting the Footprint, or GPI, or other indicator perspective into the discussion. GDP-based measures have been around for a very long time, and dislodging them from their throne will not happen overnight. BUT it IS happening. Amazing that the OECD and European Union are now having major conferences on this - unthinkable 10 years ago. So I am optimistic.

3) YES Meg. First and foremost we cannot "be owned" as you put it, otherwise the integrity of what we do will be immediately lost. I guess this is connected to my earlier note about money - we cannot always get the money for what is right to do.

4) Yes - Lazslo (was it Lazslo who said this?) is right about tailoring reporting to other opportunities like budget cycles. E.g. How might budget (and figuring of assets/liabilities, costs/benefits) look differently from a full cost accounting perspective that took into account social and environmental benefits and costs. So we do need to use opportunities like that to put forward our perspective and

understanding.

## **Ann Dale**

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We will not achieve sustainable community development without new measurements, recognizing of course, what counts is often not measured, and that what is measured, often doesn't count (Einstein). Regardless, we need to get to the large collective decisions regarding our transportation patterns, our land-use patterns and biodiversity loss, and we won't get there by tinkering at the edges, we need to fundamentally change the rules of the game (Robinson, RRU January 2006). This means, the norms, standards, bylaws, zoning restrictions, which is why we recommended with our planning tool template that they be assessed against this framework and policies aligned within a municipality and as well, be embedded in electoral cycles. Again, I think we must keep in our minds, how can we now move the impressive body of work forward, make it more visible, and create both a critical mass and political constituency for integrated indicators connected to ecological and social well-being, sorry, I slipped out of my moderator role for a bit:)

Shall we move on to our last question, "What advice can you offer to other cities about best practices around determining and implementing indicators?"

## **Ron Colman**

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Ann: You should step out of your moderator role more often. That was good!

RE your last question: There are many good and important indicators that can be recommended to cities. But if I had to pick one on which to focus: In honest truth, my favourite of all indicators in all these years, is the Ecological Footprint. It says more of what matters in this day and age, and communicates more effectively than any other indicator I know, and therefore has considerable potential policy traction. I truly believe that Mathis and Bill have come up with one of the most important measurement tools of the century. Not exaggerating! It is really the most effective tool to measure sustainability from a consumption perspective and thus to engage all citizens, and it puts the equity dimension in the very centre of the equation.

So I think Linda's present Calgary work on the Footprint holds the greatest promise for cities. She is working closely with Global Footprint Network to ensure the best methodologies (which is crucial for the tool to have credibility), and she'll have tools like a personal calculator that can engage ordinary citizens. So if I had one wish, it would be that Linda's Calgary work quickly be replicated in other Canadian cities.

Lots more to say on "recommendations" concerning Ann's question, but I'd place the Footprint at the top of my list.

### **Linda Harvey**

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Thank you for the positive feedback Ron. I have to agree about Footprint though. After many years it does emerge as the common element with the broadest application and local relevance. It is not a singular measure of sustainability (as the Global Footprint Standards note), but it is a remarkable tool for analysis and engagement.

### **Meg Holden**

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RE your last question, Ann, our new approach at RVu, given our leverage point within the city system as lodged within a university, is to take a couple of steps back from the indicators themselves to engage more actively with local government officials and professionals. Our view is local government support is essential to the effective use of indicators, and this will not come without understanding among those in a position to use them and changes in organizational culture and norms to facilitate their use. So we're working on outreach and training, in different modes. This has to be the first step toward changing the institutions of local government that John Robinson as you mention and I think this whole panel advocates.

### **Linda Harvey**

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I'm glad Meg brought up the importance of engaging with the professions. In discussions in Germany, Australia and here at home there is a common experience of professional not feeling comfortable in an integrated model that takes them out of their comfort zone and identity as a professional (e.g. engineer, social worker etc.). This was empirically tested in the Hamilton TBL process. The Canadian Society of Professional Engineers were engaging their membership on climate change adaptation back in 2005. I think changing a professional's perception of himself in relation to sustainability is a tremendous leverage point for moving things forward.

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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1. Re Ann's point on how to create critical mass, I think there isn't a magic solution. Indicators are powerful, but it would be too simplistic to think just having alternatives to the GDP in the technical sense will change the picture. So, again, one needs process, we need alternative indicator systems emerging on multiple scales and we need institutional structures and fora where creative thinking, strategizing and dialogue can take place. We have been trying to create such space through the Canadian Sust. Indicators Network (CSIN), although this like most other networks was hard to fund. I hope we will be making a happy announcement about this in the near future.

2. I agree with Ron, there is strong political leadership emerging in the OECD and EU context, but to some degree even down South in the US at the level of some states (Oregon, Minnesota, US leading indicators etc.). This goes back to the first point - we need strategies that recognize the importance of involvement at the grass-roots, but also foster the political conditions for moving beyond the GDP universe. I am optimistic, there is new dynamics.

3. These changes will also lead to new challenges, as we simply don't have experience how would a 21st century society function if we changed its measures of progress. I think this is a key question and should be more explicitly discussed. We assume and believe it would work better, but that's not enough.

