

Pocantico Statement on the Need for National Indicators of Sustainability for the United States of America

Background

March 10-13, 2002, professionals from business, nonprofits, academia, and government (federal, state, and local) came together at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's Pocantico Conference Center in Tarrytown, New York to discuss the establishment of a system of sustainability measures for the United States. The purpose of the meeting was to:

- Develop consensus among participants from leading groups and organizations on the establishment of a system of sustainable development indicators for the U.S. and
- Lay the groundwork for the eventual acceptance and use of sustainability indicators by the broadest possible audience.

The following consensus statement was developed and unanimously endorsed by the participants who agreed to form a *Committee to Promote Sustainability Indicators for the U.S.* and begin working on the next steps described below. Appendix 1 is a draft set of characteristics for a potential national sustainability indicator system.

Need for Sustainable Development and a U.S. System of Sustainability Indicators

Leaders in various arenas in the United States of America – including business, nonprofits, national, state and local government, and the general public – have called for movement toward sustainability. While no single definition of sustainability is commonly agreed to, the most widely recognized is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” Another widely recognized definition is “improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems.” Just as there is no agreed-upon definition, there is also no agreed-upon path toward sustainability. However, any path will require information that supports decisions and actions compatible with sustainable development. Developing the information and a framework within which to organize it will lead to a more complete working definition of and progress toward sustainable development.

Such information should be organized into a national system of sustainability indicators that will help decision-makers understand and assess progress toward sustainability, at different levels and in different contexts, consistently over time. The source of the information must be widely accepted, unbiased, and trustworthy to enable public deliberations on a scientific basis so that the United States can reach consensus on and effectively address key sustainability issues. The audience for and users of sustainability indicators are all decision-makers including the public, non-governmental organizations, businesses, and government agencies. How these various audiences will use sustainability indicators is described below.

Purpose of a National System of Sustainability Indicators

The overall purpose of sustainability indicators is to help the intended audiences understand the complete consequences – social, economic, and environmental – of their decisions. The system of sustainability indicators will:

- Assist decision-makers in understanding the practical meaning of achieving a sustainable way of life and sustainable development
- Provide guidance for decision-makers in designing and implementing sustainability policies and plans
- Enable decision-makers to see the interconnections among issues so they can make decisions based on the whole system rather than a series of separate, unconnected elements.
- Help decision-makers better understand trends so they can:
 - focus on long-term outcomes rather than only short-term fixes,
 - integrate social, economic, and environmental goals, objectives and strategies, and
 - optimize multiple goals rather than one goal at the expense of others.
- Provide information and feedback useful for decision-making
 - at many levels of society such as households, businesses, local and state governments, regional authorities, national, international, and global and
 - in a variety of contexts including public awareness and accountability for governmental and nongovernmental institutions and individuals.
- Serve as a framework and focus for constructive dialogue and collaboration among business, governmental and non-governmental institutions.
- Promote long-run regulatory stability and predictability.
- Promote compatibility of measures, data collection systems and decision-making at multiple scales.
- Foster constructive U.S. participation in global policy-making and meeting global obligations.

Audiences for and Benefits of the System of Indicators

Audiences for this system of indicators and some benefits to each audience include:

- Public – Indicators will provide information to enable more informed participation in public decision-making and sustainable lifestyle choices.
- Non-governmental organizations including foundations and other funders – Indicators will support missions and provide tools for setting priorities and judging results.
- Businesses – Indicators will provide information that enables businesses to link planning and goals to issues that are priorities at a broader societal scale and provide tools to guide long-term achievement of corporate sustainability goals.
- Governments – Indicators will lay the groundwork for integrated policies rather than single-issue decisions and programs; help build a framework for improved communication and integration of efforts at local, regional, and national scales; and highlight the value of data reported by agencies.

Next Steps

The following actions are needed to move a U.S. system of sustainability indicators from concept to reality:

1. Establish a public-private, collaborative, nonpartisan *Committee to Promote Sustainability Indicators for the U.S.* The Committee would:
 - Serve as the steering committee that will establish the institution described below.
 - Include representatives from diverse interests including business, labor, nonprofits, scholars, and federal, state and local governments, and reflect economic, social and environmental viewpoints in a balanced fashion.
 - Secure funding from private and public sources, initially to support the committee and ultimately to provide long-term support for the institute and the U.S. system of sustainability indicators.
 - Promote the creation of the institute and highlight the importance of sustainability indicators through a web site that will be linked to other efforts, related organizations and upcoming events.

2. Establish an independent institute with the mission of providing scientifically defensible indicators that are widely accepted by a broad range of stakeholders. The indicators should reflect conditions at the national scale and provide information on trends critical to achieving sustainable development in the United States. This will require:
 - Developing a plan for the governance of the institution that includes a public-private partnership guided by diverse and senior representation from business, nonprofits, communities, academics, government, and citizens, and
 - Developing a plan for the institutional arrangements needed to create and maintain the institute including but not limited to the development of government/non-government partnerships, resource commitments and work plans.
 - Developing consensus on a core set of categories for which goals and indicators need to be developed and a comprehensive yet useable framework within which to organize such indicators.¹ This consensus should take into account relevant state and local indicator efforts and consider how such initiatives can be linked to or integrated with a set of national sustainability indicators.

3. Establish a steering committee, convened by a senior White House Office such as the Council on Environmental Quality or the Office of Science and Technology Policy, to coordinate the federal role in the institute. The committee would:
 - Include Federal agencies and nonfederal partners.
 - Draw on current Federal work such as the Resource Roundtables, State of the Environment Report and Sustainable Development Indicators Group as well as related work outside the Federal government.
 - Develop strategy and resources to support the Federal role in the institute.

