

**Developing Civic Indicators and Community Accounting
in Canada**

by

Paul Reed
Statistics Canada and Carleton University
Ottawa

with an Afterword by
Armine Yalnizyan and Paul Reed

2000

Outline

1. Introduction: The Search for Strategic Social Information
2. Recent Initiatives to Develop New Social Statistics
3. Another Approach: Statistics and Indices of Community
Health and Social Development
4. Measuring the Civic Domain: Civic Indicators
5. Defining Characteristics and Objectives for Civic Indicators
6. Developing a Set of Civic Indicators
7. From Civic Indicators to Community Accounts
8. Conclusion
9. Afterword: A Review and Selective Summary of Recent
and Current Indicator Initiatives

Sources

Appendix: Components of the Genuine Progress Indicator
and the Index of Social Health

Tables

One in a series of reports from the Nonprofit Sector Knowledge Base Project.

The author welcomes comments and suggestions. He can be reached at:

Telephone : (613) 951-8217
Facsimile: (613) 951-6313
e-mail: paul.reed@statcan.ca

DISCLAIMER

Interpretations and views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect policies or positions of sponsoring organizations.

“Indicators are a way of seeing the ‘big picture’ by looking at a small piece of it. They tell us which direction we are going: up or down, forward or backward, getting better or worse or staying the same.”
(Jacksonville Community Council, 1992)

1. Introduction: The Search for Strategic Social Information

We live in a society that contains, by any comparative measure, an astonishing volume of societal intelligence in the form of statistical measures of countless features of our nation. This complex infrastructure of information serves many purposes, perhaps most importantly in providing the foundation for managing the public household and for public knowledge on issues of interest or concern. There is an organic quality to this information infrastructure; it is in constant flux, growing and diversifying here, occasionally shrinking there, being modified or improved in other areas. This dynamic property is, of course, a necessary trait because the reality that the information infrastructure strives to capture is itself changing constantly, and because the substance and form of what we want to know about our surrounding social environment is also evolving continuously.

Our information infrastructure is built on a foundation of statistical science and social science; in common with other domains where fact and knowledge are produced according to the canon of empirical science, questions arise from time to time about the appropriateness or adequacy or accuracy of various existing measures. The process of creating and modifying particular statistics contains an interplay among technical deliberations by experts, representations by interest groups and other users, and practical considerations such as cost and operational implications associated with different alternatives.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge with thanks the contribution of Marie Saumure to the preparation of this report.

Under the rubric of social, or societal, indicators, the past decade has seen renewed interest (work on social indicators first took place in the 1960s and '70s) in the development of better statistical measures of the overall state of aggregate well-being in, and of, our society, in order to determine whether there has been net progress, or regress, resulting from improvement in some dimensions of change and from decline in others. Few issues have more lasting prominence than the concern over whether our lives, or our society as a whole, are in fact getting better or not, and master measures of well-being carry much symbolic weight and play a significant role in public debate.

In parallel with social indicators, another set of initiatives has arisen in the past 5 years concerned with constructing measures of social capital, the health and sustainability of communities, and the quality of life in communities. The principal feature of these initiatives is a concern with the state and direction of change of the conditions believed to be necessary for our social and political order. These initiatives differ from social indicator development in two ways: they have a more explicitly normative basis, and they are oriented much more to the local level than to the national level.

The purpose of this document is to offer ideas concerning statistical measures for what we will label the “civic domain” of Canadian society. Sketching the general thrust of the initiatives noted above — indicators of well-being and social health, and measures of social capital and community robustness — will be helpful in setting the context for discussion of civic indicators and community accounts to follow. And while nearly all indicator initiatives propose particular indicators or statistical measures to serve particular purposes in particular contexts — progress at the societal level, or wellbeing of specified communities, or the quality of life of some identified population — this document takes a different approach in describing a toolkit of indicators that can be used by anyone for a broad range purposes.

