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Community Indicators Consortium Impact Summit 2013

Using Indicators Projects as Prompts for Exploring Equity: a Case Study of Greater Portland Pulse

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Introduction

Since Norman Krumholz and John Forester (1990) first advanced the notion of the planner as a social justice advocate and coined the term “equity planning” in the 1970s, the concept of social equity has gained traction and provided a guiding principle in both policy and planning. In concert with Krumholz and his colleagues, Frederickson (2010) advanced the notion of social justice in the policy sphere. His notion of the New Public Administration asserts that achieving an equitable society, by definition, requires inclusion of all voices in addressing disparities of opportunity and access to resources while seeking a consensus on policies that would achieve desired outcomes (Frederickson, 2010). The spatial dimension of equity was championed by Manuel Pastor et al. (2009) who assert that using equity as a “lens” shapes public policy and planning practices in a way that emphasizes the relationship between regional interconnectedness, individual prosperity, and social justice.

While broad policy statements can (and often do) invoke these grand equity principles,¹ operationalizing “equity” so that it can be implemented in planning practice is a more complicated matter. What does equity mean? What does it look like on the ground? How do we measure progress toward equity goals? How do we know when we have achieved equity? The use of indicators, benchmarks and opportunity mapping are becoming popular methods that support data-driven decision-making and help to gauge a region’s level of equity attainment. Regional indicator projects are also commonly used to begin a community dialogue about priorities and to assess whether those priorities are being met. Local examples include the Coalition for a Livable Future’s Regional Equity Atlas, the Coalition of Communities of Color reports, and the Greater Portland Pulse (GPP) Indicator Project.

This paper describes the process that the Greater Portland Pulse (GPP) initiated to incorporate the measurement of progress toward social equity into the project. While equity may appear to be a widely accepted priority for communities, the GPP process created a dialogue that was sometimes contentious but also profoundly educational for the participants revealing some of the complexities, not only of the issue of equity, but the challenges (particularly the inadequacy of available data) and trade-offs that are inescapable when using conventional data sets.

¹ The Portland Plan (2012) equity initiative states that: Equity is when everyone has access to the opportunities necessary to satisfy their essential needs, advance their well-being and achieve their full potential. We have a shared fate as individuals within a community and communities within society. All communities need the ability to shape their own present and future. Equity is both the means to healthy communities and an end that benefits us all. (p.18)

Additionally, this paper discusses some of the consequences of a process that, while incorporating equity values and concerns into all of its outcomes and indicators (rather than creating a separate equity outcome category) may have rendered equity less visible than originally intended.

Understanding the importance of and advantages to data-driven decision-making, Greater Portland Pulse was envisioned, by a largely public sector, establishment group of stakeholders, as a bi-state, 4-county, regional consensus-based indicators project. The Advisory Team for the project (that represented primarily government, public universities, and nonprofit sectors) were instrumental in creating the nine general outcome categories (economic opportunity, education, healthy people, safe people, arts and culture, civic engagement, healthy natural environment, housing and communities, and access and mobility) as well as imposing a restriction on the number of indicators (six to eight) within each category. But to ensure that the process also incorporated the concerns of a broad spectrum of the population, the project team created a more inclusive, participatory process. Over the course of two years, approximately 200 stakeholders worked together to identify the desired outcomes for the greater Portland-Vancouver region and the indicators to measure progress toward those outcomes.

Incorporating Equity

During the developmental phase of the project, there was considerable debate among the Advisory Team members about how to address equity. Concurrently, two advocacy organizations, the Coalition for a Livable Future and the Coalition of Communities of Color were developing projects specifically dedicated to analyzing social equity conditions. Their initial findings pointed to considerable social, racial, and ethnic inequity within the region. While this led some GPP participants to believe that a focus on equity was essential to the fundamental utility of the project, others disagreed. And for those participants for whom social equity was a central concern, some advocated for the addition of a tenth category that would focus exclusively on measuring progress toward equity while others advocated for an approach that would immerse equity values and concerns into each of the original nine outcome categories rather than creating a separate equity category.

Ultimately, the Advisory Team established equity as a priority for the project and elected to choose the latter approach that maintained the original nine outcome categories but with the integration of equity concerns and values into the language describing the outcomes and the selection of indicators.

In recognition of biases that are inherent in many conventional and widely used data sets and to ensure that equity was adequately addressed throughout the project, the Advisory Team created an Equity Panel (members included, among others, representation from both the Coalition for a Livable Future and the Coalition of Communities of Color) whose job it was to develop the definition of equity that would be used in the project and give guidance to the Advisory Team and the nine “Results Teams” (comprised of local topic area experts) that would ultimately refine the outcomes, identify the drivers (or the conditions that contribute to the outcomes), and recommend possible indicators for each outcome.

