

## **Paper Title: Indicators of Community sustainability: galvanising action**

**Key words:** sustainability, universities, local government, community, action

### **Abstract:**

What began as a short term project for a university centre developing indicators of community sustainability with three local government partners has evolved into a three year journey. The project has evolved in a policy environment where there has been increasing interest in the issue of community sustainability, a focus on evidenced base decision making and an increased role for local government in economic development and more recently, community strengthening.

The university has been well-placed as a key community partner not only because of research and project management expertise but also because of perceived independence that can help negotiate concerns about indicators being seen as performance measures and the risk of local government “league ladders”. The trust data providers have in the institution also strengthens the role.

After a three-year period of project development with local government and community partners, the establishment of the indicator suite and reporting mechanisms, the need to ensure clear benefit to the university and community has become clear. Thus this is no longer a short term project but one which must become embedded into core university business. In the process key questions need to be answered, given there is little evidence that indicators of community sustainability serve any useful purpose beyond rhetoric.

This paper outlines how the work of the collaborative project team has taken the indicators of community sustainability beyond data capture to linking these indicators to community action, student projects and ongoing research.

## **Introduction**

In 2002 the Centre for Regional Development at Swinburne University of Technology began to work with the three municipalities of Outer Eastern Melbourne, the Cities of Knox and Maroondah and the Shire of Yarra Ranges. This project was initially inspired by concern for the region which is home to the Lilydale campus of the University and the region for which the university has been given a legislative mandate to provide higher education. It was also driven by concerns about sustainability in each council. Initially funded for one year by a university grant and a contribution from each Council, the project was seen to have a finite life and results were expected within the initial one-year term. Three years on, there is an acknowledgement that, to achieve real impact and traction within the community, there is still a long way to go.

## **The development of indicators**

In November 2004, 550 invited experts from over 40 countries including senior government bureaucrats, OECD officials and heads of national statistics institutes met in Palermo Italy at *Statistics, Knowledge and Policy, OECD World Forum on Key Indicators*. In a sense this forum marked the culmination of a decade of concern about indicators of sustainability and demonstrated the growing importance of comprehensive and reliable information to inform policy development and track progress. Whilst the forum highlighted the development of indicator suites by the OECD, the United Nations, the European Union and many countries including Australia, it also demonstrated an increasing trend towards local measurements of economic social and environmental sustainability in cities and regions around the world. In 2006, a joint OECD – JRC workshop, *Measuring Wellbeing and Societal Progress*, held in Milan began a series of workshops leading up to the second world forum to be held in Istanbul 2007. This workshop was designed to explore new and better ways to measure progress and wellbeing. The background paper for this workshop provides a comprehensive picture of progress towards developing alternative global measures to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) a powerful economic tool never intended as, but nevertheless often used as, a measure of wellbeing (Matthews, 2006).

Concern with issues of sustainability gathered momentum in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland produced the most commonly used definition of sustainability. The Commission's report, *Our Common Future* (1987), popularised the notion of sustainable development and the principle of ensuring that our actions today should not limit the range of economic, social and environmental options open to future generations.

The work of the United Nations and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development indicates that the 1990s were a time of international soul-searching in relation to the environment:

“What are we doing to our planet? More and more, we are realising that the Industrial Revolution has changed forever the relationship between humanity and nature. There is real concern that by the middle or the end of the next century human activities will have changed the basic conditions that have allowed life to thrive on earth” (WBCSD 2000).

As environmental disasters have provided the impetus for change in both government policy and business practice, social upheaval has also provided motivation for a closer look at social structures and communities. Events like September 11 (New York 2001), Bali Bombings (October 12, 2002), the war in Iraq and now the London bombings (July 7, 2005), challenge assumptions about globalisation and sustainability. Whilst the sustainability of economies and financial markets are influenced globally, these influences are sometimes at odds with local concern. As the activities of 9/11 demonstrate, it cannot be assumed that all citizens find that the endeavours of the World Trade Organisation contribute to better quality of life. Terrorism can be seen as a response to the homogenisation of culture that follows the economic domination of the West and perhaps even backlash against the impact of global corporations on regional economies. Finding a balance between globalisation and culture, geography, tradition and community and the rapid evolution of a new world order is examined in ‘The Lexus and the Olive Tree’ (Friedman 2000).

