

NOTES: Option B, Friday, November 7, 2003, 10:30 am

Regional Indicators Affinity Group

Moderator/Facilitator:

Allan Wallis, Catanese Center for Urban and Environmental Solutions, Florida Atlantic University

The session opened with the proposition of two questions:

- What are the benefits and liabilities of employing a shared set of indicators?
- What can we learn from each other about best practices for developing, using and reporting regional indicators?

Regarding the first question, there was a fairly strong sense that employing direct region-to-region comparisons can carry significant liabilities (Doug Henton, from Collaborative Economics, was particularly clear on this point). Since making a case for acting regionally can itself be tenuous, focusing on comparisons can potentially undermine support for developing indicators in a specific region. Nevertheless, some participants reported that well placed comparisons can help to mobilize a region to act on an issue. [A more specific dimension of this issue, not discussed by the group, is whether employing national rankings could be useful (e.g., how does a region rank in terms of highway congestion, business competitiveness, etc.), vs. specifically drawing comparisons with other regions (as Cleveland did in its benchmarking project).]

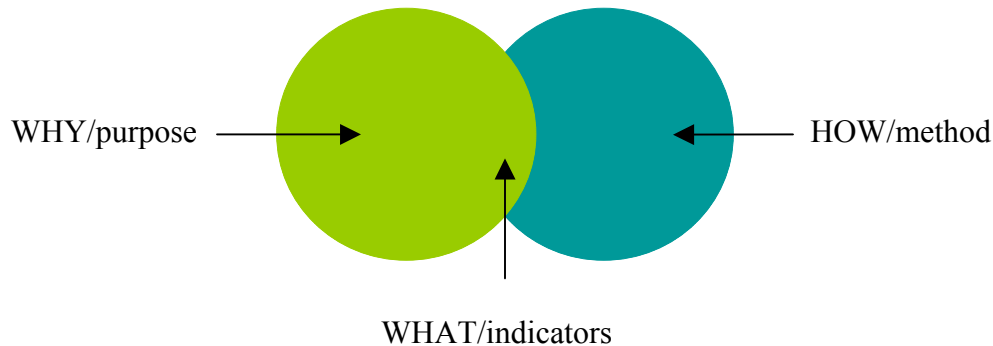
Kala Venugopal, of the California Center for Regional Leadership, shared the results of a recent evaluation of indicator reports completed by 16 of their 23 members. The analysis identified only 16 common indicators out of over two hundred employed cumulatively over all of the reports. This analysis suggests that it is possible to identify a core set of indicators, but it leaves open the question of whether this common core is adequately descriptive.

Discussion in the group moved from the question of whether it would be useful to identify a shared set of indicators to identifying shared purposes or objectives for conducting indicator studies. Lyle Wray (drawing from the work of Daniel Yankelovich—*Coming to Public Judgment*), suggested that there might be as many as seven distinct purposes for conducting indicator studies, ranging from simply creating awareness that there is a region, to being able to mobilize actions around specific issues. Following this distinction in purpose, it might be useful to look across indicator studies based on common purpose and then extract best practices by purpose. Similarly, it might be useful to look at the kinds of indicators commonly used when the purpose is awareness, as opposed to mobilization (e.g., looking at those studies with the common purpose of awareness raising, and then considering what indicators they might be employing in common). Doug Henton suggested that the question of purpose went to the WHY of indicator studies.

Some of the regions that are on their third or higher iteration of indicator reports seem to be moving toward focusing in on more specific issues (this was reported by Charlie Wheelan at Chicago Metropolis 2020 and by Doug Henton for the Silicon Valley Indicators). The term “drilling down” was used to describe focusing in on a specific issue, such as housing or transportation. Studies with a more specialized focus seemed to have the purpose of mobilizing action rather than raising awareness.

Returning to the question of how the affinity group might help serve the needs of participants, it was suggested that simply being able to share information about HOW to do it would be useful. The dimensions of HOW included measurement, communications, defining the region, gathering data, developing measures of impact, using advisory boards, and forming partnerships for interpreting and disseminating results.

Putting the WHY/purpose and HOW/methods questions together, the selection of specific indicators seems to rest in the overlap between the two. In other words, the indicators – the WHAT – that we try to look at will be informed by the purpose of our study, but also limited by our methods, skill and resources.



In addition to beginning to understand the choice of indicators as an intersection between HOW and WHY questions, the group also discussed how we tell our stories; that is, how we make the measures we employ compelling in informing people about the way their region works. This discussion raised the suggestion that one of the uses of the ARS Affinity Group might be to share information about how to get better at telling our stories. Charles Wheelan offered an interesting example, reporting that a recent study by Chicago Metropolis employed a map showing the location of Starbucks stores in Chicago. The map graphically suggested social inequalities.

The diagram below offers a graphic summary of conclusions from the session. Comments and suggestions are greatly welcomed.