2. Recent Initiatives to Develop New Social Statistics

As background to discussion of civic indicators let us consider several prominent initiatives to develop new social statistics. (A more detailed review and selective summary is provided in

section 9 “Afterword”.) Effective measurement of complex, changing, large-scale social and economic phenomena is rarely free of contentiousness. Measures of poverty and joblessness are long-standing targets of debate over what information they really convey, how valid they are, what important things they fail to reflect, and how they should be interpreted. Gross Domestic Product is another master measure now being subjected to criticism for what in the view of some are a number of serious shortcomings. Although it is, by design, a measure of the value of the totality of economic activity, it has also been interpreted as an indicator of overall economic well-being — and by extension, societal improvement or decline. Among the dissatisfactions with GDP’s weaknesses are that it fails to differentiate between constructive and destructive activities (see, for example, Cobb and Cobb, 1994; and Cobb et al., 1995), that it neglects to consider long-term economic sustainability, and that it fails to take account of productive but unpriced activities that occur outside market exchange, such as homemaking and volunteer work (see Jackson, 1995, and Waring, 1990; for a broad yet detailed discussion of the literature on GDP as a general welfare measure, see Tarasofsky, 1998).

There have been efforts in several directions to construct alternatives to GDP. One has sought to capture the benefit/detriment diversity of economic and social activities, along with their wider consequences in the form of costs, in an Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare, later labelled the Green National Product and most recently, the Genuine Progress Indicator (Cobb and Cobb, 1994; Cobb et al., 1995.) The GPI comprises 26 components that express the costs of such diffuse phenomena as crime, commuting, pollution, resource depletion, unemployment, and environmental degradation. Another approach rejects economic statistics as appropriate indicators of society’s general well-being and proposes, in a composite Index of Social Health, a set of 15 social factors (Miringoff et al., 1996; Brink and Zeeman, 1997). The specific measures included in the GPI and ISH are listed in the Appendix on p. 67.

While the U.S. GDP has shown a secular upward trend for decades, both the Genuine Progress Indicator and the Index of Social Health have been in gradual decline since the 1970s. Similarly, in Canada the Index of Social Health diverged downward from the rising GDP trend beginning in the late 70s.

Yet another related initiative has been the Human Development Index of the United Nations, an aggregate measure of well-being as a function of health, educational opportunities, and living standards. To date, however, it has served primarily as a tool for the comparative ranking of countries rather than for tracking change over time.

3. Another Approach: Statistics and Indices of Community Health and Social Development

In the early 1990s, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam reintroduced the idea of social capital to the academic world (Putnam 1993; 1994; 1995). It struck an immediate resonance, stimulating and galvanizing a great deal of discussion and debate on issues of civil society, citizenship, community, and civic health. The widespread effect of Putnam's arguments was due not only to his claim, based on data from Italy, that social capital is a pre-condition of both effective government and healthy economic development; it gave substance to a nascent concern existing in many first-world countries about the robustness of their present social orders and the viability of communities in the contemporary world. It has played a role in the thinking underlying a variety of initiatives to develop measures of civic health and community sustainability.

One such recent initiative has been that by the U.S. National Commission on Civic Renewal, which in mid-1998 proposed an Index of National Civic Health (INCH). The index consisted of 22 variables in 5 equally-weighted groups:

- (i) Political components:
 - election turnout
 - other specified political activities
- (ii) Trust components:
 - trust in others
 - confidence in the federal government
- (iii) Membership components:
 - membership in at least one group and/or church attendance
 - charitable contributions
 - local participation in meetings, groups

- (iv) Security components:
 - youth murderers per youth population
 - fear of crime
 - survey-reported crime per unit of population
- (v) Family components:
 - divorce
 - non-marital births

When the Commission charted the index for 1972-1994, the years for which data were available, it found that national civic health in the U.S. clearly declined across the period — by approximately 28 points — with most of the decline taking place in the second ten years. When proxy measures were used in place of unavailable data for the years 1960-1971, the index showed persistent and marked decline across that period also. When the index was subjected to a variety of statistical tests, it was found to be robust — relatively insensitive to different scales and weighting regimes — and conservative in erring slightly on the high side in magnitude and on the low side in estimating the degree of decline.

