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SUBJECT:: Systems of Indicators

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TEXT:

Hi Folks,

The following e-mail conversation between Robin O'Malley at the Heinz Center and Gil Ruagach is part of an active list serve of the International Sustainability Indicators Network (ISIN) - where I gave the opening keynote talk in March - and is a good summary of the distinction between an indicator effort and the setting of goals for a community or nation related to the things we are measuring. The work on indicators is not credible if political leaders or the press or the community see it as advocating a particular set of preferences or outcome. That is why BEA

does not make policy recommendations or set goals when it releases the economic indicators. It provides the data and indicators that others consider to be accurate and unbiased and the others can set the goals and make the projections into the future using that data.

Sometimes the same individuals are involved in both indicator efforts and policy efforts but if they are serious about keeping the indicators credible, they do it wearing a "different hat." This point is central to what the whole US indicator effort, including SWRR and the other roundtables, is seeking to accomplish so I forward it to you.

Any of you interested in joining ISIN can find how to do so at www.sustainabilityindicators.org

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From: "O'Malley, Robin" <omalley@heinzctr.org>

Subject: RE: [Sustainabilityindicators] Re: Systems of Indicators and Indicators of Systems

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Reply-to: Sustainabilityindicators@yahoogroups.com

Message-id:

<401B98C46028C24391FDF0B2F41C53B023277C@w2khnzcxg01.heinzctr.dom>

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Precedence: bulk

Delivered-to: mailing list Sustainabilityindicators@yahoogroups.com

Thread-Topic: [Sustainabilityindicators] Re: Systems of Indicators and Indicators of Systems

Thread-Index: AcMLukHE5lBwp7gOSvmVU0jxAQxAUQBwbj3w

Mailing-List: list Sustainabilityindicators@yahoogroups.com; contact Sustainabilityindicators-owner@yahoogroups.com

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Gil has provided several thoughtful responses:

>>>> Questions imply goals. Selectivity implies an agenda.
 >>>> Whichever indicators one group or another decides best answer
 >>>> the questions they choose to ask, they must first in any event be
 >>>> calculated and benchmarked against independently derived basic
 >>>> data sets.

I agree completely; in our effort, we brought together representatives from a wide range of social perspectives (including both environmental and industry / development interests, government at the federal, state, and local level, and practicing academics). One of their jobs was to identify - using their own agendas and goals - what indicators should be tracked to give the nation a clear view of the condition of its ecosystems. Some of these indicators are defined purely by what one might call an academic or expert-driven view of what is important from a functional or structural standpoint, while others represent what "people care about" - output of goods and services, recreational availability, etc.

This part of the process is explicitly and openly value-laden. However, and here is where I think I agree with Gil - this was not the work of "one group or another" - our effort was specifically designed to include as many perspectives on what we as a society need to pay attention to as was practical and feasible at a national scale in the US. The selected indicators do not, to the best of our ability, represent "one group" or another. They (we hope and believe) represent a good cross section, with indicators that describe aspects of very high importance to a wide range of social sectors.

HOWEVER, once this (value-laden) selection process was complete, we recognized that - while these groups might agree on what we should track (i.e., what the indicators should be), we did not agree on what levels were right or what direction trends should take.

Gil goes on to say:

>>>>The very minimum information required in reporting to enable peer
 >>>>review of the material must include the range, mean, and standard
 >>>>deviation of the sample population. There must be some discussion
 >>>>also of both purpose and methodology of the enquiry, examination
 >>>>of the data, and what conclusions have been drawn.