The definition of equity that was developed by the Equity Panel and adopted by the Advisory Team is as follows:

Equity means that all individuals, regardless of “markers of difference” including but not limited to race, ethnicity, income, disability, and age, have equal privilege and opportunity to access the basic needs, services, skills and assets required to succeed in life. This includes affordable access to healthy food, adequate and appropriate housing, quality jobs, safe neighborhoods, transportation and mobility options, education, civic engagement, health services, natural areas, and opportunities to participate in arts and cultural activities.

This definition identifies key demographic groups and encompasses all of the GPP outcome categories. Importantly, the definition was seen as comparable with the Portland Plan’s Equity Initiative as well as that adopted by the Coalition for a Livable Future.

Measuring Equity: The “Learning” Dialogues

There were five Equity Panel discussions during the development phase of the project, three of which were “learning dialogues” with the Result Team co-leads (Conrad, 2011). The Equity Panel organized its initial considerations into three important areas of indicator project development and implementation: (1) the criteria for indicator selection; (2) measurement considerations; and (3) the actual use of the indicators.

With regard to the criteria for indicator selection, the project had already adopted some fundamental guidelines that are common to indicator projects:

- **Indicator Selection**
 - Outcome driven. Indicators should be selected to measure progress toward a desired regional outcome.
 - Understandable and transparent. Indicators should be able to be understood by most people.
 - Drive multiple results. Efficiency.
 - Cross-category synergy to serve as a catalyst for systems change.
 - Limited in number. The number of indicators per category should be few for the sake of clarity and simplicity. Secondary indicators may be allowed “to honor the complexity of the issues” (Conrad, 2011).
 - Developmental indicators. In the cases where data were not available to measure progress toward the desired outcomes, there was a recognition that consensus could emerge around the development of new indicators (referred to as “aspirational” indicators).
- **Data Characteristics**
 - Affordable
 - Trusted
 - Available consistently over time
 - Available region-wide but also available at the neighborhood level

The Equity Panel suggested that in addition to the above indicator criteria, at least one indicator per category be broken down by race, ethnicity, age, income and disability and suggested that the data be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, income and disability whenever possible.

The Equity Panel ultimately agreed to four criteria or principles, specifically focused on equity, that would guide their discussions with the Results teams:

- Disaggregation. Whenever possible, the indicator data should be broken down and analyzed by demographic characteristics including race, ethnicity, age, and income.
- Map-ability. To understand the effects of place-based issues, it is critical to map as many indicators as possible at the neighborhood level, so that communities can be compared for both beneficial and harmful outcomes.
- Data Availability. The lack of disaggregated data at the neighborhood level is a huge barrier to meaningful social equity analysis. GPP should create a list of disaggregated “aspirational” indicators and advocate for their collection².
- Community Perspective. The issues must be seen from the perspective of diverse communities. And there must be an acknowledgement of the role that cultural differences play in the choosing, measuring, and using of indicators to avoid stereotyping and keeping a positive focus on the benefits of a diverse community. (Conrad, 2011)

These criteria were the basis for both a pre-screening of the Results Teams’ draft indicators and the conversations that occurred among the Equity Panel members with the Results Teams’ co-leads as they developed and refined their lists of desired outcomes and indicators.

It is important to keep in mind that the Results Teams were made up of topic area experts and advocates who volunteered for the project. Their knowledge of the qualities of effective indicators and the complexities of data (including availability, quality, and biases), let alone their familiarity with equity frameworks, varied considerably from team to team. As the Equity Panel’s proceedings indicate (Conrad, 2011), the acknowledgement and application of these equity criteria/principles at times challenged the participants’ assumptions, engaged them in much deeper thinking about the issues, and helped them to develop more sophisticated understandings of the trade-offs involved in the process of indicator selection in light of the equity criteria (the desirability of disaggregation, geographic specificity, and community perspective) than might have occurred otherwise.

What follows are some examples of the issues that were examined by the Equity Panel during their pre-screening process and by the Equity Panel and the Results Teams, together, as they attempted to come up with appropriate measures and caveats. They are based on Conrad’s “GPVI [now GPP] Equity Panel Proceedings, 2011” report.