In contrast to an index of civic health at the national level, a substantial number of small-scale initiatives have been undertaken by urban communities across the U.S. and Canada to develop quantitative indicators for use in community assessment and development. Some have taken the form of a project carried out by one municipality (Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, and Sherbrooke are some of the specific cases in Canada); others have been the product of collaboration within a network such as the Quality of Life Index Project which involves nearly thirty urban agencies across Ontario concerned with regenerating and strengthening community.

The generic character of these community information projects can be conveyed with two examples. The City of Edmonton constructed a Social Health Index, composed of 15 indicators, to measure the overall social health of the community. The 15 components of the index are:

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| - life expectancy | - foodbank use |
| - premature deaths | - percentage of economic families below LICO |
| - low birth weight babies | - single parent households |
| - teen birth rate | - property crime rate |
| - suicide rate | - personal bankruptcy rate |

- crisis support calls
- incidence of STDs
- child welfare caseloads
- violent crime rate
- reports of domestic violence

Between 1993 and 1996, nine of these measures indicated improvement and six declined. Because the magnitude of declining indicators outweighed the value of those showing improvement, the composite index showed an overall drop of 4.3 percent over the 4-year period and to the extent it is a measure with high validity, a decline of the same magnitude in Edmonton's overall social health.

The second case is Seattle, Washington, where a civic forum and volunteer network have worked to improve the region's long-term health and vitality by developing a set of forty statistical series that measured key long-term trends affecting the area's sustainability. These "Indicators of Sustainable Community" were analyzed and presented in a first report in 1993 and a sequel in 1995.

In 5 categories, they comprised:

- (i) Environment
 - wetlands
 - biodiversity
 - wild salmon
 - social erosion
 - pedestrian friendly streets
 - impervious surfaces
 - open space in urban villages
 - air quality
- (ii) Population and Resources
 - residential water consumption
 - farm acreage
 - renewable and nonrenewable energy use
 - vehicle miles travelled and fuel consumption
 - population
 - pollution prevention and renewable resource use
 - solid waste generated and recycled
- (iii) Economy
 - distribution of personal income
 - health care expenditures
 - housing affordability ratio
 - children living in poverty
 - emergency room use for non-emergency purposes
 - real unemployment
 - work required for basic needs
 - community capital
 - employment concentration

(iv) Youth and Education

- juvenile crime
- adult literacy
- high school graduation
- ethnic diversity of teachers
- arts instruction
- volunteer involvement in schools
- youth involvement in community service

(v) Health and Community

- childhood asthma
- equity in justice
- low birth weight infants
- gardening activity
- neighbourliness
- public participation in the arts
- voter participation
- library and community centre usage
- perceived quality of life

While 8 of the 40 indicators in the 1995 report showed positive change, suggesting improving sustainability, 18 series showed no trend and 14 were interpreted as showing declining sustainability “at alarming rates”.

Notwithstanding their diversity, the handful of instances we have summarized, and others, suggest a number of conclusions that can help guide the present undertaking to develop statistical measures for the civic domain in Canada.

1. There is a sense that something important about a number of aspects of our society is not being measured or is being measured inadequately. There is particular interest in capturing collective well-being, and community robustness, in quantitative form.
2. The newest measures are responses to a variety of energizing factors -- mounting evidence of counter-progress dynamics; a growing belief that intangible underlying social elements such as effective child development, or level of social capital, are more significant for social well-being than is recognized; a desire to understand the consequences of large-scale policy and program changes that are having a major impact on social infrastructure; mounting concern about social cohesion and the robustness of our social order in the face of such centrifugal forces as globalization and socio-cultural identity movements.

