

Lessons from a Community-Based Process in Regional Sustainability Indicator Selection: The Case of the Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory

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Abstract From October 2005 to April 2006, the Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory (RVu) conducted the most comprehensive public engagement process that the Vancouver region has had to date for the purpose of deriving key indicators of sustainable development. The RVu study group process was an original design to draw out new and unique ideas about best measures of sustainability from Vancouver residents. A diversity of residents from all walks of life participated in the process. This chapter describes the process undertaken and offers a critical assessment of the experience of participants in the process. The RVu case offers proof that citizen volunteers are willing and able to take on a complex and lengthy engagement process that requires integrated thinking, leadership, commitment, dedication, and lacks a very clear political channel or immediate means for policy uptake. This kind of process could be further refined and supported in order to improve and make more predictable and rewarding the policy outcomes and reinforce the characteristics and citizenship values of participants.

If . . . you asked me to cooperate in this exercise . . . I would advise myself to say no, don't go near it. They have raised the bar so high and put the frame in such a way that this is an absolute no-win for me. No matter what comes out, I'm going to be the problem. So why would I participate?

—Former elected politician, invited respondent to the outcomes of the RVu sustainability indicator process, April 3, 2006

Different indicators have purposes other than convincing elected officials. Because we all know that there are all kinds of things that go into decision making besides facts. So I think that's not a reason to be dismissive of indicators. . . because I do think that they play a greater role, in terms of supporting accountability, supporting a broad notion of public

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engagement and allowing people different modes of access into considering the future of their region.

–Executive director of a non-governmental organization, invited respondent to the outcomes of the RVu sustainability indicator process, April 3, 2006

Introduction: The Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory (RVu) Study Group Process

Metropolitan Vancouver, a region of over 2 million on Canada's Pacific Coast, has developed an international reputation for valuing high quality of life and sustainable development. West coast, left-leaning politics have produced an active interplay between citizens and elected officials, but this has not translated into a strong tradition of accountability. As a result, Metro Vancouver has bold goals, from zero waste to eliminating homelessness to exceeding Kyoto Protocol targets for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases; but does not assess or report on progress towards most of these goals. The Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory (RVu) was created in 2004 to address this failing.

RVu is a long-term action research project, based at the downtown campus of Simon Fraser University within the Urban Studies Program, and connected to the regional policy and civic community through its non-academic, multi-sectoral advisory committee. RVu is the first urban observatory to be established in Canada, as a member of the Global Urban Observatory network based at UN-Habitat.¹ Membership in this network provides RVu with opportunities to interact with and learn from the experiences of other cities attempting to measure and monitor their progress around the world. The network also serves as a motivational and inspirational touchstone for bolder, more innovative programs and practices locally in Vancouver related to indicators development and sustainability.

This chapter presents and evaluates the public participation process that RVu undertook in order to select a set of 24 key indicators of sustainable development for the Metro Vancouver region. The intent is to detail this aspect of community indicator projects that often remains hidden, especially for projects that attempt to engage and represent a broad range of the public. We will draw from the products of the process, from evaluations completed by process participants at the beginning, middle and end of the process and from the responses of community leaders invited to comment on the process outcomes. The review thus places an emphasis on the quality and nature of the experience had by the most important constituents of the RVu indicators project to date, the members of the public engaged in indicator selection, under the premise that their experiences and lessons learned are pivotal to the value of the project as a whole. Beyond this internal perspective, we also examine

¹ The Global Urban Observatory network is a program of UN-Habitat established in 1997, in the wake of the attention received by an indicators-based approach to urban development at the 1996 Habitat II Conference in Istanbul, Turkey. The network currently has over 100 members. The second urban observatory in Canada, the Greater Toronto Urban Observatory (www.gtuo.ca) was established in 2006.

the outside perspective of the other critical group that this indicator project engages, regional leaders and decision makers. We will show that the perspectives of these two groups do not match up perfectly, posing a challenge to indicator projects that seek to achieve meaningful civic engagement and political impact and uptake at the same time.

From October 2005 to April 2006, approximately 150 people of diverse positions and backgrounds participated in the development of a new set of indicators for measuring the sustainability of the Metro Vancouver region. The vision and purpose of the process is encapsulated in the RVu motto “measures to match our values.” The engagement process was an original study group process designed by RVu,² drawing and integrating ideas from systems thinking, based on the work of Donella Meadows (1998) and others (Phillips 2005), the study circle method, existing UN Habitat (2006) work on process for urban observatory establishment, and the initial public indicator process design by Sustainable Seattle in 1992 (Holden 2006). The process was thus supported by the contributions of project staff in different capacities and aided by the guidance of the RVu advisory committee, which met five times during the process period (Sept. 16, Nov. 23, Feb. 13, Mar. 24, May 1). A guide and workbook were prepared and distributed to all study group participants and an additional, more technical guide was prepared for study group facilitators. These and other resource materials were made available for download on the project website, where an electronic bulletin board was also launched to help manage process logistics as well as facilitate the exchange of information and ideas between study group members. The cash budget for the process was approximately \$80,000 Cdn, funded by the Canadian federal government, Simon Fraser University, BC Hydro, and numerous in-kind contributors.

The major work of the process was carried out by eight study groups, each of which had the ultimate task of recommending three key indicators of sustainable development apiece. The three principles for study group formation were:

1. To cluster around a tangible focus that can be expressed as a challenge and a goal with (at least) social, economic and environmental dimensions;
2. To include a diversity of members and build common ground from divergent perspectives;
3. To include members from the broad mix of communities around the Metro Vancouver region (RVu 2005).