In seeking to understand and strategically manage sustainability issues, organisations and communities have begun to focus on indicators. In response to the requirement for new dimensions of performance, John Elkington (1999) coined the term “triple bottom line’ (TBL) which provides a context for measurement of sustainability. Over the last decade the conceptual understanding of economic, environmental and social (TBL) dimensions and sustainable performance has been continuously improving. TBL reporting is becoming accepted business practice, and a range of benchmarks and indicators are used by organisations that seek to rate business performance against the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington 2001). Contemporary debate refines TBL concepts with consideration of a “quadruple bottom line” or “triple bottom line plus one” or “the five pillars of sustainability” that include an emphasis on culture and/or democracy and governance as added dimensions for measurement.

On a global scale, OECD and UN indicators measure a country’s performance in relation to international conventions or agreed standards often relating to sustainable development, human rights, safety and basic access to food, water and health care. National indicator suites often set targets for development and track progress towards the desired outcomes. Often these suites are assembled under the title of measuring progress, as in the case of Australia’s “Measures of Australia’s Progress”.

In the United Kingdom the national indicator suite is driven by the sustainability agenda:

“We have failed to see how our economy, our environment and our society are all one. And that delivering the best quality of life for us all means more than concentrating on economic growth.” (Tony Blair ‘A Better Quality of Life’ 1999, Foreward)

Canada goes further providing a results-based perspective and titles their report “Canada’s Performance”:

“A healthy democracy such as Canada’s requires the active engagement of its citizens in understanding the economic and social issues we face as a nation... we assess our progress in the following areas of Federal

involvement: the economy; society, culture and democracy; health; and the environment.” Reg Alcock, President of the Treasury Board (Canada’s Performance 2004p III)

More recently in Canada a non-government coalition of researchers, State agencies and Statistics Canada are working on the Canadian Index of Well-being for which an overall framework has been developed. The first report is expected towards the end of 2006.

It is a basic truth that what cultures measure, they also value (Theobald 1999 cited in Bastian, 2000). The real power of indicators is not merely in measurement but in becoming a tool for engaging communities and fostering change. A major contention of the OECD Forum was that indicator development needs to turn statistics into knowledge into public knowledge.

“The indicators a society chooses to report to itself about are surprisingly powerful. They reflect collective values and inform collective decisions. A nation that keeps a watchful eye on its salmon run, or the safety of its streets makes different choices than does a nation that is only paying attention to its gross national product (GNP). The idea of citizens choosing their own indicators is something new under the sun – something intensely democratic” (Sustainable Seattle)

Sustainable Seattle and the Jacksonville Indicators for Progress are two well-known community indicator projects that have been working for 14 and 20 years respectively demonstrating the power of local action. In Australia capital city initiatives in Brisbane and Melbourne focus on sustainability whilst local projects Newcastle, Onkaparinga, Port Phillip, Moreland and Albury Wodonga, for example, demonstrate the interest of local government in community sustainability or well-being indicators.

Whilst the sustainability agenda may have had its initial impetus over concern for the environment, the importance of the social dimensions of development is increasingly discussed. Woolcock refers to the work of Robert Putnam (1993) and Fukuyama (1995) demonstrating the importance of local civic associations

in terms of information dissemination and building social trust which are underpinning conditions for effective governance and economic development. Social capital, which includes institutional capacity, social networks, and community participation – has an important role to play in social and economic outcomes. Thus there has been considerable research into in the concept and measurement of social capital and related notions such as community strength, community building and neighbourhood renewal on the part of Australian governments.

“Strong communities are constituted by people who understand the social, economic and environmental assets of the community and are working towards sustainability. Strong communities also understand and work with their most disadvantaged population to ensure minimum standards for all. To do these things, members of a strong community need to be engaged, involved, feel capable of working through issues and be supported through external partnerships” (Strategic Policy and Research 2004 p).

Indicators of community sustainability are not an end in themselves, rather, they are a tool to measure progress and need to be strongly linked to the preparation of a vision for sustainable development. With a strong relationship to a community’s sense of direction and existing institutional goals, indicators become meaningful and dynamic tools that help guide progress, policy and direct resource allocation (Hughes and Honeybone, 2000).

