

## **The use of sustainability indicators to measure the 'quality of life': Accounting for multiple perspectives**

Rendt Gorter 1.6.2008

*Below represents my reflections and comments on the "Sustainability Indicators Workshop", presented by David Kettle and Dave Breuer of Anew NZ at Penrose on Friday 30 March. It is written to stimulate discussion and feedback, so please circulate the text and react to this perspective. Write to me at [rendt@gorter.gen.nz](mailto:rendt@gorter.gen.nz).*

There is growing interest in sustainability indicators by a wide range of thinkers and practitioners. That much was evident from the introductions of participants at a one-day course convened by the Society for Sustainability Engineering and Science. A need for better understanding about the application and reporting of indicators was stressed by council workers, the quality of indicators in environmental reporting was important to Ministry of Environment staff, researchers expressed interest in effective processes for developing indicators, and practising engineers and architects from the private sector talked of their role in improving sustainable practices and their encounters with divergent standards and languages of government partners. In response to such expectations the facilitators of the workshop – David Kettle and Dave Breuer of Anew NZ – presented an introduction to the complexities of using indicators for planning and administration of government policy. The workshop had been prepared to provide working knowledge of this subject and to stimulate debate. Sure enough, the discussion this generated showed some of the wider issues that the development of indicators must struggle with.

Policy development at the overlap of social, economic, environmental and cultural interests is subject to an array of influences. How problems are identified and understood is determined by which role one plays in this space. That the world of public administration and policy processes continues to undergo important changes which put established knowledge and practices in question has been described in diverse academic and popular writing<sup>1</sup>. Approaching policy analysis only analytically will no longer produce unproblematic understanding. In practice, well-designed objectives and plans are contested politically, agreed through compromise and disappoint in implementation. This means that to produce, and then agree on, meaningful indicators cannot expect to apply textbook formulas but unavoidably requires a deliberative process that can never arrive at a final formulation, but can only aim at progressing in stages. To demonstrate this claim, one need only consider the requirements that the different perspectives present.

The analysis and institutionalisation of sustainability indicators is increasingly seen as an important contribution to the improvement of public policy at local, national and international level. The vast number of different indicator tools, the varying contexts of use and their differing objectives make it clear that this does not represent a definitive methodology but rather a commitment to address the

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<sup>1</sup> Fritjof Capra (e.g. Capra, Spretnak and Lutz 1984 Green politics) is one among many popular authors, echoing what can be found in more specialist literature such as Hodgson and Irving 2007 Policy reconsidered : meanings, politics and practices, Hay 2002 Political analysis : a critical introduction, or Lejano 2006 Frameworks for Policy Analysis: Merging Text and Context.

wider issues around immediate policy goals. Government agencies, and the private sector organisations following the same trend, are more and more expressing aims and achievements with quantitative variables that are meant to reflect important parameters in the environmental, social and political context of society. But the same indicators that declare directions for corporate efforts also reveal critical shortcomings in achieving objectives. This 'implementation gap' as it is described for example by Astleithner and Hamedinger (2003), is familiar to those working in the public sector, but especially to workers with non-governmental organisations who critically observe actions and reporting of government agencies. The development of second-generation indicators must reflect this experience.

The comparison of the classical GDP calculation with a more 'holistic' measure such as the Genuine Progress Indicator/Index (GPI) shows up the problems with neglecting non-monetary costs and ignoring critical human factors. Current reporting systems value expenditure on prisons as a positive economic indicator and ignore the unpaid work of volunteers and parents as contribution to social well-being. The consequence is incomplete understanding that can lead to ineffective decisions and action. Perhaps more difficult again, is to do justice to incorporating diverse values and views of the parties involved in formulating, administering and 'experiencing' the policies that indicators are intended to guide. The wide range of inputs required in a political context in which the term 'consultation fatigue' is already frequently encountered, points to the challenges for assembling measurement tools that are realistic and acquire legitimacy through public involvement.

Efforts in New Zealand reflect an international tendency to develop comprehensive indicator programs. For instance, regional and local councils went through lengthy processes of 'community engagement' in 2004-7 to arrive at 'community outcomes'. Most government departments such as the Ministry for Social Affairs and the Ministry for the Environment will report trends and activities with analytical figures. A number of projects are developing that further, such as the 2007 NZ 'Quality of Life Indicators', and Statistics New Zealand who are leading an initiative of 'Monitoring Progress Towards a Sustainable New Zealand'.

In many countries substantial resources have been invested into designing and consulting on indicator sets that have become internationally respected, such as the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, the Sustainable Development Nordic Indicators and the MONET Swiss Indicator System. Internationally of course, indicators are a means to compare and motivate individual countries and regions. This describes also the OECD Environmental Performance Review, which in this country was last prepared on behalf of the New Zealand Ministry of Environment in 2005/06.

With these and many indicators already in use, an obvious question that poses itself is why another set should be developed through the Anew NZ project. In part, this is explained by a clear need for integration. Making meaning out of national social welfare statistics is important for deciding priorities and distributing national resources but equally for developing local solutions. Private sector operators working with government partners already encounter inconsistent standards and terminology across administrative boundaries and even more over different scales of government within this country. In order to coordinate scarce resources and transitory public interest, a clear and easy to communicate framework is very important. But implicit in such criticism is an assumption that only as long as integration with existing practices can be maintained will such conceptual development be able to overcome these hurdles.