3. The new measures are intended to serve a variety of purposes: to provide a “report card” that monitors consequential trends or “keeps score” of progress generally or toward particular societal goals; to strengthen evidence-based decision-making in public policy; to provide a basis for greater accountability by government; to measure quality of life and collective well-being; to bring important issues to public attention.
4. There is much diversity in the choice of individual statistical indicators and in the content and form of composite measures. There is increased use of “soft” variables, such as “cost of family breakdown” or “cost of noise pollution” as in the GPI, and in some cases variables which cannot be derived from existing statistics. Examples of the latter are “impervious surfaces” and “emergency room use for non-emergency purposes” in the Sustainable Seattle project.
5. There appears to be no explicit awareness of the subtle but important difference between statistical measures which are primarily descriptive of social conditions and those which have a normative or evaluative character. (This is an imperfect distinction, of course, because these two functions are not mutually exclusive, but it is important when creating quantitative social measures to recognize the purposes they are to serve.)
6. There is often minimal elaboration of the rationale for the choice of indicators; it is generally taken to be self-evident, if not arbitrary. There is virtually no guiding theory nor formal conceptual framework(s) to guide the choice of indicators or design of indexes.
7. Initiatives to develop indicators for use at the urban community level are more numerous and varied than those at the national level.

4. Measuring the Civic Domain: Civic Indicators

In common with other activities to enhance social measurement, especially those concerned with community health or quality of life, this initiative to develop civic indicators and accounts

receives its impetus from several areas of public concern and debate. One is an underlying uncertainty about where the pervasive social change of our time is leading. In the face of greatly increased social diversity, in shifts in values and collective loyalties and cultural affinities, and in profound changes in the economic order, there is concern about the possible vulnerability of our social fabric and about the consequences of growing polarization and declining government involvement in social welfare programs. There is, at present, little in the way of generally accepted, objective information to provide a foundation for understanding the civic domain of our society, especially at the level of individual communities. Despite the classical literature in philosophy and political economy on the character of “civicness” and the civic domain, we have virtually no guiding precedents for a quantitative, social science-based development of civic descriptors.

Two pieces of scholarship, both by coincidence drawing their empirical material from Italian society, help to put the *raison d’être* for this initiative in clearer outline. One is Edward Banfield’s Moral Basis of a Backward Society, a little-known study done more than thirty years ago. Banfield presents a portrait of Calabrian society dominated by a culture of extreme individualism — a society of communities, households, and people within them living with only the barest of social connections and a great deal of mutual mistrust and hostility. There was little thought or support for shared interests or common good. It was a society of deep poverty, in material terms but no less in social and moral respects as well. Banfield showed how the absence of common values, sense of affinity, cooperative action, and support for collective interests resulted in a social order that was impoverished, fractious, and harsh in the extreme.

The other is Robert Putnam’s already-mentioned work, particularly his 1993 monograph, Making Democracy Work. Based on a systematic comparison of northern and southern regions of Italy, Putnam has advanced the proposition that a crucial element of both viable social order and economic effectiveness is social capital — the combination of social connections and networks, shared norms that enable cooperation and collective action in support of common interests, and trust in others and in institutions. Putnam’s ideas have been widely utilized in efforts to understand variations in the health or robustness of communities in North America.

Another focus of concern has to do with the contemporary changes in the relationship of the citizen to the state. Fiscal deterioration and changing political ideology have pressed the welfare state to reduce its social responsibility in various domains, with the consequence that citizens' expectations, and for some, needs, must either be met by other means than government or be left unmet. One result is that government policy increasingly encourages, and in some cases assumes, community self-sufficiency; another has been a weakening of public confidence in public institutions. In response, there have been a growing number of efforts to understand and to reinvigorate the civic realm.

