

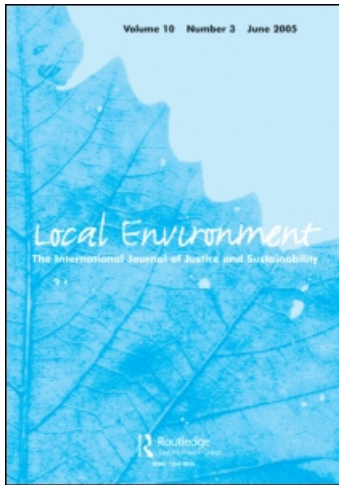
This article was downloaded by: [Florida State University]

On: 6 February 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 791802779]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Local Environment

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713394137>

Sustainability indicators revisited: Getting from political objectives to performance outcomes—a response to Graham Pinfield

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Online Publication Date: 01 October 1997

To cite this Article Brugmann, Jeb(1997)'Sustainability indicators revisited: Getting from political objectives to performance outcomes—a response to Graham Pinfield',Local Environment,2:3,299 — 302

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13549839708725534

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13549839708725534>

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RESPONSE

Sustainability Indicators Revisited: getting from political objectives to performance outcomes—a response to Graham Pinfield

JEB BRUGMANN

I very much appreciate the detailed Response of Graham Pinfield (*Local Environment* 2(2)) to my article on indicators (Is there Method in our Measurement? The use of indicators in local sustainable development planning, *Local Environment*, 2(1), pp. 59–72). For the most part, I do not disagree with what Pinfield presents, although he appears to believe that he is refuting the major argument in my article. He argues that indicators should be used primarily to engage government and citizens in a shared discussion and debate about what ‘sustainability’ means so as to develop common political objectives. I agree with him that participatory debate and objective setting are key. However, I argue further that citizens seek concrete outcomes. The achievement of concrete outcomes can be facilitated if the indicators derived from participatory processes are designed and used to hold institutions accountable to specific targets for each political objective. In contrast with Pinfield, I believe that accountability to action will do more to strengthen the “strained relationship between governments and citizens” than debate and planning that lacks a measurable commitment to action.

While noting that performance indicators “have unfortunate connotations for UK local authorities”, it deserves mention that the most prominent indicators in most industrialised countries are, in effect, performance indicators.

These indicators are often linked to specific thresholds that trigger government actions. For instance, in many cities of the world various air quality indices are used to trigger government health warnings, eligibility for central government funding transfers, or efforts to restrict private vehicle use. Governments rely heavily on indicators of price inflation, and maintain policies to adjust interest rates if these indicators exceed certain thresholds. My question, then, is why is it so controversial to propose that local governments also adopt transparent performance indicators in implementing their Local Agenda 21 or similar sustainable development plans?

Pinfield’s main concern is that indicators remain available as a tool for the public to articulate values and guide political objectives, and do not become an élitist tool in the domain of municipal officers or central government bureaucrats. I could not agree more fully with his concern. My difference with him is that, in reality, I do not think that the Sustainable Seattle effort and its replications outside the United States go far enough to establish real accountability and real partnership between the community and the municipality. The primary aim and value of the Sustainable Seattle model is educational. For an initial period of a few years it also provides a useful tool for political advocacy. However, in most communities, and

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particularly in low-income communities, people can only sustain a voluntary planning effort for so long. At some point the sustainability of the agenda itself relies on institutional support, and I think that the appropriate institution to carry that community agenda forward is the local government.

It is here that we can use performance indicators as a tool to build a formal, even statutory link between the desires and values of local residents and the budgets, laws, infrastructure and services that will truly make a difference in peoples' lives and our common future.

The Seattle model failed to build that link because action and performance were not given sufficient priority at the outset as a key objective of the model. Fortunately, in the case of Seattle, the municipality (certainly in some response to the Sustainable Seattle effort) itself was motivated to incorporate the sustainable development agenda into its statutory planning activities. But the lack of an agreed commitment, at the outset, between community and municipality to produce a common set of indicators that would be used to guide future resource allocation, planning decisions and municipal policies resulted in two sets of often divergent indicators. Pinfield offers no factual justification in laying that blame fully at the doorstep of City Hall.

As he notes, in many cities and towns there is mistrust between residents and local government which requires constant bridging. In my mind, the only way that an indicators project can build a bridge of lasting substance is if the model being applied involves:

- (1) an understanding that community representatives will work with the municipality to assess local conditions and negotiate common objectives and targets; and
- (2) distilling these objectives and targets, with continued community involvement, into indicators; and
- (3) using these indicators in a consistent, formal way to evaluate the actions and performance of all the partners—the municipality, local business, NGOs and even households.

With all of the indicators work that has taken

place in Seattle, this kind of bridge has never been built.

This kind of bridge has been built in Oregon and Santa Monica and in other localities where negotiated performance commitments are a key element of sustainable development planning. Pinfield offers no basis of research or evidence to conclude that “these municipal plan and performance indicator-dominated exercises are ... viewed fairly skeptically by the public”. Apparently Aristotle, too, once claimed that he knew how many teeth his wife had because he had once counted the teeth in his horse's mouth.

In this light, I must share that I have had the opportunity to discuss the case most cited by Pinfield—Lancashire County, UK—with both local citizens and government representatives. On the basis of past communications with some environmental organisations in Lancashire County, I anticipate that they would applaud the addition of the role of accountability and performance measurement to the three primary roles for indicators he identified in the Lancashire model (i.e. “technical and managerial; political objective-setting; public communication and participation”).

I will quickly review the three roles he posits:

- (1) *Technical and managerial*. In my article I argued that the technical measurement of conditions and trends in highly complex, self-organising systems would be better served through intensive and broad-based scientific research. This is particularly relevant in the system called Earth, which is notable for its non-linear behaviours. It is even more relevant if one aims to measure the ‘sustainability’ of specific states in this system, which may be biophysically impossible.