## **Ann Dale**

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In the absence of any e-audience questions, although we have a distinguished audience of about 40 to 50 people, I would like to ask you to make any concluding remarks you wish to make, think of me, as the mayor of Vancouver or Toronto, what advice would you give me?

## **Meg Holden**

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I'd like to hear an answer (if you care to provide one!) from Gwen on the question of the future. Why youth in indicators practice? Why Maori? What is your perspective on engagement and these different communities?

## **Gwen Colman**

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Thanks, Meg, why youth--as several people have just mentioned, it is difficult to

get people out of their professional silos and into an integrated approach to measurement. It is far less difficult with youth--especially if they can be trained early on in a holistic approach.--Involving youth also gives a great force of labour and enthusiasm to work at the community level. They want to do it! We really saw this in Thailand at the gross National Happiness Conference this past November where youth determined to network across ngos. They have incredible response time--they can grasp the technology quicker than us and see new ways to apply it also. i'll write next on Maori.

## **Linda Harvey**

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I wanted to touch on an issue that often provides a barrier to sustainability reporting at the local level. As these reports need an institutional home, it is often a local regional or municipal government that has the resources to lead the initiative. A problem arises when local Council's feel that they are responsible for achieving the targets alone, when they have very little direct control over many of the indicators (e.g. health issues regulated by the Province or health region). The approach here, I think, is to promote the interconnections to raise awareness on how things directly within municipal control do have health outcomes (e.g. planning and infrastructure decisions that are largely responsible for transportation emissions of air contaminants and GHG., land use patterns that that are linked to inactivity and obesity etc.).

Secondly, council's also feel vulnerable to community criticism if progress is not easily evident or timely. The need to create the ethic of cooperative, collective effort and not competition among sectors is critical.

## **Laszlo Pinter**

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I would argue Dr Mayor that there is no quick fix to the problem. I would argue that you start a process that you know would continue well beyond your term, whether it's your party or the opposition in power. I would also argue to engage on this with the community as a whole, to frame this as a learning and adaptive process where we have open space to raise some fundamental questions and where both citizens and the professional community can come up with ideas. The good thing in indicators is that they can be they not always are) neutral, so with the right approach you can build consensus around them.

Thanks for the dialogue!

## **Meg Holden**

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I think Lazlo makes a critical point about our responsibility as those who work with and promote indicators to articulate to mayors (for eg.) and the public what difference it could make to local decision making and the workings of city life as a whole if we had better measurement systems. Bringing this tantalizing idea down to earth is, I think, one of the most important roles we can play as indicators "works." And one that the OECD has caught onto, referencing the recent forum on measuring progress that Ron referred to.

## **Ron Colman**

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Well Ann. If you were Mayor of Vancouver, and if I had 2 precious minutes of your time, I think I'd make the Footprint argument first and foremost. If you gave me half an hour of your time, I'd probably spend a bit of time pointing out the flaws of growth-based measures of progress and the necessity of moving to a full-cost accounting approach that properly accounts for social and environmental benefits and costs (i.e. moving beyond indicators to a better accounting system).

Lazslo's last point is key: If we had enlightened leadership that automatically took the full social and environmental consequences of every decision into account when making policy (like the 7th generation process of some First Nations groups), then we wouldn't even need indicators. Bhutan embarked on a "Gross National Happiness" development strategy 35 years ago without indicators and only needs GNH indicators today because it has become a full democracy and is joining the WTO! So Lazslo's question of what policy action would look like is crucial.

## **Linda Harvey**

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Laszlo, as usual you've come to the heart of the matter :)  
Creating a learning organization and managing the change required to do so is essential to making any real progress over time.

## **Gwen Colman**

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Why Maori--

The tradition of kopapa which uses the values of the community to create the laws and practices followed by the community is so embedded in the culture of

the Maori that their grasp of indicators is almost instinctual. Yet they can be very articulate. The Maori view is very much based on place, on coming from a particular community and one's relationships within that community in the present and historically, and on a holistic view of the place that integrates environmental, social, governance and other factors. When we do visioning work with Canadian youth and compare that experience to working with youth from Asia it is obvious that there is something very important missing in their ability to connect themselves to a particular community. The Maori method would supply that sense of connection. In 2006 the Maori university held a 3-day seminar at which Ron was the keynote speaker and we were amazed how they use indicators to make decisions at an organizational level within the university and within the television station, the political party, the schools, etc. as well as for long-term community planning.

## **Ron Colman**

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Thank you all for the splendid dialogue and many wonderful insights. Re forward movement, I do think infiltration is key. I don't think change can always be "managed" though I fully agree with Lazslo and Linda on making every attempt to create such learning organizations. But plugging away with the numbers and messages (for which the basic logic is irrefutable) does have its effect over time. Thank you all. Ron

## **Ann Dale**

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I have the following question from a member of our audience. "So if the Sustainable Cities:PLUS Network were to play a useful role in bringing the matter of measures and indicators forward - what would the panel advise us to do? The Network consists of 30+ cities and regions - all at different phases of the planning cycle - ie some, like Calgary and Whister are pretty far along, others like Dar es Salaam seem a long way from even a visioning process - they are doing the usual UN City Strategies. How do we do capacity building? Do we need more case studies and documentation or do we need a more systematic way to tie indicators into the regular process and if so what actions would be most effective to help cities? When in the planning cycle (ie scoping, visioning, setting goals, developing strategies, implementing and monitoring) should the indicators be chosen?"