The basic structure of the study group meeting process was as follows, loosely using the metaphor of planning a voyage to Mars:

1. *Pulling together the crew*: Study groups first assessed their initial membership and considered whether and to whom additional invitations to join should be sent. Groups began their work with four probing questions:

² The process was designed by Meg Holden and Clare Mochrie with the expert facilitation assistance of Paula Beltgens, Lynda Taylor and Diana Smith, and additional facilitation and support provided by: Ruby Socorro Arico, Tracy Vaughan, Scott Graham, Anka Raskin, Christiana Miewald, Lianne Carley, Terri Evans, Jon Eben Field, Jason Lyth, and Vince Verlaan.

- a. If you could enhance or preserve one thing about the region, what would it be?
- b. What do you feel is the greatest challenge facing the region in the next decade?
- c. What goals are most important for us to pursue as a region?
- d. What reality in our region demands new or better information most urgently?

They additionally discussed group rules, procedures and the study group process as a whole.

2. *Visualizing the destination*: Groups brainstormed an overarching group goal and challenge; they refined these into concise statements of “our common goal” and “our common challenge.”
3. *Building the rocket*: Groups considered the driving and restraining forces affecting progress toward their goal, whether direct or indirect, strong or weak, and the different types of “capital” contributing to their goal.
4. *Charting the course*: Concept mapping, including concepts and interconnections/relationships, finding leverage points and forks in the road, as inputs to larger systems modeling work undertaken for the eight groups as a whole by the project team.
5. *Test run*: Groups tested their focus by reviewing concept maps created by the other groups, considering potential overlap, opportunities for bridging, and raising questions for other groups. Some groups also included a guest speaker to bring additional perspective to their focus. Groups revised their goal statements.
6. *Measuring the potential for success*: Brainstorming key indicators to fit criteria for sustainability indicators, to meet the group goal, and to sit at leverage points for system-wide change.
7. *Blast off*: Groups prioritized indicators into the top three and secondary three, using a matrix or coding system and a checklist to help ensure all criteria were given adequate attention. Where they could, groups also assigned intermediate 2015 targets. Groups assigned and rehearsed roles for the formal reporting out of their results.

In addition to the study group meetings, the following preparatory, summary, and large group events were components of the process:

Date	Event	Purpose
October 17, 2005	Study Group Facilitator Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To bring together study group facilitators as a team, with RVu project team and expert facilitator trainers • To train amateur study group facilitators in RVu process specifics and prepare them for their role

(continued)

October 24, 2005	“Focusing ouR View” Public Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To build public awareness of the RVu project and catalyze participation in the public process via open invitation ● To present work-in-progress by researchers into indicators of sustainability of potential interest ● To challenge participants to form initial RVu study groups ● The event was structured with presentations from leaders and researchers, dialogue with participants, and small group activities to draw out participants’ priorities and perspectives in the realm of regional sustainability
January 28, 2006	RVu Data Chew Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To provide RVu study group participants and others with a mid-process view to relevant data available from official sources (Statistics Canada, BC Statistics, and local data rich organizations) ● To provide a forum for discussion of data related questions and issues prior to the study groups’ final indicator recommendations
February 27, 2006	RVu Study Group Mixer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To give study group participants the chance to meet with members of other study groups in an informal setting, to share ideas and experiences
April 3, 2006	“Expanding ouR View” Workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To host a celebratory public event giving study group participants the opportunity to present the results of their work to decision makers throughout the region ● To further discuss the results of the indicator selection process with a wide audience, next steps and implications for policy practice ● The event was structured with an early morning decision-makers breakfast, followed by panel presentations and small group discussions, and finally an evening reception for study group participants
April 10, 2006	Study Group Facilitator Debrief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To bring the study group facilitators together with the project team for a summary focus group to draw out process-oriented lessons from their unique perspectives

(continued)

Date	Event	Purpose
May 1, 2006	RVu Data Crunch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To re-engage with interested study group participants in further refining and prioritizing recommended indicators for initial report publication, based on the project team's research into data availability issues and the results of a web-based poll of indicator preferences region-wide • By holding this meeting immediately prior to an Advisory Committee meeting, to provide project advisors with an opportunity to meet some study group participants and actively engage with the process
June 19, 2006	Launch of <i>Counting on Vancouver</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To present RVu's inaugural indicators report with international and Canadian endorsement to an international audience at the World Urban Forum 3 • The report presents the results of the indicator selection process within the process framework, in a publicly accessible format and with illustrative data

Additional process components included periodic meetings between members of the project team and expert facilitators, members of the project team and study group facilitators, and among study group facilitators themselves, to discuss the process and issues arising. Study group participants were also encouraged to participate in the web space dialogue, scan media sources, and keep notes and reflections in the workbook and its "indicator reservoir" section. Six students in the Simon Fraser University Master of Urban Studies program engaged with the study groups during February–April 2006 to assist them in the preparation of presentation materials. This work resulted in poster presentations which were displayed at the *Expanding our View* event and, later, at the World Urban Forum 3 in June 2006.

Products of the Study Group Process

The study group process generated a host of different depictions and of participants' progress toward defining their theme area and selecting indicators. While each of the eight groups worked through the same general process, the various groups had differential success with the exercises and activities. They also experienced their breakdowns—and breakthroughs—at different points in the process.