The difficulties encountered to a large extent hinge on understanding and language. In an increasingly complex society, there are on the one hand responses that require indicators that reduce complexity and provide focus on essentials. For planners and policy makers, effective tools that can provide frameworks and measurements which can be put into practice on the basis of established practice and recognised standards is desperately needed. In busy government offices, circulating emails that employ sophisticated concepts cannot be given enough time and so need to be taken on authority and trust that the authors have the required expertise. Practical concerns will revolve around coherence and communicability as much as election cycles and current media interest. But with this, a dependence on experts is growing.

Another response to complexity is the proliferation of strategic planning. 'Corporate sustainability strategies' are in constant review by regional councils, while district councils employ 'strategic' planners or 'strategic assessment' teams. What such terms share is an underlying concern for forward thinking in a changeable environment. From this perspective, good indicators need to be robust and comparable, even if this requires compromises on resolution and specificity. For good strategy to be robust, it must be able to respond to environmental risks and social investment priorities which may vary at scales or occur within time delays that do not respect the assumptions of planners.

The efficient management that strategic planning aspires to can be anathema for practitioners active in marginal communities. This is certainly the case in settings where main-stream solutions must be adapted to local circumstance and where the vulnerable are too easily missed by the long-distance radar of strategic indicator monitoring. Of course, where marginal interests are not involved in the selection of indicators, then there is an inevitable risk that the language and values embedded in the reference frameworks will favour some social configurations over other, be that gender, ethnic or simply lifestyle factors. The indicators needed for this purpose may be less interested in averages but more in distribution or extremes. Critically, the inclusion of some variables should perhaps not just be a question of democratic majority or privilege but rather of justice and equality.

Efficiency is an idea that is especially associated with the private sector world. With the move to devolution in recent years, came also a move to privatisation and outsourcing. In effect this has created a large domain in which both commercial operators and non-governmental organisations compete for public funds and increasingly become dependent on contractual arrangements with public bodies. When government services and public works are being delivered by non-government bodies then this creates 'para-corporate' networks that need to develop a common language of norms and values. Without a shared understanding of measures and objectives, critical government responsibilities cannot be outsourced and accounted for. This makes the choices of measurable outcome indicators not only necessary but critical to the self-interest of external contractors. In consequence, wording indicators that determine the allocation of public funds then becomes a delicate matter that will be of immediate concern to the contractors as much as to the public in general. In other words, what appears to be a technical task becomes a political issue.

For the designers of indicator systems and the visionaries that prepare the ground for them, there are larger aims that motivate the work. The presentation of underlying aims and overarching frameworks will emphasize the practical utility on the one hand, recognising the requirements for comprehensive assessment and practical monitoring tools. Indicators that are tangible and with

personal relevance are easier linked to more global and ephemeral outcomes such as climate change and social cohesion. Effective policy making and participation based on values that can be communicated and defended will add to the promise of a better future. A common language built on agreed concepts that can be measured and evaluated can reinforce a belief in democratic government in a time when declining voter turn-out is showing the opposite.

Another perspective yet, will show less concern for underlying truth values that may validate the use of this or that number, but be more interested in the process itself of forming opinions and negotiating social priorities. If the indicators represent the course a society chooses to steer, then the understanding of what assumptions these indicators have to be built on will have to be agreed by all those affected. Such a dialogue is necessary, for example, to decide whether to give more weight to indicators of marine biodiversity protection as represented by recent marine reserve legislation to protect rare dolphins, or to employment protection that this ministerial decision undermines in a time of an impending recession. Whichever direction is chosen, it entails a social commitment that cannot easily be reneged on.

And finally, from the perspective of the general public who may as a whole not be able to identify with any specific concerns of the interest groups that stand behind different indicators, there still remains a general principle of democratic accountability. The term of 'sustainability management' successfully satisfies capitalist notions of growth and profitability, i.e. of increasing living standards, while at the same time – as the purpose of the RMA expresses it – to provide for the 'foreseeable needs of future generations'<sup>1</sup>. The enactment of this policy and engagement with international agreements (in spite of the disappointment with the suspension of the climate change policy package in 2005 or the slow development of the Ocean Policy), gives rise to an expectation that government will use the resources and political will at its disposal to implement policies that can resolve conflicting interests and values through democratic processes in order to achieve an ideal that perhaps lies beyond reach.

For the participants of the one-day workshop, the subject of sustainability showed itself to be a cross-cutting theme across government practices, where practitioners as much as analysts are hard at work to fashion practical tools. The range of national and international frameworks presented, suggest that the design of improved indicator systems has many potential sources of input. Judging by the discussions that took place, the adaptation of such models of practice will depend on how the language of indicators can be moulded to match the language of planners, policy makers and consulted publics; how target frameworks can be brought in line with implementation capacities; and how quantitative indicators can reflect underlying assumptions and overlapping 'orders of outcomes'. As a first step, the participation in this workshop surely demonstrated a willingness to engage in that process by those that will be at the frontline of future applications of sustainability indicators.

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<sup>1</sup> Resource Management Act 1991 Part 2 s5