5. Defining Characteristics and Objectives for Civic Indicators

Systematic measurement of the civic domain requires that we identify essential properties of this domain and what we want measures of it to tell us. At root, "civic" refers to life lived in common, as by residents of a community or society. While it also refers, of course, to formal aspects of citizenship (such as what the legal status of "citizen" implies) and the relationship between citizen and state, "civic" in its contemporary sense denotes such things as: shared principal values and beliefs regarding what are the interests of the community as a whole; majority consensus on general arrangements that enable members of a community (whether physical or otherwise) to live with minimal conflict; a recognition that community order and continuity depends on members discharging their responsibilities as well as exercising their rights, which implies engagement by a significant portion of the community's members in governance and maintenance of their community; and often, a sense of attachment or loyalty to the community. Two of the most important elements in the contemporary understanding of "civic" are a capacity for cooperative, often informal collective action in support of the social good, whatever its specifics, and a concern for the well-being of those who are disadvantaged. In broad terms, then, we will seek to identify or create measures of consensus (or its reciprocal, dissensus), engagement in the social and political affairs of the community, cooperative action that serves some social purpose, and acts of generosity and expressions of mutuality. Drawing on the notion of social capital, we will seek measures of social connections and networks, norms that support community life, and trust and confidence. We will also seek measures of local resources and conditions which support healthy community life as well as those that mitigate

against it.

Beyond the essential goal of providing public information and an empirical basis for managing the public household, the purpose of the measures that will ultimately be adopted is to identify areas of robustness and vulnerability in communities, to illuminate the dynamics of the civic sector, and to ascertain where public action may be needed in support of civic strengthening. Civic indicators can be expected to become part of the broader set of activities under the rubric of social accounting. We can also expect civic indicators eventually to be harnessed to the task of evaluating civic capacity — the ability of each community’s individuals, households, groups and institutions to create and sustain the conditions needed for individual and collective well-being.

6. Developing a Set of Civic Indicators

Initially, the process to construct a set of measures of the civic sector comprises four tasks: (i) specifying the characteristics we want the measures to have, (ii) deciding what to measure and establishing a list of candidate measures, (iii) searching for these measures among existing statistics, and (iv) assessing those measures that are currently available against the criteria in (i). In the longer term, subsequent stages could include such activities as identifying different or better measures, creating new data to provide desired measures and/or properties, using multivariate analysis to identify priority indicators and redundant measures, developing composite indexes, and developing a conceptual framework that would provide both a nonrandom basis for selecting measures and an explicit basis for interpreting those measures.

(a) Desired Characteristics of Civic Indicators

Civic indicators can be expected to have the standard properties that are sought in statistics generally, such as being interval-scaled as far as possible, standardizable and cross-classifiable, disaggregatable for sub-populations, comparable across jurisdictions, and in stable time series. Two other features are of signal importance, however: One is the need to be able to obtain the civic indicators at the local community level. Preparing civic indicators initially, or only, at

higher levels of aggregation would be of questionable value due to the wide variations among communities; ideally, provincial, regional, and national figures would be the result of summing the totality of reliable community-level figures. Among the reasons for this is the fact that the 1987 and 1997 national surveys of volunteering showed evidence of a high degree of concentration of volunteer activity in a small core of civically active individuals. The 1997 survey showed the same to be true of charitable giving and civic participation as well.

(b) Potential Civic Indicators

On the principle of throwing the net widely and later discarding measures with little discriminating power or explanatory value, a set of some 100 potential civic indicators was prepared in 16 broad categories:

Economic Resources

- annual total community revenue per 1000 households and per 1000 individuals
- level of public debt and liabilities as a proportion of community revenue
- median household income, and income per adult
- median per household net assets
- home ownership rate
- income distribution skewness
- percentage of households/individuals receiving income support exceeding one quarter of total household income
- median level of shelter cost as percent age of income
- percentage of households below the LICO
- median per household consumer debt
- household consumer debt as percent of income

Work

- number of FTE jobs per 1000 adults
- gross unemployment rate
- median duration of unemployment
- unemployment of household sole-earners