As the level of government closest to community, councils have the opportunity to foster sustainability in their community through initiatives including:

- Educational, communication and facilitation of stakeholder thinking and action
- Regulatory policies and controls and
- Investment options in infrastructure (Marsh, unpublished paper 2001)

Universities too are concerned with communities and with sustainability and their role in education and research is one that complements that of local government.

## University community engagement

The importance of university-community engagement has become increasingly apparent over the last decade. This has been driven by an acknowledgement of the role that universities can play in the development of civil society and also as a response to the pressures on communities arising from the knowledge based global economy.

For universities, *“The agenda has moved on from a desire to simply increase the general education of the population and the output of scientific research; there is now a greater concern to harness university education and research to specific economic and social objectives”* (OECD 1999, p9). A new responsive model for higher education is required and central to the development of this new model is the development of partnerships.

The discussion paper “Higher Education at the Crossroads”, a review of Higher Education in Australia (Nelson, 2002; pp. 23-24) refers to *“the new compact of mutual obligation involving active partnerships between institutions, their staff, students, government and employers”* (and by implication the wider community).

“The engaged institution is committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually beneficial exchange, exploration and application of knowledge expertise and information. These interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity. The work of the engaged institution is responsive to community-identified needs, opportunities and goals in ways that are appropriate to the university’s mission and academic strengths. The interaction also builds greater public understanding of the role of the university as a knowledge asset and resource.” (Holland, 2001; p.7)

Given the growing recognition of this role, it is not surprising that universities are partnering with communities in developing indicators of sustainability. For example, Latrobe University has become involved in researching community

sustainability through the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities based at the Bendigo campus (Pepperdine 2003, Rogers, 2004) and Deakin University produces the Australian Unity Well-being Index through its Australian Centre on Quality of Life. Victoria University and Swinburne are currently collaborating with ABS and local governments on the development of Victorian Community Indicators. The three Outer Eastern Melbourne Councils are participating in this project in tandem with the development of their own regional indicator suite.

### **The process of developing indicators of community sustainability**

The indicator project in Outer Eastern Melbourne was developed by a team made up of University staff, a project manager and a project researcher, and local government managers whose areas of responsibility could be categorized as social, economic, environmental or organisational development.

From the beginning it was acknowledged that the development of the sustainability indicator suite has the capacity to fulfil a community building role through the process of engagement and consultation. Whilst the existence of the suite and the publicity and education associated with the indicators can be seen to be important, the process of developing the indicators themselves can help develop policy through public debate and discourse (Innes 1994) – another important role in community building.

Historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to invest themselves and their resources in the effort (Kretzman and McKnight, 1993). This observation explains why communities are never built from the top down, or from the outside in (Kretzman and McKnight, 1993). Effective community development efforts are based upon an understanding of the community's assets, capacities and abilities, not deficiencies or needs (Kretzman and McKnight, 1993). Celebrating assets, connecting skills to the economy, and inviting people to the table to envision a future allows mobilisation of a vision for the future and harnesses energy together.

The process of selecting indicators begins with community consultation. Collectively a vision is prepared on how the community would like to look in the future. Many councils undertake this process as part of their planning and strategic framework and this forms a good basis for indicator development. In the case of Outer Eastern Melbourne, each local government had developed a community vision. These visions were aligned by the project team as a foundation for the development of the indicators.

### **Stakeholder involvement**

Residents and organisations which provide services to the community are stakeholders in the indicator development process. Stakeholder organisation cooperation is essential in the development of an indicator suite to highlight locally relevant issues, provide technical expertise, monitoring and data collection. Stakeholder organisations also obtain benefits from the process of indicator development. Opportunities to share reporting requirements, reinforce messages to the community and provide details on local projects and services exist with the distribution of “report card”.