Access and Mobility

In examining the Access and Mobility Results Team’s initial indicator list, the Equity Panel identified an inadequate sensitivity or a lack of specificity related to equity concerns on a number of fronts. Equity panelists felt that not enough consideration was given to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) issues, for example. In addition, they wanted to see a greater level of

² This was an approach that the Coalition for a Livable Future would take in its Regional Equity Atlas 2.0 project.

specificity related to issues of aging in the indicators. And, they wondered whether the degree of public participation in transportation planning decisions would make a difference to underserved communities – pointing to the desirability of cross-category analyses, in this case, with the Civic Engagement Team.

These comments led the Access and Mobility Results co-leads to think about the possible financial, quality, and physical barriers to access and mobility and questioned the adequacy of readily available data both in terms of the desire for disaggregation and geographic specificity to begin to reveal the equity dimensions of the topic. In addition, the question of the meaning and relevance of travel time and how that should fit in to an equity equation was raised and discussed.

Several possible disparities were identified as important but not addressed by the draft list of indicators including: urban vs. rural access, particularly the availability of sidewalks; the level of community involvement in decision-making; infrastructure maintenance and speed of repairs; travel delay times; emissions (which neighborhoods are most affected?); cultural sensitivity in communication campaigns; aging and access; and the experience and perceptions of safety in relationship to access and mobility. In many respects, these unaddressed issues could be considered the suggested aspirational indicators that the Equity Panel saw as a priority for the project.

Economic Opportunity

During the pre-screening of the Economic Opportunity team’s proposed indicators, the Equity panelists reached the conclusion that the “Household Sufficiency” indicator³ was a “new-age construction” that “didn’t really fit with the reality of people’s lives” (Conrad, 2011). Because of these concerns, the Equity Panel asked the Economic Opportunity team to consider the feasibility of using the number of hours it takes for households to achieve a living wage.

They wanted to see the proposed homeownership indicators broken down by race and ethnicity but they questioned this indicator as the most appropriate measure of wealth given the economic recession.

In contemplating the suggested business prosperity indicator, the Equity Panel questioned the assumption that, from an equity perspective, there was an expectation that businesses share their prosperity with the community through corporate social responsibility efforts, employee benefits, and by creating healthy environments. Related to this, they suggested that the proposed volunteerism indicator might set expectations too high for small businesses that don’t have adequate resources. The Equity Panel also suggested that this Results Team investigate the impacts of public investments in businesses on low-income communities by looking into the availability of data on the residents of urban renewal districts after these investments are made.

When the Economic Opportunity co-leads met with the Equity Panel, the co-leads communicated the fact that they were struggling with what should be the desired outcomes from an equity

³ This measure was misidentified in the proceedings but refers to the Self-Sufficiency Standard. This standard was developed by Dr. Diana Pearce to determine the amount of income necessary to meet basic needs (including taxes) without public subsidies. The wage that is developed by this metric varies from place to place and by household size.

perspective. And they wondered what indicators to use that could represent the point (or points) of view of marginalized communities. One member of the team dismissed the idea that income distribution was an important indicator but was overruled by the team. The co-leads, too, were concerned that data would not be available that were demographically disaggregated, temporally acceptable, and geographically specific enough.

Arts and Culture

In reviewing the Arts and Culture draft indicators focused on arts education, the Equity Panel suggested a comparison among school districts and the inclusion of private schools to reveal discrepancies between public and private school course offerings. They also suggested the inclusion of data from faith-based institutions as arts providers and educators (Nichols (2010) suggests that these institutions are important nurturers of the arts especially in low-income and rural communities) and wondered if faiths were also considered “cultures.”

When the Equity panelists met with one of the Arts and Culture co-leads, the biggest single concern was the availability of data. The co-lead suggested that celebration of diversity and importance of equity are central to the practice of arts and culture. Nevertheless, the Equity Panel asked this team to consider: developing a better understanding and definition of what a culturally specific art organization is; identifying the funding inequities among arts and culture organizations; identifying how the mainstream arts groups have developed their audiences and the demographics of these audiences; and how to capture, as an indicator, the support and capacities of these organizations. Because of the strong relationship between culture and community and the paucity of data sources, cross linkages were considered to be essential to this category as well as the development of a list of aspirational indicators for which to advocate.

Education

The initial set of draft indicators were still under discussion when the education Results Team co-leads met with the Equity Panel. The team had been challenged by three major issues: (1) the “paradox of choice” problem or the large number of indicators to choose from; (2) the desire to reinforce and complement other existing projects; and (3) the fact that the data are less available where the team needed them most, such as good early childhood and teacher quality measures (Conrad, 2011). Given the large number of data sets available, the Education Results Team wondered if the Equity Panel could assist them in eliminating some measures from consideration.