Situation of Children

- infant mortality
- incidence of low-birth weight infants

- percentage of children in single parent households
- percentage of children in single parent households below their LICO
- percentage of children in single parent households with parent under 25
- number of children under 15 per 1000 in protective and foster care
- incidence of children with asthma, immunity system disorders, birth defects

Situation of Young People

- percentage of population 18-25 years in a post-HS educational institution
- percentage of high school students completing HS within 6 years of entry
- unemployment rate for population 18-25 years
- percentage of individuals under 25 leaving community

Situation of Adults

- adult literacy rate
- percentage of the population age 75 and over living alone
- percentage of elderly living alone who are below LICO
- percentage of population age 75 and over receiving income support exceeding one-half of income

Families

- incidence of single parent families
- incidence of families below LICO
- family dissolution rate
- family formation rate

Population Stability

- average number of years' residence in community
- churn rate (total annual in-migrants plus out-migrants as percentage of mean annual population)

Destabilizing and Social Stress Conditions

- rate of alcohol- and drug-related deaths (non-traffic) per 1000 persons
- rate of alcohol- and drug-related traffic injuries
- rate of alcohol- and drug-related traffic deaths
- rate of alcohol- and drug-related traffic offences
- rate of property crime reported (theft; break and enter)
- incidence of vandalism
- rate of crimes of violence reported (total; domestic; sexual assault)
- incidence of sexually transmitted diseases
- distress centre visits and crisis line calls per 1000 persons
- number of meals and person-nights of lodging provided by shelters to members of the

community, per 100 individuals

Institutional Resources and Capacities

- for each type of public institution (police, courts, hospitals, teaching institutions and social services), measures of:
 - total personnel per 1000 population
 - professional personnel per 1000 population
 - workload
 - duration of waiting queues
- public library facilities
- number of charitable and voluntary organizations per 1000 households

Community Physical Facilities

- public open space as percent of total settled area
- kilometers of paved road per 1000 population
- kilometers of sidewalk per 1000 population
- community civic and recreational facilities (community centres, meeting facilities, sports facilities) per 1000 persons

Environment

- community air quality
- community water quality
- community ambient noise levels

Time Use

- time spent on selected activities:
 - caring for needy persons within household
 - caring for needy persons outside household
 - social participation activities
 - civic participation activities
 - political participation activities
 - volunteering

Civic Participation

- incidence/frequency of civic participation (via membership and meeting attendance) in
 - religious organizations
 - school organizations
 - work-related organizations
 - school-related organizations
 - other organizations
- voting incidence in local, provincial, and federal elections
- frequency of acquiring news and information about current events and public affairs —

- locally, nationally, and internationally
local newspaper circulation and readership

Social Participation

- incidence/frequency of social participation - with non-household family
- with non-family

Caring and Contributing to the Community

- incidence, frequency and magnitude of formal volunteering
- volunteer activity by type of organization
- incidence, frequency and magnitude of direct personal (non-organizational) helping and caring
- personal and household charitable giving through organizations: incidence, frequency, amount
- incidence of donating blood

Trust and Confidence in Institutions

- confidence in government and other community institutions/organizations
- perceptions and judgements of performance of community institutions/organizations

For most of the approximately one hundred distinct measures listed, we would want to have both their current magnitude or value and also their annual change in value.

Results of an Exploratory Search

A key question is how many of these potential civic measures currently exist or could be derived from existing statistics or data? To make an initial determination, fifty were selected at random from the list above. For each, a search was made, and in cases where existing statistics were found they were assessed in terms of whether they possessed the desired characteristics discussed earlier. Particular attention was paid to the sources of the statistics because of the need to have measures at the community level and with reasonable periodicity. One third (32 percent) could not be found in any form. One quarter were available or capable in theory of being derived from census or Labour Force Survey data. Census data would provide community-level statistics but only on a quinquennial basis, while LFS statistics would be available monthly and at the community level for a limited number of communities (none probably below 100,000).