The “triangle” group,³ with interests spanning from land use to economic development, found its focus by developing numerous iterations of its goal statement. Given the large size of this group and the fact that not all members were present at all meetings, this process worked because it was easily amenable to electronic contributions. Box 1 describes this group’s extensive goal definition process and how it was resolved, eventually, with the general consensus of the group. The final goal statement is not elegant but does achieve a level of negotiated explicitness.

Box 1. Coming to Consensus on a Goal Statement, Triangle Group

The triangle group spent a great deal of time, both during meetings and in on-line discussion between meetings, defining the group’s goal. They began with the following statement:

Regional growth, development and consumption as proportionally appropriate to our global share of natural and economic resources; to be achieved through leadership and participatory democracy, creating effective and efficient regional planning and implementation in land use and growth patterns, supported by the pursuit of the ‘triple bottom line’ in all enterprises and activities.

The group struggled in particular over the meaning and appropriateness of language including growth versus development; sustainability (“I know this issue is always raised, but what exactly is meant by sustainability? I think trying to agree to define this may be futile and I don’t have a recommended solution, but I think we all have an idea of the sentiment of the phrase, and can work with it and move on from there”); the region versus its political title, the Greater Vancouver Regional District; the triple bottom line versus consumption (“I think we are trying to say that if humans were to consume in a way that is fair and equitable both to all other people in the world, and to all other “things” that we share this world with, including other species, ecosystem components and relationships, non-living things and elements – this is what we would like to strive for.”); and decision-making processes. (“We all live on planet earth, and everyone needs to be involved and aware of making changes. Only by involving people can we actually realize action.”) Their discussions were considered but often circular, testing the skills of the group’s facilitator:

³ The eight study groups were each initially assigned a name based on a geometric shape. These shapes were chosen at the October 24, 2005 *Focusing our View* workshop as headings under which the participants’ themes and ideas were clustered. Shapes were used to define groups rather than topical names in order to avoid prejudice regarding terminology, to encourage flexibility in defining the groups’ focus, and to prevent a kind of exclusionary founder syndrome of particular terms or categories.

Participant1: One word that I would like to strike out is growth - when you talk about development and growth . . . I guess my thinking is that you can't have sustainable growth, whereas you can have sustainable development...meaning development differently...I mean you can develop in many different ways, you are not just growing forever. . .

Participant2: My view is that if you don't include the term growth it is taken as a no growth attitude and my view is that we have to say, yes we are accepting growth but we are going to manage it properly. . .

Participant3: The problem is if you restrict growth in some areas inevitably it is going to spread [in others], and you give everyone else that growth...you have to find a way to counteract that... and I don't see how you can do that. . .

Participant4: . . .but when we are looking at a mission statement, I feel that we should aspire to developing differently, we should not aspire to growth, so that's why I guess I am promoting the term development. So that is why I think we should get rid of the sustainability then and just talk about growing efficiently.

The final goal statement arrived at was:

Citizens and their elected representatives direct the GVRD's development and growth in order to enhance long-term regional wellbeing, within the context of the general principles of sustainability (conserving today's resources for future generations) and the following additional tenets: Decisions will be fully assessed on the basis of social, cultural, environmental and economic benefits and costs; Decisions will endeavor to maintain regional consumption of natural and socio-economic resources within levels and rates that do not compromise the ability of natural elements or species to flourish, and promote globally equitable human consumption patterns; Decisions will be made through more transparent, inclusive and accountable processes for issues affecting communities (citizens should be heavily involved in forming the questions, examining the options, deliberating, deciding and implementing decisions related to sustainability).

The "square" group, whose focus was broadly defined around the topic of food and agriculture, engaged particularly well in a force field analysis exercise. The results of this exercise are shown in Fig. 1. In this exercise, the group began with a goal statement, shown in the middle of the figure – "To be a world leader in policies and practices for understanding and protecting local food resources . . .". From this point, group members identified both driving forces toward the goal and restraining forces inhibiting goal achievement. After compiling these forces into a tabular format, at the next meeting, members provided an individual score for each force, basing their rating from 1 (weak) to 4 (strong) on both the strength of the force and the ability of local or regional actors to influence it. Ratings were summed up for all group members during the meeting such that they could engage in dialogue over cases in which there were wide discrepancies between ratings given by different members, and ratings were sometimes changed before the final tabulation.

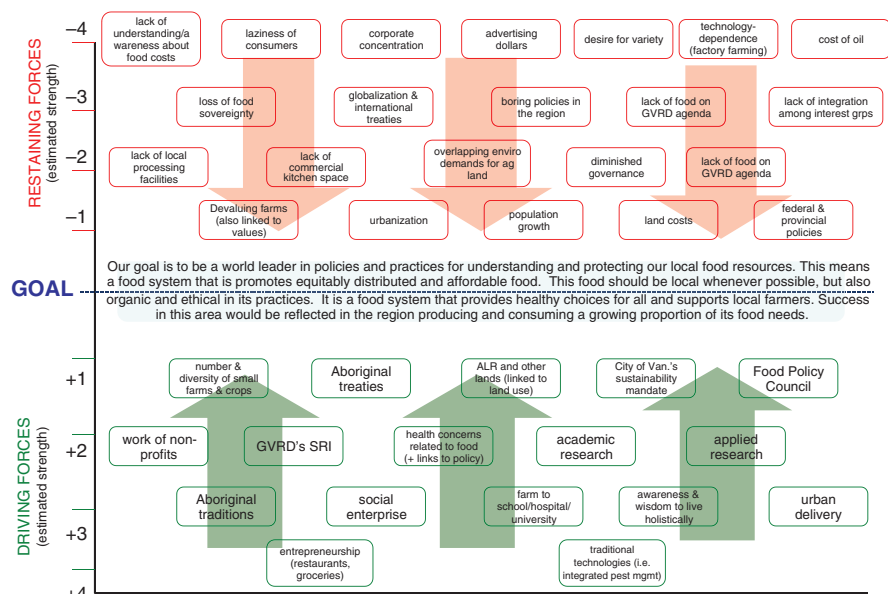


Fig. 1 Sample force field analysis, square group (ALR: Agricultural Land Reserve; SRI: Sustainable Region Initiative; GVRD: Greater Vancouver Regional District)

