Unit Eight

Tracking and Reporting Progress

Developing an outstanding set of indicators for your goals, targets, and strategies is meaningless if they are not tracked and reported to policy makers and the public. Data for the indicators you have selected must be gathered, and the results incorporated into reports that communicate the progress (or lack of progress) the community is making toward its objectives. The reports should be distributed to the public, civil society organizations in your community, and individuals in the community government.

There are two distinct but interdependent phases presented in this chapter: collecting data to track indicators, and preparing a sustainability report using those results. Tracking indicators consists primarily of data gathering. Preparing a sustainability report consists of analyzing and interpreting the data and writing coherent descriptions and recommendations that are easily understood by the target audiences. Policy makers are busy and will usually not be able to take the time required to read long columns of data. Further, many people find it difficult to understand raw data. The purpose of gathering indicator data is to enable you to inform the community of progress — and this purpose will not be met unless you draw up and present the messages in an easy-to-understand format.

ACTION STEP
Determine the Reporting Frequency

Before beginning to gather data, the Stakeholder Group should determine a schedule for gathering baseline data and releasing progress reports. The schedule you set will depend on your community's specific needs, resources, and other factors. When Santa Monica's Sustainable City partnership began their effort in 1994, they set a target for gathering baseline data and releasing a report within one year. Thereafter, they would release progress reports every two years. Santa

Monica found that this schedule struck a useful balance — long enough for strategies to have an observable impact, frequent enough to revise strategies if the community was in danger of missing targets. Hamilton, Ontario releases an annual sustainability report. Other communities will want to allow for more time between the periodic updates. Generally, though, you don't want to wait more than five years before making a progress report.

Data should be gathered as frequently as possible within your community's constraints. There are two reasons for this. First, the data required by many sustainability indicators can sometimes be distorted by outside factors — simple measurement errors, for instance. If data are only gathered every five years, any flaws in that sample could suggest a trend that is, in fact, not happening. For this reason, data should be collected more often — perhaps every year or two. This is especially true early in the program, when revisions to goals, strategies and targets will almost certainly prove necessary.

ACTION STEP *Gather Progress Data*

This task of locating and tracking data has already been addressed briefly in the discussion of Indicators (Unit 6). Because of the varied topics for which you will be employing sustainability indicators, and the very specific nature of data gathering, we can only cover the basics here. Your team will need time to learn the specific data collection techniques for your particular indicators. Some helpful hints for places to begin this research are covered below.

Plan Your Data Tracking

The following steps constitute a general approach for gathering data, and will provide an outline for you to begin. The precise nature of your own data gathering will depend on the indicators your community has chosen and on the amount and quality of data being generated by other entities in your country and region.

First, consider each indicator you have identified for your chosen targets. You will already have identified possible data sources in the brainstorming session. Your task now is to establish with certainty whether those suggested sources will actually provide the data required. Each indicator should be assigned to a member of your team, who will then be responsible for contacting the anticipated source, learning what they have, and eventually soliciting the data from them.

The responsibility for each indicator should therefore be assigned to an individual who, if possible, has some contact with the relevant organization or government agency.

Confirm the Data Sources

After the responsibility for tracking each indicator has been delegated, individuals should begin to contact the anticipated data sources. For this purpose, it might be helpful to have an official letter about the sustainable community program. This letter would, of course, refer to the program by whatever name you developed for your campaign. It should include all the members of the stakeholder committee, and be written on city letterhead where appropriate. You don't want to come across as an antagonistic agitator, as some officials may assume, but rather a member of a thoughtful group that includes members of the government and the business community.

Sooner or later, someone will discover that a source where you anticipated find the data will not have it. If this is the case, the individuals you contact can still be useful in directing you toward an agency or organization that does actually have the data you seek.

Finding the data you need is rarely easy, and will sometimes prove impossible. However, there are certain agencies and organizations that tend to be better bets than others when searching for information. Some places that may provide valuable leads include:

- *EarthCAT Online.* Other communities who have used our approach will have stored their data sources in EarthCAT's Indicators and Track Progress sections.
- *Indicator reports from other organizations.* Indicator reports — such as those listed in the Resources section — will tell you where other organizations got their data. Just be sure that the technical elements you seek are included in the reports, and not just referred to in an appendix.
- *Government data compendia.* These would include national, regional and local ministries and agencies such as the environment ministry, police, schools, motor vehicle agencies, etc. These sources should prove a direct source of data.
- *International agencies* that have projects on the ground in your country. These can include development agencies run by individual countries, or multi-national organizations such as the World Bank.
- *Universities.* Researchers and students will sometimes have data you need. You may also be able to interest them in gathering new data as part of a class research project. For example, an environmental science class may be willing to help with air quality sampling.

