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# Measuring Progress, Strengthening Governance, and Promoting Positive Change: Developing Sustainability Indicators with Winnipeg's Urban First Nations Community

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## **Measuring Progress, Strengthening Governance, and Promoting Positive Change: Developing Sustainability Indicators with Winnipeg's Urban First Nations Community <sup>1</sup>**

Christa Rust

### **Introduction**

The most commonly cited definition of sustainability comes from the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future*, which defined sustainability as, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Commission 1987). In the last two decades, that definition has received a great deal of attention and, as a result, it has begun to change the way society is thinking; but a change in thinking hasn't necessarily led to a great deal of action.

The systems we have in place today are perfectly designed for the results we are getting .... If what we're doing isn't working, we ought to consider doing something different ... we need to engage the community differently in planning to discover what we need to know [in order] to do something better. (Warner 2008, 1)

Involving the community, increasing the profile of the challenges, and promoting the positive impacts people can have in addressing them, can strongly effect the constructive changes people make in their lives and the level of ownership they have in the process and the outcomes. The process of developing indicators is central to the legitimacy and relevance of the resulting indicators. Indicators developed through a community process reflect the values, interests, and goals of the participants, and the whole point of community indicators is to encourage and enable the community to make a measurable improvement over time.

With dramatic shifts in population and the challenges that come with living in the urban environment, the First Nations community needs to come together in order to build and maintain greater social cohesion by empowering the community,

the family, and the individual to understand, plan, and achieve a more sustainable future.

Relations between and within communities suffer when people lack work and endure hardship, debt, anxiety, low self-esteem, ill-health, poor skills, and bad living conditions. These basic necessities of life are the foundations of a strong social fabric and important indicators of social progress. (Wikipedia 2009)

The key elements in understanding, planning, and achieving a sustainable community are establishing a baseline and working collectively to map and monitor the community's progress towards its vision for the future. Community indicators are pieces of information that together form a picture of the overall sustainability of a community. Over time those pictures come together and a story emerges. The story helps enlighten the community with new information and ideas, and compels the community to take action by forcing people to question their preconceptions and what real value there is in maintaining the status quo.

Community indicators attempt to present a more accurate picture of the quality of life in an area that people call home. When done well, they illuminate linkages ... [and] ... present vital information in a format that is easy to understand. (Redefining Progress and Earth Day Network 2002, 4)

The popularity of indicators today is akin to the fact that they “are a necessary part of the stream of information we use to understand the world, make decisions, and plan our actions” (Meadows 1998, 1). The identification and monitoring of these measures consequently become tools for change and learning. Indicators are seen as a positive way to raise awareness of concerns and issues; help in priority-setting, planning, and resource allocation; evaluate the performance of programs, projects, and interventions; provide evidence to support concerns, claims, and positions; and help influence policy- and decision-making.

## **Issues**

Since the release of the reports by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996, a number of federal and provincial initiatives have been developed to attempt to deal with the disparities among First Nations peoples on and off reserves, with varying success. Why many initiatives have proven unsuccessful relates to the fact that they were developed for the people, not with the people. These state-level approaches have often refrained from examining the societal paradigm that continues to perpetuate disparities between First Nation and non-First Nation populations. New approaches that are grassroots, engage the people, focus on positive outcomes that empower the community and lay the groundwork for a sustainable future are what is needed.

Now more than ever, First Nations people are becoming increasingly assertive in securing their rights and improving their collective well-being. Obviously, this shift requires a new approach to the issues and a thorough understanding of key issues, their status, and trends, both in the urban context and beyond. There is a need for information rooted in—and reflective of—the unique First Nations' values and visions for a positive future. A short review of literature or a quick glance at a survey poll suggests that there is a significant information gap in the minds of First Nations themselves and Canadian society as a whole. This gap impedes—and will continue to impede—our ability to work together and address the issues if it is not closed, and if initiatives continue to be developed for the people instead of with the people.