This final tabulation set the group's priorities and themes for indicator selection. For easy visual consideration, Fig. 1 shows how the group displayed both driving and restraining forces at different points along the vertical axis depending on their rating of its strength and their ability to influence it. This illustrates that group members considered the use of traditional farming technologies such as integrated pest management as among the strongest driving forces toward a sustainable regional food system while they considered population levels a relatively weak restraining force. This was not to say that the group considered population levels to have an insignificant impact on the sustainability of the food system, but that they did not consider it within their power, or the power of regional planning and policy more generally, to change.

A number of groups found the expression of their ideas in the form of concept maps to be rewarding and useful. An example partial result of this process is shown in Fig. 2. This involved beginning with the group's core goal. In the case depicted of the "infinity" group, the goal is shown in the center bubble, that "Our mobility system optimizes equitable access while developing positive social, cultural and economic systems and healthy populations and mitigating negative environmental impacts." From here, the group brainstormed trends related to their goal, distinguishing between those working in favour of the goal and those not in favour. In this case, the group identified two levels of both positive and negative factors, with first level factors often having aspects that worked in favour of the goal and those that did not. The first level factors identified were business, political will,



Fig. 2 Sample concept map, infinity group

increasing traffic congestion, intensification of land use, population changes, citizen groups/involvement, public awareness, concern for human health, people's need to economize, historical development patterns and negative factors of institutional inertia. The second level factors flowing from each of these are distinguished visually with positive factors in green and negative factors in red. The group additionally attached notes to many of the trends that specified the primary locus or means by which the trend affected the goal, whether in public or private space or via the imposition of financial costs. Many of the conditions noted in the sub-trends linked explicitly to other trends, serving as a good test of the level of importance and centrality of proposed indicators.

One group, the "donut" group, centered on the theme of the natural environment, took up the challenge of translating their ideas into a qualitative systems model. The model, shown in Fig. 3, identified the direction of impact of processes and desired trends on one another without attempting to quantify the material scale of impact. The model suggests the major influences on environmental sustainability in the Vancouver region; with the major goal expressed at the centre: "A regenerative and adaptable natural environment." Through iterations of dialogue, the group determined that there were six sub-systems in which they could identify sub-goals that would lead to this larger goal. These six sub-systems constitute the six boxes in the model, a heading for each identified along the top and bottom borders. Within each sub-system, a central objective is identified, surrounded by other boxes containing methods and means that would lead to attaining this objective. Directions of connection between the objectives and methods for action are depicted, with different colours used to show linkages within the sub-system and across sub-systems. This modeling exercise also allowed the group to consider its specific areas of connection to other study groups, which are identified in boxes lying just outside the model. For example, the sub-goal of the lower right box (Developing an Eco-Friendly Planning Culture) was identified as "Develop a planning system that is both responsive and forward-looking." The group suggested a number of ways to achieve this planning goal, such as "Planning for higher densities in compact regional centres." The group then recognized that this particular initiative was connected to the work of one of the other study groups, the "triangle" group, noted with the title "Growth as Development." The initiative is also connected to the upper right box, "Reducing Habitat Loss," where they recognize the importance of the work to "Reign in sprawling development that consumes limited green space in a spatially constrained region."

The study group was able to use this systems model as a thinking and dialogue tool for the identification and prioritization of its key indicators, ensuring that they were placing indicators at points in the system that would be appropriately connected so as to lead to the achievement of their ultimate identified goal. While the model was locally-grounded in the members' understanding of trends and conditions in the Vancouver region, group members were satisfied as well that the model allowed them to express their understanding of the inter-relations between regional and global trends in the realm of environmental sustainability. The one failing that the group found with this approach was that it did not allow them to illustrate the