In summary, stakeholder involvement is essential to indicator development for many reasons including:

- (i) Insight into the needs and concerns of the community (Myer 1987; Hughes and Honeybone 2000; Pepperdine 2003).
- (ii) Identification of locally relevant and meaningful indicators (Pepperdine, 2003).
- (iii) Embedding indicators in the local community and promoting adoption (Parker 1995, cited in Pepperdine 2003, Hughes and Honeybone, 2000).
- (iv) Empowering the community (Parker 1995, cited in Pepperdine, 2003).
- (v) Facilitating data collection and monitoring (Pepperdine, 2003).
- (vi) Developing action to improve indicator measures.

In confirming the vision for a sustainable future, project researchers facilitated workshops and focus groups with stakeholders to determine community

understanding of the term “sustainability” and to identify potential measures or what would constitute evidence of sustainability to participating community members.

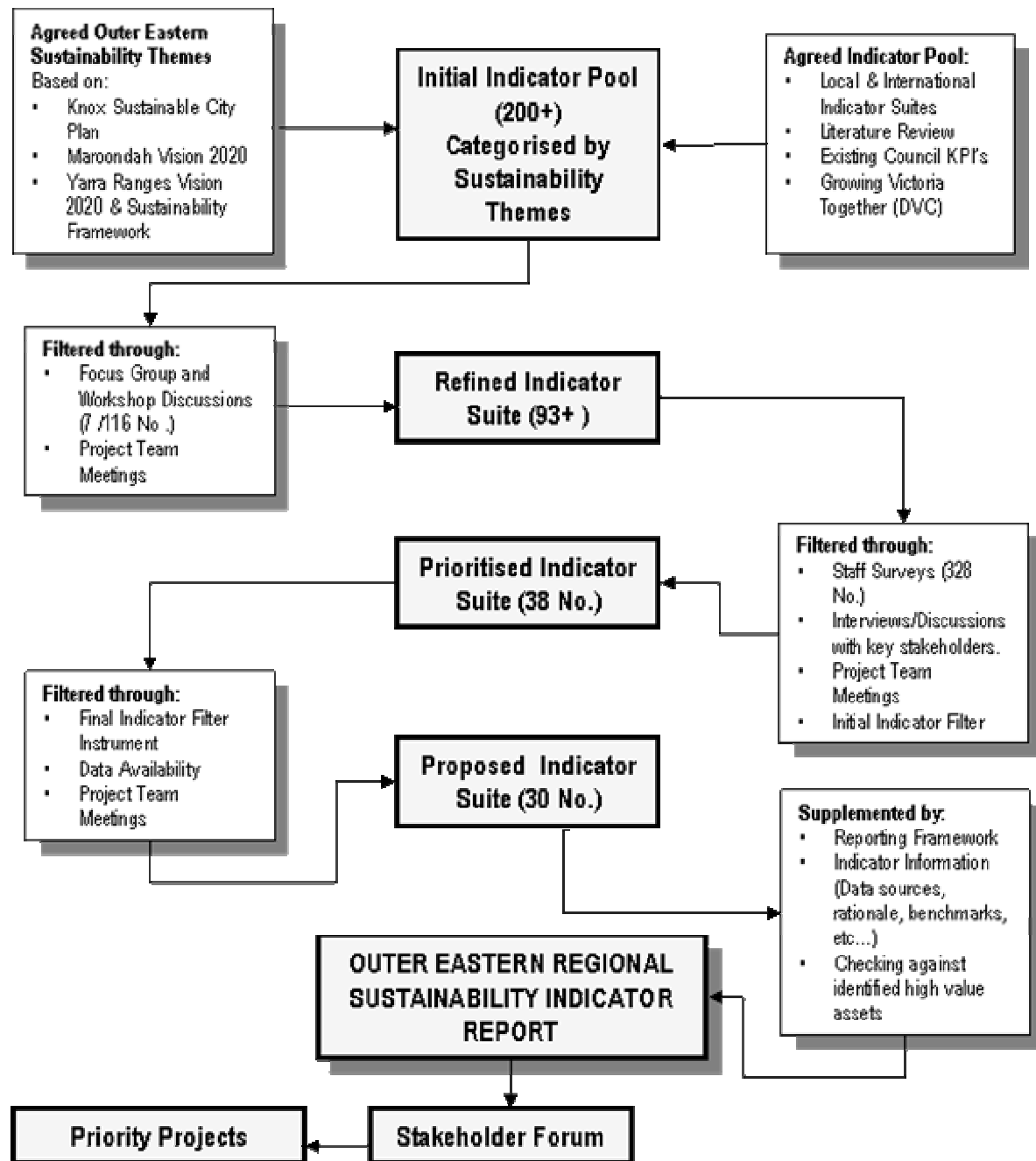
The project also involved an extensive literature review which meant researching other models of sustainability indicators (including Sustainable Seattle, Jacksonville Indicators for Progress, Canterbury Dialogues, Onkaparinga, Newcastle, Wodonga, Measures of Australia’s Well Being and other ABS indicators, Social Benchmarks for Victoria developed by Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Growing Victoria Together Framework, OECD (Social Health and GDP), the Global Reporting Initiative, Outer East Alliance Social Determinants of Health and theoretical frameworks for measuring social capital, happiness and quality of life, for example. The university was ideally placed to provide this background research and to facilitate workshops and focus groups on behalf of the team.