Based on a mutual desire to close these gaps and develop a community-based tool to understanding the current state of the Winnipeg First Nations population, identify a shared vision for the future, and monitor progress towards achieving that vision, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) partnered on a community level project to develop sustainability indicators with Winnipeg's urban First Nations community. The objectives of this initiative include:

- building an improved understanding of the challenges facing Winnipeg's First Nations community for the First Nations, the city as a whole, and decision-makers;
- identifying past successes of Winnipeg's First Nations community and factors that made success possible;
- identifying critical problems and vulnerabilities and their underlying causes where policy action by First Nations and/or other actors is necessary;
- developing a set of goals and specific targets, and building on past successes, identifying options for policies and actions that will help meet those goals through engagement and consultation; and
- building the capacity of the First Nations community of Winnipeg to better diagnose problems and identify successes, and to develop confidence in envisioning, planning, and implementing collective and individual action in the interest of achieving a positive future.

## **Methodology**

Typically, sustainability indicators are framed around the three domains of sustainability (social, environment, and economic), but since framework selection should also be dependent on the targeted audience, cultural relevance needs to be incorporated into the framework. A culturally relevant or ethnically specific framework is essentially tailored to suit a particular people's emotional, physical, environmental, and/or spiritual needs. The resulting indicator system is intended to be a mirror in which members of the community can recognize themselves.

People are more receptive to the value of sustainability when it is specific and has direct application to their own community, and when it is addressed by people who are a part of that community (Redefining Progress and Earth Day Network 2002).

Tell me, I'll forget. Show me, I may remember. But involve me, and I'll understand. (Chinese proverb)

Framework selection criteria for this initiative centred on the desire to ensure that the system developed was a reflection of the culture, issues, and concerns of the urban First Nations community. The selected framework was based on the four domains of well-being as described by the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel. The aspects of each domain and their associated measures were determined by the community. The Medicine Wheel was the ideal choice for this initiative because there was an identified need to look at the issues in a holistic manner. The Medicine Wheel represents an easy-to-understand model of complex systems, relationships, and behaviours, and it is identifiable among First Nations cultures.

The development of community sustainability indicators requires a planning process that fully engages the community and enables people to have influence on policy- and decision-makers.

It is only through action that communities improve themselves, especially in a rapidly changing world where not to act often means to fall behind. But just “doing something” is not sufficient. What gets done has to make a difference. (Epstein et al. 2006, 2)

Engaging the community means giving its members real opportunities to help effect positive change. In order to understand the real issues—not just the perceived issues categorized by stereotypes and entrenched in media—the Winnipeg Urban First Nation initiative relied heavily on the engagement of the community to identify, articulate, and prioritize the issues impacting well-being. A series of grassroots-focused forums were used to engage the First Nations people of Winnipeg and their service sector providers in order to understand the issues and their implications. The community was defined to include both the urban First Nations people and their community service providers. Community was defined like this because it was felt that in order to truly understand the elements necessary to plan for a more sustainable community, you need to involve the people who know the issues and concerns of that community—the people who live and work in the community.

### ***Meet and Greet Information Session***

The first meeting held with the community was an information session. In advance of the session, radio and newspaper media were engaged to help encourage the

**Figure 3.1: Key Issues Affecting the Well-Being of Winnipeg's First Nations Community**

community to attend. The meeting was not as well attended as we would have hoped, highlighting the challenge of communicating with the urban First Nations community. The purpose of this meeting was to introduce the community to the project and its research team, and to answer questions. Asking those in attendance for their advice on how to attract more participants helped build our audiences at the later forums and strengthen our communications with the community.

### ***Feast and Forum 2—Identifying the Issues and Concerns***

The second meeting was a forum for the community to identify the issues and concerns that impact the well-being of the First Nations community (see Figure 3.1). A total of forty-eight people registered their attendance at the forum. Of those participants, thirty-five identified themselves as a First Nations person. The forum was much better attended than the information session and attracted a broader spectrum of engaging participants who were driven to have a positive impact on the well-being of their community.