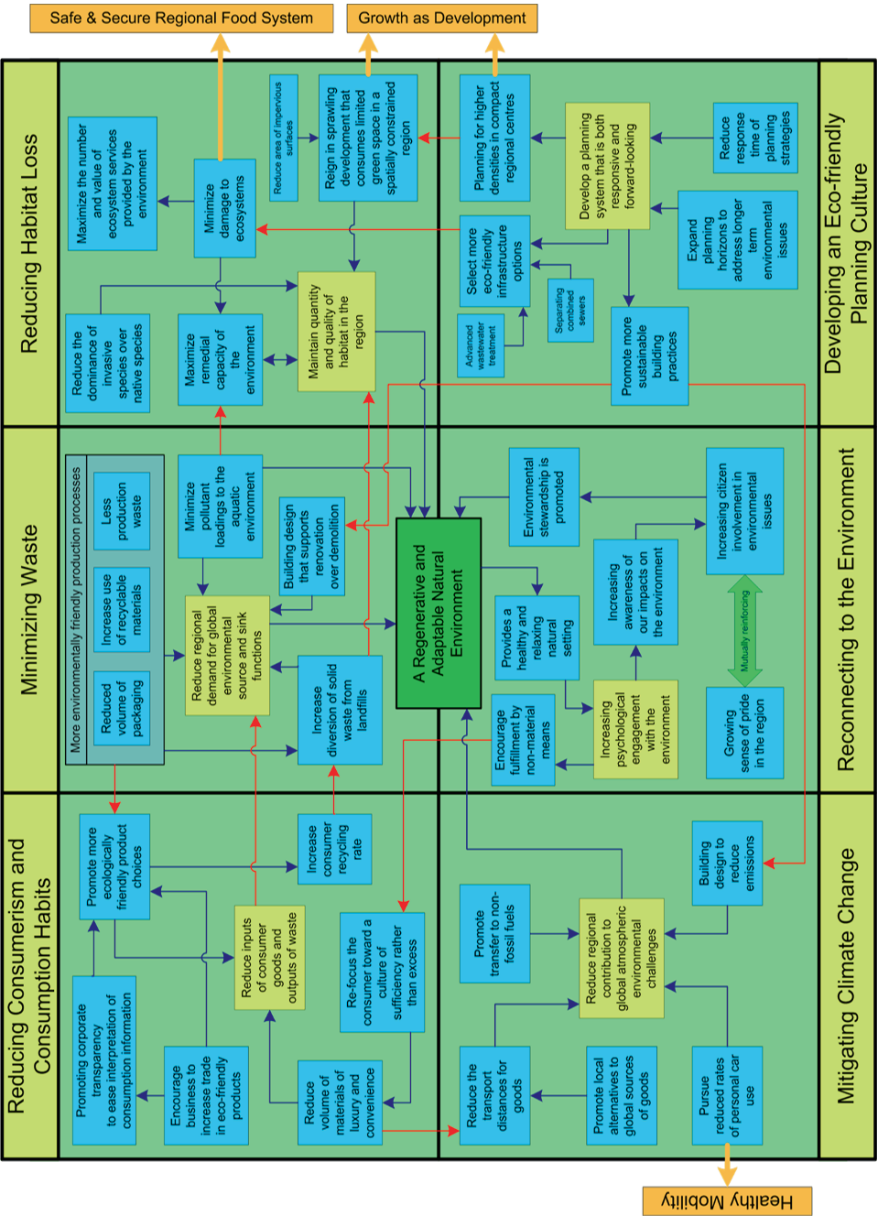


Fig. 3 Sample systems model, donut group

ways in which they saw different groups (citizens, business, or government) being involved in the various means and steps identified in the move toward environmental sustainability.

Results at the Beginning, Middle and End of the Process

As a means to understand how this participatory indicator selection process worked, we examined the results of the process at three points in time: its beginning, the October 24th *Focusing ouR View* event, in the middle, via half-way feedback on the study group process from participants, and at its completion, based on evaluations from the April 3rd *Expanding ouR View* event. Results will be assessed primarily in terms of the level of participation, the quality of experiences, and perceptions of success among those who participated in the process, as the most direct means of evaluating the participatory nature of the study group process.

While methods vary widely in practice and their contributions are rarely assessed, public participation in urban and regional indicator projects is almost always considered to be a key aspect of, in terms of legitimacy the measures selected, to facilitate learning, and/or to enhance the political traction of the project. In the RVu study group process, civic participation was considered to be of value in and of itself, for the learning and engagement opportunity it offered to participants regardless of class, status, or expertise; our hypothesis designing and carrying out the process was that these values could far outweigh the instrumental values of any indicator set in and of itself. External assessments of the results of the process will also be considered, from the perspective of elected and community leaders invited in to comment on the final indicators selected and their potential for uptake into regional political processes, as these suggest another important aspect of the value represented by a participatory process such as the RVu study group process.

Judging the Process at the Beginning

The major launch event for the RVu study group process, *Focusing ouR View*, drew over one hundred participants for the day-long workshop and was also the main recruiting event for the study group process as a whole. The day began in large group format, with brief but motivational speeches from federal leaders expressing excitement for and commitment to the observatory and its work. This was followed by an introduction to RVu and the tasks before participants in order to rise to the challenge of creating indicators of sustainable development for the Vancouver region. Before lunch, participants listened and responded to a series of presentations from local researchers who had been asked to contribute their expert knowledge on different sectoral aspects of indicator selection in the region: from governance, health, environment, Aboriginal, poverty and economic perspectives. After lunch, the day shifted to small group format, in which participants self-organized into working

tables in order to respond to a series of overarching questions about sustainability and its measurement. Responses to these questions were clustered into themes and presented back to participants, who were invited to regroup into study group tables to expand on and develop these themes. At the end of the day, participants returned to the large group setting and reported back the main discussion points from each table to the whole group. With this and some additional logistical explanation about the unrolling of the process from that point forward, as well as a celebratory exercise, the day's events concluded.