Again, I agree completely, but the description above does not and will not give me an answer to the normative questions that drive policy. Is a rate of wetland loss of X million acres per year acceptable? This is not a technical question. This is what I mean when I say that it is possible to identify indicators, but that it is not always possible (and in our view often counterproductive to the indicator enterprise -- to force agreement on the normative characterization of those trends and endpoints. We know we want to pay attention to wetlands loss, but different groups will inevitably have different views of how much loss (if any) is acceptable. If I impose a view that says that no wetlands loss is acceptable, and the indicator set comes out with headlines that say "unacceptable wetlands loss occurs" (or conversely, if I impose a view that says that losses are OK is they are kept at less than 5% a year, leading to a headline that says that "wetland losses of 4% of US wetlands base are no problem this year

If, instead, I say that "wetlands losses this year are 4% of the base" - with no further commentary, different groups can take that interpretation and fight over whether 4% is acceptable or not. No one shoots the

messenger. That's a good thing from my point of view.

Gil further says that

>>>> What management or union leaders believe is irrelevant to the setting of rigorous and objective research standards

I agree, but it is not research standards that we are talking about, it is regulatory standard, public policy choices, and allocation of society's resources (time, effort, money) by public choice and private action. In this arena, what management and union leaders believe is exactly what matters. This is not to say that there are no cases in which there are "bright lines" - levels of contamination that people should not be exposed to, for example, in which we have, as a society, chosen to take action. It is more to say that, most of the time, there is a huge range of choice available to us as a society, and that indicator projects can help inform these choices by providing information, not necessarily by becoming partisans in the debates over the choices.

ROBIN

-----Original Message-----

From: Gil Hardwick [mailto:gruagach@highway1.com.au]
Sent: Friday, April 25, 2003 10:54 PM
To: Sustainabilityindicators@yahoogroups.com
Subject: RE: [Sustainabilityindicators] Re: Systems of Indicators and Indicators of Systems

At 07:58 AM 25/04/03 -0400, Robin O'Malley wrote:

>Indeed, this discussion is quite rich in ideas and intellectual threads.
>I'd like to respond to an emerging thread, mostly in Brent and Valerie's
>recent posts, which appears to be saying that a set of indicators MUST
>explicitly embody and be structured around goals for the feature in
>question. I disagree.

>
>In a highly pluralistic society, it will inevitably be the case that there
>are features of the environmental, social, or economic system many people
>believe are important and should be tracked (i.e., should be "indicators")
>but about which there is much disagreement about appropriate levels or
>directions of trend.

Hm, yes, I think there is something missing from this discussion that needs to be clarified before we go much further.

One of my great frustrations has long been a lack of appreciation of what basic research entails and how data sets are developed which can be referenced in the selecting of what indicators may or may not be useful in providing answers to questions.

Questions imply goals. Selectivity implies an agenda.

Whichever indicators one group or another decides best answer the questions they choose to ask, they must first in any event be calculated and benchmarked against independently derived basic data sets.

The very minimum information required in reporting to enable peer review of the material must include the range, mean, and standard

deviation of the sample population. There must be some discussion also of both purpose and methodology of the enquiry, examination of the data, and what conclusions have been drawn.

That process is not a "closed shop" among ivory tower academics, but the foundation of the discipline on which we are embarked.

What management or union leaders believe is irrelevant to the setting of rigorous and objective research standards, though I dare hope that in stimulating them in turn to deal with each other dispassionately toward resolving their differences and getting on with life some good will come of the effort.

With respect to your State of the Nation's Ecosystems project, as you appear to be describing it to us, what you are addressing is not the nation's ecosystems at all, but people's beliefs about the nation's ecosystems.

Those are two different things, and your report title must reasonably reflect that.

We have a so-called State of the Environment Report in progress here right now, which is sadly degenerating rapidly into very personal abuse. Were the work to have been entitled "A preliminary report on what four members of the A-MR Shire Council and five of their political supporters believe should be included as indicators in state of the local environment reporting", I would have no problem accepting it.

Fine, whatever . . . it's a free society . . .

I am not saying here that people are choosing to be dishonest, but that a cavalier approach is being taken to basic use of language and basic standards of validity and reliability in reporting.

Frankly, the entire business needs to come a long way back down to earth before I will even begin to consider having my name and my professional reputation associated with it.

In the meantime I find myself justified on those and a number of other grounds for seeking to persuade everyone to relax and think quite a bit more about where they might be headed in all this.

Gil

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