The forum was structured in such a way that it enabled community members to voice issues and concerns through moving personal stories that provided real context to the issues. Two of the stories shared at the forum are featured in Boxes 1 and 2.

The forum was successful in bringing forth the identification of many issues that impact the well-being of the community. To ensure that the indicator system developed would be manageable, issues were prioritized with the community and sorted within the four domains of well-being.

### **Box 1: Cultural Identity**

A young man stood at the front of the community centre and told everyone that if it were not for the sense of pride he has for his people, and the role that pride plays in his well-being, he would be in a gang, jail, homeless, or dead in a ditch somewhere. To him, his cultural identity keeps him grounded and that sense of identity and respect for this culture makes him a positive role model for younger generations.

### **Box 2: Housing**

A young mother spoke to the room about her concerns about quality, affordable housing. She shared with the group that she had been on an affordable housing waiting list in the city for several months relying on friends and family for a place to stay. When she was finally offered a home for her and her children, she felt compelled to turn it down because of health and safety concerns. She concluded by saying that she is now back on the bottom of the list because she declined what she was offered.

### ***Feast and Forum 3—Prioritizing the Issues and Identifying the Indicators***

Building on the second forum, the third forum focused on validating the issues and facilitated an exploration of potential measures to gauge progress on the key issues. The decision to have the community involved in the identification of measures was made to ensure that what would be measured would not only help the community to identify progress, but also serve other community priorities. “Citizens want results they care about, not just data, so citizen priorities should drive what data to collect, report and use” (Epstein et al. 2006, 105). The priority measures identified are as follows:

#### ***Environment Domain***

- Security
  - Number of First Nations police officers
  - Number of First Nations people in jail
  - Number of crimes against First Nations people
- Housing
  - Number of First Nations people who own their own home
  - Number of First Nations people who rent their home
  - Number of First Nations people who live in low-income housing
  - Number of First Nations people who lack affordable housing/are homeless

#### ***Economic Domain***

- Governance
  - Number of First Nations people eligible to vote
  - Number of First Nations people who actually vote

**Figure 3.2: Domains of Well-Being and Issues Affecting Well-Being**

- Number of programs teaching First Nations governance
- Number of First Nations students studying governance
- Number of First Nations people in leadership or governance roles
- Employment
  - Number of First Nations-owned businesses
  - Number of First Nations-run businesses
  - Length of employment
  - Sectors of employment
  - Number of First Nations people considered to be working poor

#### ***Social Domain***

- Health
  - Number of First Nations people receiving home care
  - Number of First Nations people in personal care homes
  - Number of First Nations people with a disability
  - Number of First Nations people with chronic health conditions
  - Number of First Nations children registered in recreational sport
- Education
  - Number of First Nations teachers
  - Number of First Nations children/youth registered in school at beginning of year and those successfully completing the year's studies
  - Number of First Nations people attending post-secondary school
  - Number of First Nations people graduating from post-secondary school

**Culture Domain**

- Cultural Identity
  - Number of First Nations people who can speak their native language
  - Number of schools with First Nations curriculum
  - Number of First Nations cultural events
  - Number of First Nations people accessing/consuming traditional foods
  - Number of First Nations elders invited to teach traditional ways in schools
- Community Services
  - Number of community service organizations serving First Nations people
  - Number of First Nations people volunteering
  - Distribution of services for First Nations people in the city

The priority measures identified through the community engagement process serve as the basis for the examination of the available data.

**Data Considerations**

Access to data is a key element in developing community indicators. Data sources are very important in the context of indicators, as the data fed into the measures developed translate into the indicators of conditions. For this project, four crucial criteria needed to be taken into consideration with regards to potential datasets as the project aims to utilize existing data: 1) are the desired datasets available; 2) are there costs associated with accessing the datasets; 3) are the datasets accurate and comparable; and 4) are the datasets collected with appropriate frequency?