In addition to the event's success as measured by its recruitment of volunteers for the substantial time commitment of the study group process, evaluations of this workshop were submitted by 35 participants. The evaluation questions at this point focused on perceptions of the success of different aspects of the event itself, along with more general impressions and ideas about the RVu project, the public study group process, and its future directions. These participants were most enthusiastic about the way the day-long event was structured and facilitated in order to provide for interaction, including small and large group dialogue. Comments made included optimism about "knowing there will be an ongoing process," that "it felt as though real progress was or will be made through this process" and seeing "a careful civic inventory as a very important part of the process." Of course, there were critiques of the timing and facilitation of the day, as well, with a number of participants left wanting more interactive time for small group discussions in order to solidify their study group themes. The second most common aspect of praise received for the event related to the diversity of participants and opportunity to network with others. This praise was matched by a similar proportion of concern from other participants that more diversity ought to have been included in the event, be it age or ethnic diversity or the inclusion of more representatives from industry or government.

Participants noted the value of the vision encapsulated within the project as a whole, the event as a stimulating kick-off for a longer participatory process, and the efforts already taken and perceived as possible in the future for connections between RVu and other processes and organizations. The presentations by local researchers about work on different dimensions of sustainable development in the Vancouver region were also specifically cited. For some, this was a highlight of the event and for others it was a shortcoming; the latter group either hoped for more time to interact with these presenters or thought too much time was devoted to this portion of the event. A number of participants felt the day's events lacking in terms of providing enough background information about the RVu process itself, its global network and what other observatories had accomplished, or other aspects of completing an indicator-based process. The other process element of the day that received some critique was the way in which participants' ideas were clustered into study group themes, leaving some feeling "pigeon-holed into a particular issue at day's end" or as if more time were needed to ensure their theme was properly delineated.

Participants were additionally asked at the process outset for their ideas about events and activities that would most effectively engage the region in establishing a common set of sustainability indicators. The most common reply related to

sustained outreach activities to diverse groups, with ethnic communities including Aboriginal, East Indian and Chinese groups, professional groups, municipal governments, youth and the health sector all receiving specific mention. Specific emphases within the realm of selecting indicators were mentioned, as well, with several participants calling for an emphasis on human and cultural factors within sustainability indicators, and several others calling for an effort toward integrating indicators with the practical needs of government and community groups. Other ideas for future public events and media strategies also received mention.

Judging the Process in the Middle

Evaluations distributed mid-way through the process sought to examine participants' motivation for getting involved and whether this had changed. Questions also, probed for the nature of the study group experience and assessments of progress. Experiences of the process, based on the 17 evaluations submitted, varied widely. The motivations these respondents provided for their interest in getting involved and staying involved with the process fell into three main categories. One group joined in order to learn about sustainability generally or some specific aspect such as food or mobility, sustainability in Vancouver, about RVu, about other people or how they perceive and/or contribute to sustainability solutions. A second group was drawn in particular to the opportunity to devise indicators, which for some was related to a professional aspiration, to contribute to a "civic inventory," and to the agenda for the upcoming World Urban Forum 3. A third group was drawn in by the networking opportunities in a topic area of interest to them personally. A small number (less than ten percent) was there at the request of their employer. Respondents mentioned the draw of being "an active citizen," to activate a personal "commitment to the development of the region," "community engagement" or generally "to affect change."

Participants compared the process to past experiences with community meetings, stakeholder consultations and public advisory groups hosted by government, group work in academic or corporate settings, and a few to other specific indicator-related processes they had engaged in elsewhere. A number of participants considered the experience incomparable to anything they had previously been involved in and one thought it compared best to "heated dinner table conversations."

A number of common frustrations were noted at the half-way point in the process. Many groups and participants found it challenging to keep their dialogue within the group's specific theme area and to generate indicators in that area. One participant referred to this as the frustration of "big goals leashed in by small particulars." Some struggled with the ambiguity and complexity of key concepts, surprised by "how challenging it is to put into words a concept that we all felt relatively familiar with." Others experienced frustration with the pace of the process, with some facing difficulties feeling "up to speed" in time for each study group meeting and others wanting to speed up the process to get to the next stage – "let me get out there and measure something." Still others were most frustrated

by inter-personal relationships within the group, particularly related to those participants who seemed to speak too much and listen too little, to those who seemed not to make an effort to understand and accept the ideas of others, and more generally to the “WIDE variety of perspectives and backgrounds” (emphasis in original).

These frustrations, however, were matched by rewards and curiosity that kept participants hanging in. Participants noted in particular their gratitude and surprise at the amount of information available to be shared and by how much they had to learn in an area that usually was already a personal interest. Many found value in learning from their fellow study group participants, gaining insight into the diverse perspectives of others and more clearly recognizing their own distinct ability to contribute to a valuable outcome. This value of the process was encapsulated by one participant as “developing ideas collectively and beyond what we could do individually.” Participants also maintained their momentum via their curiosity about whether their group, and the process as a whole, would be able to meet its goal within the time frame provided, how the linkages among the groups would manifest, and where this all would put the RVu process in relation to other activities in the region and to other observatories around the world. Questions at this point included: “How will it all come together?” and, “Will it all make sense soon?”

Judging the Process at Its Completion

The April 3rd *Expanding our View* event offered study group participants an opportunity to present the results of their work to local decision makers throughout the region, to other study group participants, and to interested members of the public (see appendix for the list of 24 indicators). They did this through five minute presentations at a special breakfast session, through visual presentations on display posters, and presentations of their condensed results in the workshop proceedings. A special invitation was sent for the breakfast session to local elected decision makers region-wide, in attempt to make the “coming out party” for the indicators also a bridge to finding receptive channels for injecting the indicators into existing local political processes. Study group participants were congratulated and introduced by regional leaders. Following the presentations from the study groups, many decision makers left, but additional members of the public arrived for the next phase of the day, which involved a panel discussion of invited respondents addressing each of the eight study groups, time for discussion, followed by a second panel of commentators suggesting how to propel the indicators work forward in the regional and the Canadian context. The day’s final activities included round table discussion and reporting back to the large group.