The measures identified by the workshops and focus groups were added to indicators identified by a literature search and presented as a pool to the project team. The filtering process in the Outer East is demonstrated by the following. In the Outer East, the three local governments are significant local employers and an analysis of the postcode of staff residence showed that over 85% of the staff employed by the councils lived in the region. Although skewed by age (slightly older) and sex (more female) than the working population of the region on average, the local government employees provided an accessible group of the regional community to survey as part of the filtering process. A questionnaire was developed using the indicators initially filtered by the project team. Respondents were asked to categorise the indicators against a 5 point Likert scale (not at all important, not important, neither important or unimportant, important, and very important). The questionnaire was administered in a web based and hard copy format. Respondents were also encouraged to write comments and suggest indicators not already listed.

During analysis of the survey, the wide demographic cross section represented by local government staff became apparent. Figure 1 following shows the three

year process undertaken to arrive at the indicator suite, reporting mechanisms and identifying collaborative action.

**Figure 1: Indicator Filtering Process**



## **Engaging Stakeholders as Partners in Action**

The process of developing the indicators engaged data providers for the Outer Eastern project including Melbourne Water, SPAusnet, Least waste, The Department of Victorian Communities, the Outer Eastern Learning and Employment Network, the Department of Human Services, Victoria Police, Yarra Valley Water, South East Water, the Environmental Protection Agency and the local governments themselves. Data from ABS and Centrelink was also obtained.

However, if community indicators are to be sustainable themselves, an ongoing relationship with these data providers needs to be maintained. The purpose of developing the partnership with these stakeholders is not just for ongoing data provision, it is also because these stakeholders may wish to be engaged with the council and community in action to change indicator performance.

In the case of the Outer East, the initial sustainability report was presented to stakeholders at a forum hosted by the university in 2005. This forum also identified three key areas for collaborative action. Agreement was obtained from a number of stakeholders to co-badge the indicator website ([www.sustainableoutereast.com](http://www.sustainableoutereast.com)) and these stakeholders joined the launch of the indicators in early 2006.

## **The importance of the university role**

The role of independent facilitator and a keeper of the data have emerged as quite important. Independence from the political role of councils is seen by some members of the community as important. For councils, the university and stakeholder partnership is important in terms of establishing community ownership. The indicators are not measures of council performance but a means to inform strategic planning of the whole community. In the Outer East the councils opted for a regional report, co-badged not only to encourage collaboration and joint ownership but also to avoid “league ladder” type comparisons which may have been one outcome from a report that looked at the indicators for each of the three councils and then the region.

For some data providers, university research rigour provides the confidence that data will not be misused or misinterpreted. The capacity to provide data analysis and guide the development of the framework has been appreciated by the local government team.

The project management role of the university has been crucial to the establishment of the cross-departmental and cross council teams. The initial task of aligning the three visions was a revelation to the council team in the Outer East. It became very clear that they shared common goals and that they could work together for mutual and community benefit. Much has been learned from the collaboration. As trust has developed so has the capacity of the team members to learn from each other. Building team ownership has been important to the development of the indicators and this has taken time. The process of development is almost more important than the indicators themselves. For one local CEO, having the indicators is 30% of the job – the big task is engaging the community to make change and all team members acknowledge that this is not going to happen overnight.