Instead, the Equity Panel’s recommendations tended to highlight the Results Team’s third concern – the inadequacy of the data. These include the inclusion of “push-out” rates for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, and Queer students (LGBTQ); a push to reactivate the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey (and linkages to the Safe People team); teacher training data related to cultural competency; the availability of culturally specific education; resolving the questions of disaggregation (by school district or school?); and disaggregated school discipline and retention rates.

Healthy People

The Equity Panel proceedings indicate that the Healthy People Results Team began its list of potential indicators with a focus on the availability of health services but switched course when

the team members concluded that health services have a relatively small impact on people's health in comparison with the social determinants of health. Instead, the team adopted the position that the two most important predictors of health are an individual's economic and educational status. The new approach clustered the issues into three categories: health promotion (obesity rates, nutritious food, physical activity, tobacco use, and teen pregnancy); health services (prenatal care, behavioral/mental health, immunizations, tooth decay, ER visits); and the social context (linkages to the other GPP categories).

The discussion with the Equity Panel focused on the paucity of disaggregated data for the proposed indicators given the heavy reliance on the Center for Disease Control's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) that only conducts an over-sample for race every five years. The Equity Panel also suggested considering access to health insurance, the incidence of domestic violence, the race and ethnicity of health providers, as well as the issue of racism generally.

Safe People

At the time of the Equity Panel's discussion with the Safe People Results Team co-leads, the team had identified one indicator that would directly measure equity: the region's demographic characteristics compared to individuals (a) arrested, (b) charged, (c) convicted, and (d) under supervision. The team had also come up with two aspirational indicators that were also directly related to social equity: perceived safety and perceived trust. These perception indicators were seen to be important to understanding the racial and ethnic disparities as they relate to trust in the judicial [and police] system, but relevant data are not collected in a robust or consistent manner over the entire geographic region.

A key concern for this team was the availability of comparable data for both Oregon and Washington given the bi-state nature of the region. And, this data comparability issue would affect the usability of potential indicators in several of the other outcome categories as well.

Housing and Communities

Perhaps more than any of the other Results team leaders, the Housing and Communities co-leads were most familiar with the importance and the complexities of measuring progress toward equity coming from the affordable housing, academic, and related fields. The break down of the indicator data by "critical" populations was always central to their approach. As a result, the conversation that they had with the Equity Panel focused on more subtle aspects of equity analyses as they pertain to housing in particular.

For example, there was some discussion about the importance and meaning of the "segregation index or dissimilarity index"⁴ as it relates to the desired outcome for housing and communities. While this measure assumes that people should be able to live where they choose to live, the co-leads argued that sometimes there are cultural communities of choice. How does an indicator project such as GPP come to terms with this apparent dichotomy?

⁴ According to the Population Center of the University of Michigan, the Dissimilarity Index measures the "evenness" with which two mutually exclusive populations (such as the white and African American populations) are distributed across geographic units (such as Census tracts) that are part of a larger geographic entity (such as a city) (<http://enceladus.isr.umich.edu/race/calculate.html>).

There was also discussion about the necessity of a reliance on quantitative data but the recognition that causality questions, particularly around why people choose to live in certain neighborhoods, are not easily explored with conventional quantitative data sets alone. This team expressed a strong desire for qualitative, anecdotal information to better measure the degree of choice the people have in their places of residence. This team also understood that some of their indicators, such as gentrification, could probably be addressed through cross-category analyses.

Like several of the other Results Teams, there were questions raised about some generally accepted indicators such as homeownership as a proxy for wealth (the Equity panelists had questioned this indicator in its review of the Economic Opportunity draft indicators). And, there was a clear expression of frustration over the lack of adequate data to measure the access to housing question in terms of equity: Does the make-up of housing advisory boards make a difference in terms of equity? Is there a database that will allow us to see the effectiveness of individual development accounts? Can the tax burden be measured for all jurisdictions? What about youth, gay, and lesbian homelessness? How can we measure housing accessibility in light of ADA requirements? Are there re-occurring data for bank lending practices in terms of housing type? And, what about the availability of data regarding the mobile home option? How about data that express the availability of culturally appropriate services with regard to housing? This team, in particular, emphasized the importance of a long term commitment to the project so that a constituency could be built to effectively advocate for the collection of these aspirational indicators.