A minority of participants submitted evaluations of the study group process as a whole after this event ($n = 17$). Their responses provide a sense of the participant experience including how much time and energy they had invested, how effective they found the group process and what they had learned. The average number of

hours that respondents dedicated to the process was 31, with a wide range from 10 to 70 over the entire October–April period. Nearly half of respondents (47%) considered the process “very effective” and an equal number found it “somewhat effective”; 62% were “extremely” or “very” satisfied with their group’s outcomes. There was a predictable range of responses regarding the balance of time commitment and outcomes, with some calling for a longer or more intensive process and others claiming the process had been utterly too demanding. With more time, participants would have liked “to ‘test’ indicators with the media and municipalities,” to interact more effectively with other study groups, or to better explore new ideas: “the challenge was that many of the interesting thoughts and ideas came close to the end and we couldn’t discuss these fully.”

All respondents stated that they had learned something new from their experience. Key lessons learned ranged from those related to group dynamics (“self-selecting groups can lead to difficulties,” “great to connect with people who are committed to this type of discussion,” “frustrated with myself: social skills lacking”), related to the different perceptions of sustainability evident in the region, and related to the roles of indicators in management, decision making and action.

A large majority agreed that their group had reached consensus on their key indicators (93%), secondary indicators (83%), group focus (79%) and system model (77%). Some reflected that to achieve a tighter group focus, their group might have meaningfully been split into two (energy and environment rather than “natural environment” as a whole, for example, or education and governance rather than “governance”) – and that the failure to make this split prevented some from full engagement. Others mentioned variable group member participation from meeting to meeting as a challenge to reaching consensus on different aspects of the process, since “the conversation dynamics changed for each session, depending on which participants attended.”

In the RVu process, the series of small group meetings among participants interested in setting indicators for particular domains of sustainability (mobility, for example, or environment or arts and culture) was successful in creating a sense of community amongst participants. The eight groups were able to agree to a vision for sustainability in their domain as a means to determine key indicators.

When the groups presented their visions and indicators to outsiders for the first time at the April 3rd event, the political possibilities and constraints of the indicators became immediately apparent to participants. Invited responses provided by community leaders to the indicator recommendations of each group had a powerful impact on the study group participants. As noted in the epigraph for this chapter, one former local politician invited to comment on the indicator set took a particularly dismissive view of the vision of a sustainable region that underlay the 24 final indicators, considering them too dangerous for formal political uptake:

If . . . you asked me to cooperate in this exercise [as an elected politician]. . . I would advise myself to say no, don’t go near it. They have raised the bar so high and put the frame in such a way that this is an absolute no-win for me. No matter what comes out, I’m going to be the problem. So why would I participate?

This criticism was considered devastating by some participants, given their lack of standing to take the project forward toward implementation beyond what they had achieved in their small group. The same respondent continued:

That ability to frame an issue is often more important than whatever is inside the frame. And there are a set of frames that I saw throughout all of the various groups that are “disputable.” I found myself politically writhing, particularly in the poverty one. Where I want to engage in the premises that you have. There’s lots of important things we can talk about but it won’t be the data. It’ll be the assumptions and the frame you describe.

In other words, to this stakeholder, formally recognizing these indicators would seem to dangerously lift the veil of ignorance so long held in place between the workers in data and the workers in the public eye, blurring the boundaries between those who have the facts and those who engage in public debate around priorities and decisions. Considering his past role as a local politician, these kinds of risks involved in engagement with politicized indicators appeared prohibitive. It is important to note that this perspective was not the dominant one expressed by respondents at the workshop. Other invited respondents defended the value of the indicators regardless of their ability to win the favour of elected politicians. Consider, for example, this comment from the executive director of a nongovernmental research organization:

Different indicators have purposes other than convincing elected officials. Because we all know that there are all kinds of things that go into decision making besides facts. So I think that’s not a reason to be dismissive of indicators . . . because I do think that they play a greater role, in terms of supporting accountability, supporting a broad notion of public engagement and allowing people different modes of access into considering the future of their region.

A sitting local official saw the use of indicators for obviously political purposes as a valuable addition to the process of hearing and responding to the wide range of concerns in which he is already regularly engaged:

Putting forward an indicator is a political act in itself, drawing attention to them is an act in itself, so I’m not afraid of groups that come up with indicators to argue their point but I think that is a good way to go. Because as a politician I hear everything. And so if you’ve got an indicator even if it’s got your spin on it, the world is wide. I believe in listening to the local community but right now, I’m in charge of listening to Vancouver, so to me it’s very difficult to get one-on-one dialogue. So indicators . . . might be a way to go.

Another local official expressed a different but also positive view of the need to politicize indicators by speaking directly to those in positions to take action on deteriorating trends:

If you don’t get their attention and you don’t get them activated, what’s the point of having the indicator? Things are just going to keep drifting around in the wrong direction. So if you want to keep things from drifting around, you’ve got to engage the people who have some say in what direction we’re moving. And they’re not always politicians, but that’s part of it.