In other words, this is not a matter, as he recommends, of simply focusing indicators “around key concepts such as ‘carrying capacity’”. It is a matter of using appropriate tools. Simple, single indicators are just not adequate for a technical task recognised in the scientific community as being more complicated than landing men on the moon. Indicators could be used in this research effort, but their application would

be at such a technical level that they would not be very accessible to any lay community that I have come across.

Pinfield gives some small and economical credit to my chief argument in his mention of a managerial role for indicators. I agree with his concerns about not 'massaging' indicators "so that the institutions appear in a better light". For this reason, the UK experience he cites, in which managers apparently established their own indicators for their internal managerial use, should not be repeated. ICLEI's recommendation is that the indicators used for internal managerial purposes should be directly related to the performance indicators derived from the community-based planning. This is the practice that was applied in the cases of Oregon and Santa Monica, and staff for both of these efforts are constantly working to strengthen opportunities for further participation.

(2) *Political objective-setting.* In more than 20 years of grass-roots organising experience I have neither personally used nor come across a grass-roots group that has used indicators as a *primary* tool to encourage a party or government to change its political objectives. In Lancashire County, I do not believe that local residents would have unchained themselves from trees that were being threatened in a municipally-endorsed highway project had a municipal officer stood at the bottom and invited them to help out with the local indicators project. Political objectives in most communities are redefined through good, old-fashioned community organising where power and not indicators are the medium of exchange.

The alternative to rough-and-tumble organising is *real* power-sharing between government and business, on the one hand, and neighbourhoods and NGOs on the other hand. If these parties can agree to a sustainable development planning (read: negotiation) process which promises to establish concrete targets whose implementation will be monitored with a set of agreed performance indicators, then I think we can offer a real alternative to climbing trees and taking to the streets.

(3) *Public education and participation.* Nothing in my article, nor in the cases I cite therein, should be interpreted to imply that indicators do not or should not serve an important participation and education function. The point of my article is to encourage practitioners not to settle for education and participation as ends in themselves, hoping that this will indirectly create some agency for actual change in practice. In most communities, participation and education will only translate into significant sustainable development outcomes if integrally linked to institutions whose decisions, practices and investments are shaping the options we have in our day-to-day lives.

In conclusion, when I review Pinfield's Response, and the similar arguments forwarded by some of his UK colleagues in past debates, I believe that our differences may boil down to two issues.

First, the debates highlight nagging problems with semantics. The jargon of sustainability clearly is so diffuse that we constantly confuse each other with our statements. Pinfield seems to use the term 'sustainability' in a figurative sense to imply a set of social values about what a community wishes to preserve and where it wishes to go. Indicators can be used to express these values. In contrast, I use the term in a literal sense. 'Sustainability' is a condition in which the imposition of social values on complex, objective biophysical systems does not so destabilise these systems that we can no longer achieve our basic values. The problem is that the reactions of complex systems to our impositions are not always clear. It is for this reason that we establish sustainable development planning processes. These iterative processes have two fundamental elements: obtaining a deeper understanding of the relevant system(s) and redefining our values accordingly. To me, indicators are a very poor tool for deepening our understanding of the system(s). They should be primarily used to track whether or not we are imposing our newly redefined, i.e. sustainable development, values on the system.

A further semantic hiccup arises from the term 'performance indicators', Pinfield appears

at times in the awkward position of dismissing performance measurement on the basis of some bad experiences with something called 'performance indicators' in the UK. I therefore propose to simply call them something else—perhaps 'Happy Indicators' would do. What really matters is both to build accountability to concrete targets and to measure their achievement.

Second, I perceive that our contextual starting points are at times radically different. My UK colleagues are effectively using Local Agenda 21 to buttress a comparatively weak and often assailed system of local government. My impression is that what UK local authorities cannot accomplish owing to lack of powers, resources or public legitimacy, they are trying to achieve through education and participation that may steadily rebuild legitimacy and redefine political objectives.

In the US cases I have cited—as well as in much of Western Europe and a growing number of developing countries—the starting point is one of comparatively strong (not withstanding lack of resources) and independent local government. Certainly, we want to educate, encourage participation and shape political objectives. But our constitutions and political systems provide a variety of mechanisms for participation—the right to court action, binding referendums, the right to recall, statutory requirements for neighbourhood councils and representation and participation on municipal committees and boards etc. Increasingly, the local governments to whom we address ourselves have the power to make a concrete

difference. Therefore, we want our processes to be directly linked to their practice, and we want to use indicators to establish that essential link of accountability to the sustainable development agenda.

I am sure that some local government officers in the countries to which I refer would take comfort from the lack of defined commitments and the weak accountability implied in the Sustainable Seattle model. It offers all the public relations benefits, but does not confront the municipality with the tough political choices implied in sustainable development.

As I may underestimate the actual constraints on UK local authorities, I reluctantly concede to Pinfield that a non-performance based approach may presently be inevitable in the UK. However, as growing numbers of countries abandon the UK model of local authorities that they inherited as colonies, I will continue to caution non-UK colleagues against an indicators model that dodges the 'P' word. Local governments owe real and measurable performance to their constituents.

I therefore leave this debate with one last plea to abandon the myth of Seattle and to take up Pinfield's call to review the practices of local government counterparts in Scandinavia, Germany, The Netherlands, the United States, Australia, Brazil, Peru and elsewhere. In this spirit, I hope that he might give further consideration to the fine cases of Oregon and Santa Monica. When the findings are in I would be pleased to revisit this discussion with him and some other Lancashire County citizens in a pub somewhere in Preston.