

Canadian Sustainability Indicators Network (CSIN)

Accord¹ (September 2003)

Background

Envisioning, implementing and monitoring sustainable development requires measurement tools suitable for the task. If sustainability is a journey, indicators are the signposts that show where we came from, where we are, and help understand where we may be heading in the future. Without such signposts there is no way to tell whether particular policies are working and whether organizations, regions, sectors or communities are heading in the right direction. Reports are also critical parts of the information flow. Like a drivers' handbooks, they help to interpret the signs and establish a common understanding of their meaning.

As interest in the practical implementation of sustainable development in Canada increased over the last decade, organizations often found that traditional, mostly economic, measures of success fell short of capturing many concerns. The quest for relevant sustainability indicators began. Indicator and reporting projects were initiated at many different scales and perspectives: from the municipal to national; from river basins to ecozones and trans-boundary ecosystems; from entire sectors to thematic issues.

The organizations taking responsibility range from grass-roots community groups through universities, various levels of government, multi-stakeholder groups, all the way to corporations and multi-lateral international organisations.

Although often initiated independently, collectively these indicator and reporting programs contribute to a multi-layer information system on environment and development. The increasing number and diversity of indicator initiatives that are emerging suggest the need for increased networking, coordination and information exchange to explore areas of convergence and/or overlap. In particular, it would be beneficial to share lessons learned and best practices with one another in order to support the effectiveness and efficiency of these initiatives.

¹ This Accord is a result of discussions and input from a range of interested participants including the March 15, 2003 "dinner discussion" organised by Environment Canada as part of the International Sustainability Indicators Network (ISIN) biennial meeting in Toronto, March 13-16, 2003. It is also based on original Discussion Paper by Dennis O'Farrell with input from Laszlo Pinter, Michael Keating and Risa Smith. Further revisions and additions have been imputed by the CSIN steering committee.

Purpose

The purpose of the Canadian Sustainability Indicators Network (CSIN) is to create a rich and stable community for new and experienced practitioners developing and applying indicators, indicator systems and reporting. This community will assist and enable practitioners to share lessons learned, discuss relevant issues of theoretical, strategic, technical, and practical importance, and start developing mechanisms for collaboration among the multitude of indicator and reporting initiatives.

Goals

The Goals under this purpose are that the Canadian Sustainability Indicators Network will encourage and facilitate Canadian indicator and reporting practitioners:

- 1. To create a common, welcoming "space" for communication, collaboration and learning with respect to indicator development, reporting and use.**
- 2. To share data and indicators and exchange information about methods and strategies and concepts for indicator development, data collection, dissemination, presentation and other aspects of indicator and reporting program.**
- 3. To explore ways of strengthening indicator work in Canada, especially strengthening the links between indicators and decision-making, policy and action, through, debate, studies, research findings, and innovations that can improve the whole process of indicator development and presentation for all participants' benefit.**
- 4. To make connections with international practitioners and, in particular, with the International Sustainability Indicators Network.**

In addition to the above four priority goals, the following are additional objectives for the Canadian Sustainability Indicators Network to:

1. Act as a key Canadian focal point for discussing the linkages from science and data to policy- and decision-making to action.
2. Encourage and promote better understanding of indicators and reporting, and effective use of indicators in policy- and decision-making processes.
3. Provide access to a pool of expertise in the form of contact information or documented knowledge from indicator experts.
4. Promote best practices in indicator development and reporting;
5. Facilitate collaboration on specific issues as "sub-communities" or "working groups."
6. Improve co-ordination among indicator and reporting initiatives
7. Provide opportunities for professional training, advancement and recognition.
8. Understand at a practical level how to market sustainability indicators to expand user opportunities.

9. Create alliances with other groups such as, professional associations, corporations, government, and nonprofit organizations.

The Network itself will need to review and refine these objectives and the priorities as needed.

Activities

Key activities could include the following, depending on the collective priorities of the network members and available resources:

- Consult and collaborate with the International Sustainability Indicators Network.
- Organize face-to-face meetings for all members every two years (allowing for more of a focus on the ISIN meetings during alternate years). Local/regional events and subgroup meetings could occur more often. "Virtual events" may also be planned. Meetings will be planned in association with other conferences of interest to indicator practitioners.
- Build a convenient method such that members can contact other members without infringing on privacy needs.
- Build a central information and announcements area where all members can post relevant information of interest to the entire community. Possibly including a user's guide to sustainability indicators and/or a directory or classification system for indicators and indicator systems.
- Establish ways to promote innovation - on the Web space and during face-to-face meeting sessions - where members feel comfortable posing questions or suggesting new concepts for indicators, indicator development, reporting or presentation and get feedback from experienced members and the community as a whole.
- Establish support for sub-communities and "working groups" who may want to focus on scale-specific, strategic or technical issues, Environment Canada initiatives, a biodiversity index, or making indicators dynamic, interactive and user friendly, while ensuring the linkages are always there with the Network as a whole.
- Establish data, indicator and tool sharing facilities where participants can give and receive specific directions, files and links to data, tools or indicators that could be used in different contexts.
- Create a mechanism to organize the knowledge contained in the answers, conversations, experiments and events.
- Organize special events such as the big annual meeting but also lectures/presentations by outsiders, meetings on special sub-topics, etc.
- Encourage and facilitate improved access to information and data regarding indicator trends from all sectors.
- Coordinate a peer/third party review function for member indicator initiatives.

Other activities may be suggested and could take on priority. The group as a whole will decide this when considering revisions to this accord.

A "Community of Practice" approach

The key behind the community of practice approach is the exchange and creation of knowledge for the benefit of participants involved in a common area of work. Communities of practice are voluntary and participants determine their own level of involvement, which can change over time. Communities of practice can be informal networks of people but they can also be highly organised and supported by organisations; they are self-governing and, so, open and receptive in nature. These are the kinds of characteristics needed of a group of people with a shared interest to come together for problem solving, innovation, and learning. There is a well-developed literature on the support and encouragement of communities of practice that should be useful as CSIN evolves.

Organizational structure

A flexible organizational structure will be established with the concept that the membership will help bring further direction and definition to the structure over time, if necessary. At this stage the National Indicators and Reporting Office of Environment Canada can provide some infrastructure and work on establishing tools that would enable progress on the "goals and activities" that are agreed to.

The National Indicators and Reporting Office will provide developmental and day-to-day operational support. A coordinator from the National Indicators and Reporting Office will ensure that networking and improvements are ongoing. The coordinator will have ongoing access to immediate colleagues and the support of Environment Canada management. For the long term the group will need to review the means by which funding supports internet collaborative tools, time devoted by the coordinator, teleconferences, "virtual events" and meetings.

The volunteer Steering Committee, established in March 2003, will help guide the Community in formulating and achieving goals and priorities, through soliciting input from the larger group.

Face-to-face meetings (supplemented with teleconferencing as needed) and some form of collaborative Internet tool will be the practical priorities for now as the steering committee begins its work.

Given the close alliance and the coherence in objectives, the National Indicators and Reporting Office will co-operate with the International Sustainability Indicators Network (ISIN) to forward the objectives of the Canadian Sustainability Indicator Network. Linkages with other indicator networks and associations will also be explored where appropriate.