¹ This framework should build on the existing work of organizations such as the Calvert-Henderson Quality of Life Indicators, Federal Interagency Working Group on Sustainable Development Indicators, Global Reporting Initiative, Heinz Center for Science, Economics and the Environment, Program on Non-Market Accounts at Yale, Redefining Progress, and the work of the US Delegations to the UN and to OECD.

Meeting Participants

The participants of the meeting were (organization listed for identification purposes only):

Dr. Jennifer H. Allen, Oregon Economic and Community Development Department

* Alan AtKisson, AtKisson + Associates, Inc.

Cynthia Barakatt, International Sustainability Indicators Network

David Berry, Interagency Workgroup on Sustainable Development Indicators

Tracy Bowen, Alice Ferguson Foundation

Tim Brennan, CERES, the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies and the Global Reporting Initiative

Carolyn Nunley Cairns, Consumers Union

Roan Conrad, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Dept of Commerce

Dr. Patrice Flynn, economist and CEO of FLYNN RESEARCH

Michel Gelobter, Redefining Progress

David Hales, ALTARUM

Dr. Peter Hardi, International Institute for Sustainable Development

Maureen Hart, International Sustainability Indicators Network/Sustainable Measures, Inc.

Theodore Heintz, U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Policy Analysis

James E. Kearney, Bristol-Myers Squibb Co.

Robert Loeb, Communications Consortium Media Center

Larry Olmsted, Voices and Choices, Charlotte, North Carolina

Robin O'Malley, The H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics and the Environment

Craig Perkins, City of Santa Monica

Dr. Peter Roussopoulos, USDA Forest Service

Don Seville, Sustainability Institute

Dr. Deborah J. Shields, USDA Forest Service

Col. Daniel Smith (ret.), Center for Defense Information

Randall E. Solomon, Resource Renewal Institute

Martin Spitzer, U.S. House of Representatives, Science Committee Staff

Dave Tilford, Center for a New American Dream

* Jeff Tryens, Oregon Progress Board

James S. Turner, Citizens for Health/Swankin and Turner

Dan Tunstall, World Resources Institute

Dr. Michael P. Washburn, Global Institute for Sustainable Forestry, Yale University

* Indicates individuals who were not able to attend the meeting but who participated in planning the meeting and creating this statement.

Appendix 1

Draft Characteristics of a National Sustainability Indicator System

The following characteristics of an indicator system were used as the basis for discussion at the meeting and were generally supported by participants. However, it was not the subject of detailed discussion at the meeting. Thus, while the tone and general content are consistent with the meeting's outcomes, the specific text is included here for informational purposes, not as a component of the consensus statement. Portions of the characteristics were taken from the Bellagio Principles, a set of guidelines developed in 1996 by an international group of measurement practitioners and researchers from five continents.²

To be most effective, a U.S. system of sustainability indicators should:

- Consider the condition and capacity of social, ecological, and economic subsystems, including their state as well as the direction and rate of change of that state, of their component parts, and the interaction between parts;
- Place primary focus on phenomena and factors most directly relevant and causally related to sustainability;
- Promote the consideration of both positive and negative consequences of human activity in a way that reflects the costs and the benefits for human and ecological systems, in monetary and non-monetary terms;
- Adopt a time horizon long enough to capture both human and ecosystem time scales thus responding to the needs of future generations as well as those of short-term decision-making;
- Define the space of study large enough to include not only local but also long distance impacts on people and ecosystems;
- Build on historic and current conditions to anticipate future conditions (e.g., where we want to go, where we could go) and start to identify unintended consequences of previous activities;
- Include statistical measures based on replicable observations from existing sources to the extent practical and appropriate;
- Organize data into a set of related categories at varying levels of detail that have a clear conceptual relationship to sustainability; and
- Promote compatibility of measurements and indicators in various contexts (government, businesses, non-governmental organizations) and levels (local, regional, national) that allows for a tiered system of indicators.

Dissemination of the information in that system should include:

- Data and information products that are widely viewed as not being affected by the biases of particular interests,
- Making the indicators and underlying data available in a manner that allows a variety of users to select the sets of space, time and phenomena appropriate for their purposes as well as the levels of aggregation, and the methods of geographic and graphic displays, and
- Publication of a core set of indicators in clear and plain language that are periodically broadcast to the public in a manner that builds a common understanding of conditions and trends.

² The complete text of the Bellagio Principles can be found at: <http://iisd1.iisd.ca/measure/bellagio1.htm>

Implementing this system will require long-term commitments from governmental, business and non-governmental organizations to:

- Identify and allocate permanent resources such as staff and funding;
- Participate collaboratively in the process of developing, evaluating, and maintaining the system of indicators;
- Manage the indicator development and implementation in a manner that is efficient, well coordinated and yields high quality products;
- Create an institutional structure with sufficient independence from policy and management to assure freedom from bias;
- Develop mechanisms for coordination and collaboration among governmental, business and non-governmental organizations to gather data measuring a wide range of phenomena from a variety of data sources;
- Continually improve the coverage, quality and consistency of the data through a process that sets priorities based on the extent and value of the usage of different categories of data; and
- Continually improve the scientific basis for interpretation in sustainability assessments and diagnoses.

Successful use of the national system of sustainability indicators will require:

- Incorporating the system of indicators into policy and decision-making at all levels;
- Providing a mechanism to periodically review and revise the indicators that includes the users of the system and the data keepers; and
- Supporting the development of local, state and regional capacity to assess sustainability and incorporate that information into decision-making processes.