Another 25 percent appeared to be available from such administrative data sources as Vital Statistics, the Uniform Crime Reporting Program, and the Central Divorce Registry. Data from these statistics are available annually, but at an unknown level of disaggregation and thus for an unknown proportion of communities across Canada. The remaining one-fifth were produced through sample surveys, some recurring (such as the General Social Survey and Family Expenditure Survey) and some not (such as the survey of school leavers), most of which (due to survey sample size) would not be capable of yielding community-level statistics nor statistics with reliable or useful periodicity. Extrapolating these results to the full set of 100 indicators, we could expect fewer than one-third to be nationally available, even hypothetically, in community-level form and with an acceptable periodicity of 3-5 years or better. While the census would be an indispensable part of a set of civic indicators (not least because it would be the sole source of data for standardizing many of the indicators), its two-year waiting period for availability of small-area data could be a limiting factor. And there may also be the further question of the extent to which existing federal statistical policy would permit disaggregation of some indicators to a level as low as 25,000-population communities.

It appears likely, then, that less than a majority of the potential civic indicators could be created from on-the-shelf data. It is also clear that issues of content (of a set of civic indicators) are closely coupled to questions of means -- how data to create the indicators would be generated.

7. From Civic Indicators to Community Accounts

Developing civic indicators can be considered the first phase of a longer process. Without a cohering conceptual structure, civic indicators will for the most part be an array of static measures, with limited sensitivity to dynamic processes in the civic domain. With conceptual elaboration and related empirical probing, it would be reasonable to anticipate development of a more comprehensive, interconnected complex of measures that would capture relational and dynamic features. We can designate such a complex a set (perhaps eventually a system) of community accounts. To illustrate with an example: the civic sector, it can be argued, operates on a different set of economic principles than does the market or government sector; in the civic sector, resources are procured in different ways, and distributed and utilized in distinctive ways.

In a set of civic accounts, we might wish to portray the flows of charitable donations and grants from various points of origin to an array of recipients. The following table provides such a flow-of-funds matrix, as far as existing data and statistics permit. (Beyond its substantive content, the matrix is also useful in identifying areas where information development is needed.)

It is important to note, however, that although the term “community accounts” resembles “national accounts”, we are not assigning to “community accounts” any sense of their being summary reports of financial transactions in the civic sector. Rather, it is only in another feature of the national accounts — their well-developed conceptual framework and detailed specification of identities and interconnections — that civic accounts would resemble them.

8. Conclusion

In some respects, the civic domain is a new area of social terrain for systematic measurement in the sense that it may have new features to be measured and may require different metrics or data sources/flows. In most respects, however, the differences between statistics on the civic domain and other social statistics programs are far outweighed by similarities. The most demanding difference appears to be the fact that the principal locus of the civic domain is at the community level. However, there were, according to the 1996 census, only 90 communities in Canada with populations of 25,000 or greater (and only another 47 with populations between 10,000 and 24,999).¹ To develop community-level indicators for 90 communities is far from an insurmountable or unaffordable task.

The exploratory work reported in this document presents a number of questions and choices. Some of the key questions at this point are:

¹The 1996 distribution of communities by population was as follows:

10,000 - 24,999: 47	100,000 - 249,999: 9
25,000 - 49,999: 34	250,000 - 499,999: 7
50,000 - 99,999: 31	500,000 - 999,999: 5
	1,000,000 and over: 4

- Which indicators are likely to be the most discriminating, and which the least?
- How many are needed to adequately characterize the most important properties of communities? how can this be determined?
- Are there measures of the civic domain at regional or national levels that should be recognized, to complement community-level measures?
- How realistic is it to expect data from sources other than those in the national statistical system?
- What is the capability and willingness of communities to generate data required for selected civic indicators?
- How will the costs of civic indicators be apportioned?
- Is it optimal to begin at the community level and move gradually to higher levels of aggregation? would it be strategic to construct civic indicators now at regional or national levels to attract broad interest and support for longer-term work?

