

CSIN Learning Event #14 - September 2005

Snapshots of Provincial Indicator Initiatives

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1. Alberta Environment

with Brian Free, Environmental Reporting Coordinator, Education and Outreach

- Alberta Environment currently uses online reporting and reports on 43 environmental indicators across 6 topics.
- There is some overlap between SOE reporting and performance reporting related to business plans and Ministry performance. This can create both opportunities and challenges.
- Brian shared about two processes, Alberta's Roundtable on Environment and Economy, for which a set of indicators were developed to measure progress towards sustainable development in the early 1990s, and the State of Environment Indicators available online. (www.gov.ab.ca/env/soe/)
- Three main points were shared about indicator development process:
 - involve a variety of perspectives
 - simple structured way to evaluate proposed indicators
 - need to champion the cause and promote the need for indicators

1) Involve a variety of perspectives:

- For both initiatives, workshops were held to engage stakeholders.
- For the Alberta Round Table's process, a rich mixture of people was present; it was productive to have a wide variety of perspectives.
- For the State of Environment Indicators, workshops were mainly with government experts for specific topic areas, such as water management and air quality. However, the process did include some outside stakeholders. Many of the more interesting and innovative suggestions came from people outside of the traditional network. People working within government can become comfortable with traditional measures.
- Brian emphasized the importance of bringing in fresh ideas and new perspectives.

2) Use a simple, structured way to evaluate proposed indicators

- For the Alberta Round Table process, they started with 850 indicators and for the State of Environment report, they started with 117 indicators. With such large numbers, a simple structured process will help to narrow the field to a manageable set of indicators.
- For both exercises, a set of criteria were used to evaluate the indicators. Following presentations and discussion, participants were provided with evaluation forms to assess each indicator based on the criteria. A simple scale of agreement or disagreement was used. Numerical values were later assigned to assessments, producing a score and a ranking for each indicator. They didn't try to reach consensus on indicators at the workshop.

3) Championing the cause

- Shortly after the round table produced its Alberta Round Tables sustainable development indicators, the Round Table was disbanded. No organization was tasked with continuing to develop and implement the indicators. Because of this, the indicators have not made an impact.
- The State of Environment indicators received strong support from management within the department, and moderate support from other departments and agencies. It is very important to continue to promote the benefit of indicators so that other agencies and partners will be motivated to expend the time and effort to develop them.

2. British Columbia Ministry of Environment

with Linda Gilkeson, Unit Head, State of Environment Reporting

- When Linda first began working on the 2002 Sustainable Development report, one of her first initiatives was to survey experts and users of the 2000 report for content, usability, and format. This provided a rigorous evaluation of the report, which enabled quick changes to be made to the 2002 draft report.
- In keeping with international trends, a decision was made to report on environmental trends every 5 years, and, in the interim, to report on special areas, such as coast and marine environment, in partnership with national, provincial (2 Ministries) and academic (UBC, UVic) interests.
- International trends are showing that reports are being increasingly developed through partnerships.

Coast and Marine Environment Indicator Development Process

- A series of workshops around the province located in regional offices included regional staff and the private sector
- A pivotal workshop included over 50 people, with scientists from different agencies; a 'bottom up' approach was used; the morning was spent asking

- participants - what do you want to know and why?; replies were then sorted into main topic areas. The next step was to look at indicators that would help provide answers to the questions. An effort was made to keep the “what data do we have?” question until later in the process. When data availability was analyzed, a list of gaps and issues was created.
- A wider survey of ENGOs, municipal and regional district staff was also done; results largely mirrored what came out of the workshops.
 - Observations from the workshops included:
 - It was important to respondents that the SOE report be balanced and impartial.
 - Both experts and non experts basically zeroed in on the same issues; maybe not in the same way, but each brought the same issues to the table.
 - While a web format was essential, there was a strong need for certain types of hard copy
 - The approach of this project was to provide 7 technical papers that would become the basis for other information products (web site, poster, etc.) and that would allow other people to build what they need from the technical information

3. Manitoba Conservation

with Glen Holmes, Policy Analyst, Sustainable Resource Management Branch

- Between 1991 and 1997, four State of the Environment reports were developed and were successful at the time. They were, and still are, used as reference documents.
- A decision was made to focus more on sustainability issues, towards a more integrated process of reporting on provincial sustainability. The report goes beyond environmental issues and looks at how sustainable we are as a province.

