

Measuring what?

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The books that sit at the heart of this note are: *Sustainability Indicators: Measuring the Immeasurable?* (2000 and 2008), *Measuring Sustainability* (2003) and *Resilient Participation: Saving the Human Project* (2011). All three were written by me, Simon Bell, and my colleague Professor Stephen Morse of the University of Surrey, UK.

There is a world of difference between measurement and the measured. There is often a galaxy of discontinuity between the sustainability indicator and the subject of assessment.

Indicators are usually made by experts and applied to populations. Think about two of the biggest indicators around nowadays: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the Ecological Footprint. We use these indicators to measure national output and ecological change. Very few people know how they are made up and very few people would be confident to talk about what they are really measuring, yet they are used to define the way we think about and measure nations.

It was with these kinds of thoughts in mind that I considered the value of indicators for sustainability back in 2000, prior to writing *Sustainability Indicators*. My concern was (and remains) the urgent need for sustainability to be measured in a way which means something to those who are measured and does not leave people feeling remote from the indicator process – and possibly hopeless and in despair.

It is often the case that indicators increase a sense of powerlessness rather than reduce it. How come? The indicators are too powerful in many cases. I am not claiming that this is a nasty conspiracy. Far from it. Most measurement is undertaken with the honest and scientifically clear intention of providing information which is value free and objectively, evidentially, verifiable. The science is often the best we have, but the result is often negative.

The maths and statistics can result in indicators, long formulated by experts, that are incomprehensible without a member of the expert group that formulated them being around to explain what they mean. Also, sustainability indicators are often of global significance and often depressing (in showing continual decline in species, biodiversity or whatever) and unactionable because they relate to forces beyond the means of any country, let alone *anybody*, to respond to meaningfully. The result of many global indicators can therefore be powerlessness and misery.

It was with this formidable background in mind that the three books emerged. They attempt to bring indicator creation, measurement and assessment to the person who cares about it in a personal manner. The argument is quite simple. If we want sustainability indicators to mean something to real people in the real world then they need to mean something to that person and they need to allow that person to do something about it. What many indicators do now is reduce morale and make the problems seem too big to handle. This can cause the despair I mentioned above.

If we want a child to *do* something, we would never say, ‘Oh, by the way, there is no value in what you are doing’, or ‘The task I have set you is impossible’, or ‘What you produce will be useless.’ We know that such comments would be ridiculous. We know that any child facing such a torrent of disincentive would just not bother or, at best, would bother very badly indeed.

Yet, in sustainability, we seem intent on providing individuals with gargantuan issues which they have no hope of even conceptualizing, let alone tackling. In sustainability work:

- We rarely provide a potential of cure along with the diagnosis of the disease.
- We rarely provide information fit for action at the level of the person.
- We never offer a better than fifty–fifty chance of recovery.

In their very objectivity, standard indicators can crush the potential for hope and action.

So, in the three books mentioned at the start of this note, Stephen and I tried to put indicators back in the hands of the people who could develop and use them: indicators for people!

Since publication of the first book on sustainability indicators I have worked with hundreds of people in dozens of sustainability workshops and projects in lots of countries – from sustainability around much of Europe (see <http://www.point-eufp7.info>) to coastal sustainability in Spain (see <http://www.camplevantedealmeria.com/en/content/camp-levante-de-almeria>), from the London Olympics to the future of the internet (see <http://ibzl.net>) – and my experience is that the view from the ground is one of energy, hope, vigour and endeavour. This positive side of people is laced with caution, a lack of credulity regarding all things political, and measured optimism that ‘we’, the people, can make a difference.

To face a potential global tragedy we need a systemic consciousness. And we will get that only by nurturing people and providing them with indicators they understand and to which they can relate.

- A great device for getting people to think together and be creative is Rich Pictures: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/itunes-u/art-rich-pictures-for-ipod/id563801497>.
- To learn more about diagramming for group work, see: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/money-management/management/guide-diagrams>.
- To see some interesting material on community, noise and London’s Heathrow Airport, see: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/science-maths-technology/engineering-and-technology/design-and-innovation/innovation/terminal-cities>.
- And if you would like to learn more about community use of indicators, look at the Open University module on Environmental Management: <http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/qualifications/q72>