If this initiative is to be continued, there are choices to be made about possible next steps. It is clear that there must be analytical probes to guide selection of indicators and to determine what are the problems of data sources and possible solutions. We will need to ascertain (i) which civic indicators can be derived easily from existing statistics or data; (ii) which indicators require only the disaggregation of existing data; (iii) where new data will be required but can be procured from existing sources in the national statistical system, and (iv) where new data are required and require alternative sources. Several other directions of work could be considered as well. It would be feasible, starting with existing data, to construct a small number of prototype community profiles for demonstration purposes, using multivariate analysis to identify which civic indicators cluster, are substitutable (i.e., eliminable), or have low discriminating power. Another initiative could be to use a small sample of, say 15 “test-bed” communities, selected in several groupings to capture an array of characteristics, to undertake “utility of concept” work.

It would be desirable to have the participation of specific communities especially in the formative phases of the work; it is also desirable to make use of relevant expertise and information resources at a variety of points within Statistics Canada and externally. Such points include the Small Area and Administrative Data Division, and the group developing measures of

social cohesion. A link with the consortium of Social Planning Councils who are developing community quality of life indices would be desirable, as would links with several of the municipalities (Edmonton, for example) that have undertaken work on community indicators.

Perhaps at this point in time, however, the preeminent task is to recognize that the technical work, however well done, will be of value only if it acquires the support of a broad consensus, and that this needed consensus must be built proactively and for the long term.

9. Afterword: A Review and Selective Summary of Recent and Current Indicator Initiatives

Introduction

The relationships between individual and society, citizen and state, are changing profoundly around the world. Pervasive disenchantment with political institutions has given rise to a new politics of problem solving, implicating more and more citizens at the community level.

This has entailed a subtle shift of political focus from government to governance, from the accepted judgements and directness of authority to the challenge of collective input in defining the direction of change for communities. But since the impact of broader issues inevitably arrives at “a neighbourhood near you”, this process is not restricted to the local level. Consequently there is renewed pressure for more effective problem-solving at a more aggregated level, both inside and outside traditional government structures, in large policy arenas such as health care, or urban and/or environmental sustainability.

Nothing stays the same indefinitely; and if things must change, there is an obvious interest in moving towards positive change, towards progress, rather than decline. The role of effective governance is to orchestrate the right set of forces that could push towards the betterment of things, and ensure that the widest majority of people enjoy that improvement. What are the necessary pre-requisites for good governance? What do we need to know in order to best guide development of strong community, whether at the local level or our entire society?

Reviewed a whole, indicators projects chorus around certain notes of technique, the core of which is to provide a systematic, balanced approach to creating strategic community information. As this note will document, the end purpose of this information can lead to action, or not. But without the development of reliable and credible strategic information, action is at best myopic, lacking in credibility or legitimacy; at worst, autocratic, serving specific and limited interests, and regressive.

If governance of any kind is indeed predicated on an information-action-monitoring information cycle, this system can be engineered to operate from the top down or from the bottom up. Ultimately, however, all the projects seem to nod heavily in the direction of making information available for the purposes of facilitating individuals to better understand and participate in their own communities, and thereby facilitate community management collectively.

Indicators of civic life can remain just that, a series of disparate observations. Or they can be transformed into a system of civic accounts that provides the potential for collective community management. In order to achieve the latter, the system must provide a way of assessing “both sides of the ledger”: needs and capacities, assets and liabilities, strengths and weaknesses.

Ultimately the process of determining coherent action needs to answer such questions:

What do we want to know about?

What do we want to know about it?

Who wants to know?

For what purpose?

How is the “new” information different than what we already have?

How can it be produced?

This document selectively examines the range of current initiatives to develop strategic social information.