Sustainable Development Report

- The first SD report was released this year. The timeline for the report was less than 4 years, and it took approximately 5.5 years (including some downtime).
- The process was initiated by developing a draft set of indicators; IISD was involved as well as the Manitoba Round Table. Consultation took place in various communities including the North and rural areas to get a sense of what people would be interested in seeing in a sustainability report, and what was of interest to them. The report is intended to be a public document.
- Once consultation on the draft indicators was complete, they were refined during a period of further consultation. In 2002, the indicators were approved by cabinet. Overall the process worked well.
- One of the challenges was matching data with the indicators. Deciding whether to develop data and indicators from scratch or whether to base indicators on pre-existing and readily available data was a conundrum.

- The process involved a working group formed from staff within the government departments. Each department had to provide relevant information related to the indicators within their responsibility.
- A government wide-working group had representation from each department; a steering committee at the ADM level was intended to drive the process and provide guidance.
- The report provided information on 42 indicators within 3 dimensions; this is part of a statutory requirement to produce this report every 5 years under the Sustainable Development Act. Manitoba Conservation is responsible for fulfilling the requirements of the Act.
- One of the major challenges was obtaining information from departments on a timely basis; this could have been better coordinated through a central agency of government that was not a line department. For example, the Treasury Board Secretariat.
- A parallel report was produced on government performance. This document was developed by the Treasury Board, and because it was developed by a central agency, there was greater ability to obtain information from various departments.

4. Ontario Ministry of Environment

*with Dan Mulrooney, Research Analyst, Natural Resources
and Tim Bellhouse, Senior Monitoring Ecologist, Natural Resources*

- Historically, there was an initiative to coordinate state of reporting in Ontario. A framework was developed that included ecological and social aspects.
- This was followed by a pilot study which led to the identification data gaps for a number of measures. The pilot was invaluable in terms of proofing or ground truthing as well as information management.
- Limited resources have been an important internal challenge.
- Integration among other branches is starting, with a focus on state of reporting. The forestry department has made some significant strides.
- Most of the information we are using and reporting on is sourced from other branches and ministries, often because we don't have the resources to conduct our own monitoring.
- One of our goals is for data to be collected in compatible ways so that we can all speak the same language.

5. Développement Durable, de l'Environnement et des Parcs du Québec

with Benoit Limoges, Centre de coordination de la biodiversité du Québec

- Benoit spoke about the State of Environment publication and his core area of work on biodiversity.
- Indicators are mainly being used to report on government performance towards biodiversity.

- There have been two biodiversity strategies. The 1996-2002 strategy consisted of 400 actions, and reporting consisted of reporting on actions. The 2004-2007 strategy and action plan now involves reporting on results.
- The action plan is the result of a joint venture between 12 ministries and 10 NGO's.

About the Biodiversity Action Plan

- The action plan includes strategic objectives, including deadlines and quantitative targets. Each objective has indicators and actions. One of the questions is whether to have targets for the indicators or for the objectives.
- There are currently 150 indicators that document government response but few indicators that tell us what the effect of these actions are on biodiversity
- We are trying to move towards monitoring the state of biodiversity.
- We report on 85 strategic objectives, and different response indicators and actions are associated with each objective.
- We are still improving and progressing.
- Using a dashboard of state of biodiversity approach, we see that response indicators are strong, but there are few pressure and very few state indicators.
- We are looking to the Albertan monitoring network and trying to adapt that model to our province.
- Environment Canada is moving in that direction as well; it would be interesting to have a nation-wide program before each province develops its own model.
- The Sustainable development strategy was launched a few months ago. Indicators are used to monitor the implementation of performance indicators. We have 16 principles for sustainability, including a polluter pays principle. We are now trying to establish indicators towards these 16 principles.