And another question from Ewa Ciuk:

Hi there,  
Thank you for such a great dialogue on indicators, I am with ICLEI and

of course am thrilled to be part of a discussion on municipalities and sustainability planning (a special hello to Linda, an long-time friend of ICLEI's!)

I wanted to respond to Laszlo's comment on linkages between indicators and other processes, specifically budgetary cycles. We've been involved with (and created) a system called EcoBUDGET which is used for natural resource accounting and distinct from a tool for general environmental management.

Following the same principles as financial budgeting, the ecoBUDGET process sets short-, medium- and long-term targets for natural resources (such as air quality, water, raw materials, climate stability, etc.) creates implementation plans to meet the targets, monitors progress against set targets, and assesses results prior to the reevaluation of targets.

Once established as an annual routine, as with financial budgeting, ecoBUDGET ensures that environmental quality is managed on an ongoing, rational and transparent basis, thus supporting accountability. After the completion of a yearly ecoBUDGET cycle the reasons for success or failure of meeting the ecoBUDGET are then reported to the community.

Environmental aspects are woven into municipal policy making across departments; making municipal leaders true resource managers, responsible for both financial and natural resources. It's essentially a process that mirrors financial budgeting (the EcoBudget goes through municipal council in the same manner as a financial one does) however for natural resources.

Thank you again for such a great dialogue!

**Laszlo Pinter**

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To the Cities PLUS question, I think the answer to some extent is in capacity building keeping in mind that 'capacity' in this context can mean many different things: knowledge, resources, skills etc. This has of course been attempted before, but many not on the same scale and not with the same degree of understanding of how indicators can make a difference. I would argue that ideally a visioning process should be at least informed by indicators - our common story, expressed by numbers - so based on that I would develop a diagnostic set of measures in the early phase of the process around values that would not change, whether you look back or look forward.

## **Meg Holden**

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Thanks to everyone for a really stimulating dialogue. I look forward to following up on all your projects and resources. Meg

## **Ron Colman**

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That sounds like a question from someone at ICSC...?! Can I guess?

I'd have one key piece of advice in response to this question: That is that we do not need to reinvent the wheel. I am all for cutting corners (actually the window of opportunity for change is small and shrinking). We have all had lots of consultations and engagements and processes for visioning and selecting indicators. So at this point, I'd start a little from the top down rather than bottom up: Build on what has already been developed and THEN validate it through the engagement process in each of the 30 cities. But I suggest creating the template with suggested indicators first, based on the best that has been developed globally to date (lots of great stuff is available), so that the 30 cities are not starting from a blank slate but have the benefit of building on and adapting the best that has been developed to date. That approach can save years of time, and we don't have the luxury to wait.....

## **Gwen Colman**

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Ewa, do you have a website address for Ecobudget and do you think it would translate well to discussion at the provincial level? We are looking for ways to engage youth in the current consultation process in Nova Scotia around natural resources, thanks.

## **Ron Colman**

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Dear Ewa: What you describe on the EcoBudget is wonderful - excellent example of moving beyond indicators to an accounting system. Until we do that kind of work, we will never dislodge the dominance of GDP-based measures. So that is most exciting - the direction we need to go. Thank you for that.

## **Linda Harvey**

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Hi Ewa. Good to hear from you. I know many cities in Europe are using Eco-Budget.

Case Studies and documentation have been done -- I think it's time to take Ron and Meg's advice and link indicators to action, with a process that is replicable and respectful of local conditions. A diagnostic set of indicators that could form a baseline for trending is important.

Building on existing work is really important, so that we respect investments that communities have already made. In both Calgary and Hamilton it was difficult to know how to approach Vital Signs given our existing systems. The same goes for Natural Step or other initiatives.

For those communities that haven't been able to articulate a vision I think the Melbourne Principles (adapted or not) could save a lot of time, effort and money compared to starting from scratch.

Footprint is a good starting place. I'm sure we can build on this to determine social indicators. Economics are already part of the Footprint methodology to a large extent.

## **Linda Harvey**

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I just thought I should offer that Footprint as an accounting system (humans demand outstrips nature's supply by 5 1/2 planets to 1; consumption compared to bio-capacity) is a powerful message here. It is helping with the life-cycle / full cost accounting mind set, although that is a big challenge.

## **Ann Dale**

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I would like to thank each of the panelists for their generosity in sharing their time and intellectual capital with us today, I knew some of you, and some of you I have heard such good things about, a very interesting dialogue, and one that was carbon neutral, thank you for your collaboration on this critical public policy issue. Please take a moment to complete our survey, and we will share all this information when compiled.

Postscript: website address for ecoBUDGET, <http://www.ecobudget.org>