Impacts of the Dialogues

The GPP approach incorporated equity values and concerns into the outcomes and the indicators rather than creating a separate equity outcome with its own Results Team. This created an environment in which outcome category Results Team members (who were not necessarily focused on social equity concerns or the challenges and trade-offs that occur when equity criteria are applied to indicator selection and data identification) could engage in questioning their assumptions, delve into possible biases in conventional data sets, struggle to fill data gaps and deficiencies, and recognize the necessity for the articulation of aspirational indicators that could begin to fill the gaps in the future. For many, this was a profound learning experience.

Any indicator project that is regionally based and dependent on conventional data sources (with the exception of data collected with adequate frequency and at an appropriately high sample rate) faces a choice between the temporal and spatial resolution of the available data. The question of how to come to terms with these trade-offs in light of the addition of the disaggregation that is optimal for equity analyses, is not easily answered even for those familiar with the issues. For many of the Results team members, understanding the implications of these trade-offs, having to make decisions about the selection of the indicators with the trade-offs in mind, and having to decide the extent to which the project should be focused on equity given these trade-offs were significant challenges. Another was the recognition that data that more accurately capture the equity dimension are frequently not collected with regularity, if at all – requiring the extensive use of proxy measures based on more readily available public data sources.

Greater Portland Pulse is first and foremost an indicator project and as such has prioritized the dissemination of public data that is frequently updated. However, the often coarse geographic scale (counties and Metropolitan Statistical Areas) of these data sources does not allow for a

demographic disaggregation at finer levels of geography that would be ideal from an equity perspective.

Re-thinking the Positioning of Equity

Unlike the Coalition for a Livable Future's Regional Equity Atlas 1 and 2.0 projects that were driven solely by the desire to understand and track equity conditions within the region, the Greater Portland Pulse project was seen by its proponents as having a broader purpose. The GPP Advisory Team saw the value of equity as integral to all of the outcome categories rather than something separate and outside the original set. It was assumed that by infusing equity concerns and values into the nine established outcome categories and indicators, rather than calling out equity in its own outcome category, that equity would be effectively addressed. Certainly the Greater Portland Pulse process to discuss and incorporate equity into the project accomplished a great deal to promote the importance of equity and reveal, to the participants, the complexities and tremendous challenges that tracking regional equity conditions present. The Results Team members have been sensitized to the issues, and equity values and concerns are now woven through the project.

However, by not calling it out as a separate outcome category with indicators all its own, on the surface, equity appears to be strangely absent. This is further complicated by the multi-dimensional nature of equity that, as the Equity Panel/Result Team dialogues suggest, often requires cross-category indicator analyses that can be difficult to identify as the project's website as currently designed. With regard to equity analysis, this apparent invisibility presents a challenge for GPP.

Cobb and Rixford (1998) have suggested that indicators can influence policy outcomes by "expanding awareness and focusing attention" (p. 2). But Cobb, in his 2000 piece "Measuring Tools and the Quality of Life," contends that in order to effect policy change, indicators projects cannot be politically neutral:

The single most important factor in determining the success of indicators whether they are designed with a purpose in mind – more specifically, a political purpose. The formation of a political purpose requires an ideology, which simply means a set of ideas or theories about what works and doesn't work... In short, without an ideology, there is no story, and the absence of an effective story is a recipe for political failure. (p. 15)

Greater Portland Pulse is a regional indicator project that highly values, and was built on, the notion of consensus. And, consensus has required that politics remain in the background. This may have driven the Advisory Team's decision to make equity (which was seen by some participants as political) less overtly visible. After two years "live," in evaluating the uses of the indicators, we have wondered whether the lack of a clearly articulated political framework may be hindering the usability of many of the indicators in policy assessment (of storytelling) as we have sought to fulfill the mission of the project to move beyond measuring results to "inspiring action."

In order to assist potential consumers of The Pulse in a more effective use of the indicators in the policy arena, the project team is currently developing a policy-focused user guide that is based

on a series of case studies that can be used as examples. The User Guide is intended to reach beyond the original participants to educate a broader public about the nature of indicators (what they do, their importance and power) as well as the criteria for selection that includes the development by users of their own theoretical or political framework. Additionally, this will allow GPP staff to communicate to a larger public (using the Equity Panel deliberations as examples) how and why GPP incorporates equity into the project in the way that it does, its equity definition, the equity criteria for indicators that the Equity Panel developed, and the implications of these criteria for outcome articulation, indicator choice, the temporal/spatial trade-offs, and the exceptional need for proxy measures (given the lack of adequate data) that are integral (based on the equity criteria for indicator selection) to any analysis of equity.

In the future, the Greater Portland Pulse User Guide will provide the basis for our trainings as well as options for public forums or regional conversations that are critical to the vitality of the project.

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