### **From rhetoric to reality**

In the Outer East the project has now run for three years led by a team of university and local government champions and it is only now that the indicators are being used in local government strategic planning. The engagement of councillors has been uneven and the impact of the indicators on councillor decision-making has yet to be tested. The impact on university decision-making is also not clear.

Whilst the rhetoric about empowering communities is compelling, the evidence as yet seems slight.

Some of the indicator suites most cited in this work need to be watched over time. For example, the indicators for the City of Onkaparinga have evolved and have a different reporting format. The relationship between the indicators and Council decision-making is still not apparent. The Jacksonville Indicators of

Progress continue to be populated but, given an over 300 percent refusal rate on their community survey, the depth of Jacksonville community engagement must be challenged. Sustainable Seattle reported last in 1998. In 2004 momentum again built. This time 24 key decision makers were empowered to start a new “indicator program toward a product that will move King County towards sustainability” (Sustainable Seattle). This project represents a significant initial effort, an “intensely democratic” process but one that has had to be reinvigorated. The question can be asked, have the indicators made any difference?

Further, there may even be vested interest in these types of projects not achieving their “intensely democratic” potential. It has been suggested that government rhetoric might support community capacity building and empowering of local communities but, “rather than being about any substantial social transformation, community building projects are generally about the kind of low-key and modest local activities and services that people pursue despite government” (Mowbray, 2005, p263). Could it be that indicators like many government sponsored community capacity building programs support only those in the community who are already empowered?

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency has developed a comprehensive bank of local community statistics available online which include online tutorials to support community based use of these statistics. The site and the tutorials are ostensibly well used. Increasingly social atlases are available online using interactive geographical software and in South Australia such a site is under development, designed to report comprehensively on the health status of the communities in each South Australian Local Government Area. However, the connection to informed decision making and empowering change is still not demonstrable.

It is clear that, difficult as the process may be and as inclusive as the process may be, deciding upon a suite of indicators and providing the data is not enough on its own.

In the Outer East a regional report is produced and published online. Individual reports provided to each local government for its own use and it is hoped that much local action will be decided upon in local forums. The indicators reveal that the communities of the Outer East have a comparatively good quality of life but there are some significant warnings for the community. The region has an average high retained retail spending but lower local employment. School retention is a concern along with higher and further education participation rates. Households in the region have a steadily increasing energy consumption (8.2 tonnes green house gas per household) and waste is an issue. Whilst most residents feel that they can get help when they need it, they also feel disenfranchised and not able to have a real say about issues of importance. Despite lower than State average and declining levels of crime, residents do not feel safe.

Based on two year's indicator data, the stakeholder forum decided upon three areas for regional action: lifelong learning; energy consumption and safety. Only the lifelong learning regional action group has been convened so far. This group is comprised of approximately 20 people from local and regional agencies including the Outer Eastern Local Learning and Employment Network (OELLEN), The Eastern Metropolitan Region Education Department, Eastern Regional Libraries, the three council school-focussed youth services workers, Swinburne University and TAFE, the Regional Adult and Community Further Education office and Community Houses.

The group has now met regularly for over six months facilitated by the Centre for Regional Development. The positives are that the group has real momentum and enthusiasm; that valuable information is shared; that two major initiatives have been developed and that university student projects have been built into the process. The negatives are the resources required to support the group and action decisions and the resources required to implement the "grand plans" which include a regional marketing campaign. Perhaps because of this there has been limited time and energy to initiate meetings of the other two groups.

It is clear that research into the impact of the indicators on the community is required and the team is committed to pursuing this research over the long term.

## **Conclusion**

Publishing the indicator suite became a small celebration of a stage on a journey. The challenge is to maintain the momentum and ensure that the indicators and the indicator project are relevant to the regional community stakeholders, that the indicators are used in decision making and the community capacity to use the indicators is built over time.

Embedding the indicator work in the core business of both local government and the university is crucial. For the university, this means a commitment to ongoing research into the indicators and continuing to find ways to engage students in projects related to the indicators. In this way student learning is enhanced, students are engaged with contributing to the community and the project can continue to evolve in a way that is mutually beneficial regardless of the ultimate verdict on whether indicators really do empower communities.

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