The availability of datasets specific to urban First Nations people in Winnipeg, or any other large city in Canada for that matter, is not keeping pace with the growth of the population. It is very difficult to obtain statistics focusing solely on First Nations people. Most available statistics group First Nations people with the Métis and Inuit, as Aboriginals, despite the fact that their leadership systems do not operate as one and these groups view themselves as separate and distinct peoples.

Data surround us, but the information might not be collected or constructed in the way it is needed. A quick glance at the Canadian census, for instance, will show you that a great deal of data is available at virtually no cost. However, in the case where specific datasets, not individually reported, are required, there are costs for special tabulations.

With respect to accessing data on First Nations people, there are a number of issues regarding accuracy and comparability. Some of the important considerations noted in this project are:

- the *Indian Act* (1876) stripped away the rights of Status-Indian women who married outside the Status-Indian community along with offspring from that union;
- in 1985, Bill C-31 reinstated the status of women and their offspring, which was stripped away by the 1876 *Indian Act*. A small number of reinstatements continue to occur each year;
- the administration of the Canadian census, the language of the questions asked and definitions used to describe Indigenous people have undergone many changes over the years;
- census counts do not include Aboriginal persons residing in institutions such as: hospitals, senior care homes, jails and shelters, or those living outside Canada on Census day;
- the census is subject to issues of under-coverage and incompletely enumerated reserves where enumeration is either not permitted or halted before completion;
- there is a great deal of community both on and off reserve; and,
- some surveys are relatively new and therefore not comparable over time.

## Conclusion

The purpose of developing community indicators is not to gather data and publish reports. Rather, the purpose is to effect positive change and we acknowledge that change will take time. We see the development of an indicators system as a critical piece of social infrastructure to help the First Nations community of Winnipeg enhance its overall well-being. The system clarifies the issues that are central to the community, and that the information it communicates can inform and influence policy- and decision-making.

In this first phase of the two-part project, there were three components of work:

1. background research;
2. engaging the community; and
3. reporting on the baseline indicators.

The output of the first component was a pre-publication document entitled: “Building Knowledge, Measuring Well-being: Developing Sustainability Indicators for Winnipeg’s First Nations Community” (available at [www.iisd.org/pdf/2007/building\\_knowledge.pdf](http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2007/building_knowledge.pdf)). The document, which was used to guide the development of the sustainability indicators for the urban First Nations community in Winnipeg, is a review and summary of relevant literature and available data sources. The contents of the document form a historical overview of First Nations people in Canada; summarize framework methodologies and data sources relevant to First Nations; describe the profile of the First Nations popula-

tion; explore increasing urban migration; and examine the needs of the growing urban community and the services available.

In recognition of the need to develop indicators that were reflective of the issues and concerns of the community, it was necessary to engage the community. The resulting output from the engagement of the community in a series of forums is the “Preliminary Report—Framework Development and the Community Engagement Process” (available at [http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2008/amc\\_dev\\_indicators\\_wpg.pdf](http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2008/amc_dev_indicators_wpg.pdf)). The report documents the process and the identification of key issues and measures of well-being.

The final component of the first phase of the project is a report on the baseline indicators. The third component and the delivery of the output have yet to be completed due to a project funding deficit. Once the deficit has been addressed, the required datasets will be purchased, analyzed, and interpreted. The findings will then be documented in a report to the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and presented to the community at a project milestone celebration.

The goal of this project was to develop a community-specific indicators system and access relevant data in order to develop an accurate picture of the well-being of Winnipeg’s First Nations community. With that picture in hand, the next step will be to engage the community in the second phase of the project. The objectives of the second phase will focus on developing a shared vision for the future, setting targets to monitor and evaluate progress, and ensuring that the capacity to update and manage the indicator system is built within the community.

## Endnotes

- 1 A version of this paper was originally published by the International Institute for Sustainable Government 2009.

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