6. Yukon Department of Environment

with Michael White, Coordinator, Integrated Resource Management, Policy and Planning Branch

- Indicator development has primarily been covered under two main areas initiatives
- Requirements for SOE reports are embedded in the Yukon Act; the reports have been produced every year since 1996 and the 3 year Reports are comprehensive; contributions are received from territorial departments, various federal agencies and local NGOs; Traditional first nation knowledge is incorporated into SOE reports as available
- The SOE reports focus on what is happening, why it is happening, why it is significant, and what we are doing about it.
- The Yukon Conservation Strategy and Economic Strategy are two strategies that include continued performance monitoring on a sectoral basis (ie transportation).

- The Yukon Council on Economy & Environment uses a comprehensive set of sustainability indicators related to the objectives of the 2 Strategies related to capacity building, diversification, equity and participation.
- In 2004, the Yukon government approved an Integrated Resource Management Strategy with the goal of refining its internal resource management processes to support decision making that achieves sustainable development
- The Yukon Environmental & Socio-Economic (YESSA) process is a comprehensive project assessment process that is embedded in land claims agreements and includes work on social, economic and environmental indicators.

Overview of Challenges

- Environmental indicators were driven by data availability rather than user needs; in small jurisdictions such as Yukon our data is sparse or non existent. This is a problem because priorities have changed over time and it is difficult to maintain consistency in data collection over time.
- How to incorporate traditional knowledge – the method used was to consult with a native elders group on environmental issues; challenges around how the information will be used; also First Nations need resources to collect the information. While traditional knowledge provides insight, it is primarily qualitative and tends to pertain to small regions. It has proven difficult to use when monitoring long term trends.
- The role of indicators in decision making – information provided from indicators does not always line up with desired political messages and final approval of indicator reports have been challenging.

7. Question and Answer Session

Q: With respect to Ontario's initiatives, there are quite a few environmental indicators being monitored, and reporting on only a few indicators. Are the indicators being reported on the best and most important indicators, or are they the ones bureaucrats are most happy with?

A: The initial framework contained 242 measures. Using the EMAN rationalization process, these were reduced to 138 measures. People often talk about only measuring a few indicators because too many measures can be overwhelming. But how do you give a view of the environment with only 9 or 10 indicators? Because we are working with a criteria and indicators framework, we can report at the criteria level for the public facing report. Also we distinguish between monitoring and reporting indicators. It is important to roll up, but not to roll up too far. - Dan Mulrooney

Q: With respect to the BC experience, how to you aggregate indicators into something that can be digested?

A: By offering people various levels of information in a way that they can self sort. A poster provides a summary level; the website goes to the next level; an issue paper takes the issue deeper.

We also found that only the first and most comprehensive State of Environment report was incorporated into the school curriculum; they like it because it has the most background information about the issues.

It is important to provide a variety of formats, so that people can access the level of data they are looking for.

People working in public policy need complexity and depth of information; the public on the other hand, wants to know what to do with the information in a practical sense. These are two very different perspectives. – Linda Gilkeson

Q: Are provinces approaching municipal leaders with their indicator initiatives and their results? Would the impact of indicators be different if it was marketed and pushed towards decision makers, at multiple levels of governance?

Comments: The constraints of the approval process, from collecting data to analyzing the report is an area of interest.

There is an increasing trend towards indicator development occurring through partnerships at the federal level. Issues about openness and accountability may surface depending on whether it is a private foundation that is providing the funding.

The Canadian Sustainability Indicators Network (CSIN) is a community of practice for experienced and new indicator and reporting practitioners across Canada, supporting a rich learning and information sharing environment. For more information or to join the CSIN listserv, contact the CSIN Coordinator, Carissa Wieler Phone: (204) 958-7719 Email: cwieler@iisd.ca Website: www.csin-rcid.ca.