Regarding the issue of how directly the project should be framed as an input to specific decision making, as opposed to being framed as general inputs to civic understanding of trends, a manager with the regional government, then called the

Greater Vancouver Regional District (now called Metro Vancouver), expressed frustration with the absence of overtly political indicators in the formal political process this way:

This question around whether or not we want to politicize the indicators that we're tracking as a community I think is a fundamental one. We have experience with annual reporting at the GVRD. How many people know the GVRD does annual reporting on the LRSP? ⁴ We had an experience last year where even our own Board was not familiar with that report and that it was done annually and delivered annually. So, the non-politicized indicators for what we would say are some of our most pressing issues seem not to have traction.

The indicators that proved most popular amongst readers of the report were provocative but not overtly tied to policy. ⁵ These indicators were put forward by the group, working on indicators of the natural environment, named "waste watchers" and "fossil fools." The most contentious indicator, about which there was the greatest variation in level of support, included one from the triangle group, the only indicator that was specifically policy-directed – "number of local land use bylaws that deviate from the LRSP."

Conclusion

The RVu study group process resulted in a new set of 24 key indicators of sustainable development particular to the Metro Vancouver region, that have subsequently been refined and published in the inaugural RVu (2006) indicator report, *Counting on Vancouver: Our view of the region*, and released to a global audience at the World Urban Forum 3. The recommended RVu indicators remain unadopted in local political processes in Vancouver, although they have been used as inputs in two regional indicator processes that have subsequently come about, in what amounts to somewhat of a local revival of an indicator-based approach to governance. ⁶ Neither of the indicator processes that have drawn on the RVu results have had the budget or capacity to engage citizens as broadly or deeply as did the RVu process and the ability to draw on an existing engagement process has been seen as a valuable input.

The question of whether the political impact of the RVu process has been or will be equal to the efforts invested in the process by citizens and the resources spent in designing and completing it remains open. Evidence presented in this chapter has proven, however, that citizens are capable of and interested in engaging in a

⁴ The LRSP, or Livable Region Strategic Plan, is the Vancouver region's growth strategy, established in 1996. Its authority rests in its standing as a "compact for development" agreed to unanimously by municipalities when it was passed, rather than in any specific incentives, disincentives, or other policy "teeth" able to enforce compliance.

⁵ This information is based on 28 completed ratings of preferences among the indicators completed by members of the Vancouver public between April and June 2006.

⁶ These two indicator projects are the Sustainable Region Initiative Social Action Team indicators of social sustainability (Edmonds & Abrams 2006) and the Vancouver Foundation Vital Signs (2006, 2007).

deep and intensive volunteer process, even when the goals are as cerebral and vague as devising indicators of sustainability and when the political commitment to the results falters. The rewards of this participation stretch beyond the formal political process to those of broad-based civic engagement and learning across communities of interest, practice in pursuing sometimes difficult dialogue and debate with fellow citizens, social skills and political strategic thinking.

The detailed understanding of the study group process provided by this chapter provides lessons for the design and operationalization of public participatory processes for community indicator selection and beyond. The internal judgments of the process are not a perfect match for the external judgments of the outcomes; this discrepancy does, however, demonstrate how the RVu study group process served to enliven the regional civic dialogue and debate about the qualities of a sustainable region, the role, utility, and political risks of an indicators-based approach, exposing some shocking perspectives in a region considered to strongly espouse values of sustainability, quality of life, and public participation.

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Appendix: Key Indicators of Sustainability, Results of the RVu Study Group Process

	Indicator	Trend
Sustainable Mobility	Percent of children who walk or cycle to school	Negative
	Percent of household income spent on transportation within the region	No Change
	Level of agreement with the statement: "I live in a neighbourhood in which I can walk to work and to meet my personal needs."	?
Overcoming Poverty	Availability of emergency services (food, beds, detox) as a proportion of demonstrated need for these services.	Negative
	Percent of households in the region consistently able to meet their basic needs.	Negative
	Quality of media coverage of poverty as a regional sustainability issue.	?
Economic Development	Local Index for a Vital Economy (LIVE).	?
	Number of land use bylaws passed by municipalities that contravene the vision and principles outlined in the Livable Region Strategic Plan (LRSP).	?
Governance	Efficient resource use in local municipalities (oil equivalent per capita).	Positive
	Percent of Vancouver region residents who feel they have opportunity to voice thoughts on major community decisions.	?
	The success of a sample of attempts by municipalities to reach diverse groups of the public in strategic work toward sustainability.	?
	Percent of Vancouver residents who are aware of the Ecological Footprint and understand their contribution to it.	?
Building Community	The number and location of "third spaces" around the region.	?
	The number of institutions, organizations and businesses which engage with the public on a regular basis.	?
	The number of public consultations which achieved "true dialogue."	?

Appendix (continued)

	Indicator	Trend
Natural Environment	Total regional waste produced per capita.	Positive
	Percent of citizens who participate in environmental stewardship activities.	?
	Percent of development on greenfield vs. brownfield land.	?
Food Systems	The gap between the percent of income spent by each of 4 income groups needed to purchase a “healthy” food basket.	Negative
	Ratio of all land available for growing food to the potentially productive land in both urban and rural areas.	?
	Ratio of food items produced and consumed within the region those imported and consumed within the region for selected foods.	?
Arts and Culture	Quantity and quality of opportunities for cultural activity, as represented by an annually updated cultural events matrix.	?
	Percent of individuals who feel that they have adequate access, freedom and time for cultural and artistic activity.	?
	Ratio of dollars spent promoting multicultural awareness and artistic work to the dollars these activities contribute to the region.	?

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