Overcoming Barriers to Accessing "Public" Data

Some bureaucrats seem to believe that data are meant to go obsolete in obscurity; others believe that outsiders seeking public information must be subversive; and still others believe data is owned by the holder and is available only for a price (whether authorized or not). It will often take innovation, good connections, and persistence to get information, even when you have legal rights to it. Find out whether your country has a Freedom of Information law, and make use of it if need be.

Gathering Original Data

Sometimes, when you cannot locate pre-existing data, you will be forced to choose between abandoning the indicator and deciding to gather your own data. Gathering data, regardless of the variable, will require time and at least some minimal knowledge and expertise in the target subject matter. If you cannot justify investing the resources that gathering your own data would require, you should consider dropping that indicator. If you deem the indicator too important to drop, it may at least be worth postponing gathering that data until you have successfully issued your first report. In this case, you would report that no data were available for that crucial indicator this time around.

Gathering original data may also require appropriate measurement devices or other hardware. This may prompt you to seek out the help of other organizations. Before striking out on your own, it's a good idea to research all the local organizations — governmental or otherwise — that may have interest or expertise in your chosen target area. When considering organizations to approach for advice, think beyond you own local community. Regional, national, and even international NGOs may have programs or contacts that can provide advice or at least a reference document pertinent to your needs. Similarly, regional government offices may have access to information and resources that your local government does not.

Metadata

Metadata is defined as information *about* the information — the who, when, how, and where data were gathered. Regardless of what source provides the data, be certain to get information on when and how they were gathered. This is very important in ensuring that your data can be correctly interpreted, and that your reports will withstand outside scrutiny. Each time somebody gathers data for an indicator they should be sure to gather and record the metadata.

Gather the Data

Once you have determined where the pertinent data reside, make a request for it. Again, you will want to present a letter demonstrating your purpose in asking. Hopefully, the organizations you deal with will provide it without argument. If you meet resistance, there are various approaches you can take. First, be sure you know the law pertaining to government information in your country. Government information is gathered using public funds and should, by all rights, be freely available. Sadly, this often isn't the case in practice. While quoting the law to a reluctant bureaucrat probably isn't the best initial strategy, it can be useful if all other efforts fail. Before resorting to this, it is probably a better strategy to try to get the mayor of your community to make a formal request, or to have them ask a higher-ranking official in the agency in question. If everything else fails, and your country does have a Freedom of Information law, you can assess the usefulness of trying to apply for release of the information through that channel. If it is a private or non-governmental organization that refuses to give you information, you have no recourse but to ask again or to offer to pay for it.

If you have determined that you will have to gather your own data for a given indicator (don't assume this without investigating!) you will need to develop your own methodology for the purpose. Unless your data gathering team includes somebody with experience in this area, you'll probably need to engage an outside expert to guide you. This can be someone in an NGO, government, academia, or perhaps in the private sector. You will generally find that many people will be sufficiently interested in the sustainability effort to be willing to help you think the question through and provide you with some resources to guide your efforts. Before seeking help, determine — at least in a broad sense — what kind of data-gathering approach you need to use. For example, if you will be measuring attitudes and opinions, you will need to find a social scientist who can help you design surveys. If you will be taking water or air quality samples, an environmental scientist would be a better choice.

Record the Results

You can use a worksheet like this to help with the process of recording the data you collect for each of the indicators you are tracking. And once you have the data in hand, have a look at the Track Progress element in EarthCAT Online — this is an easy place to store your tracking data over time.

Data Gathering Worksheet

Target	Indicator	Source	Collection Date	Measurement Data

In order to assess the success of your strategies, you will need to track the indicators over time. As discussed above, gathering data on each indicator every year or every other year after you establish the baseline, if possible, will allow you to most effectively assess the progress being made toward achieving your goals.

ACTION STEP
Prepare a Sustainability Progress Report

Now that you have the results in hand, here's the most interesting part: interpreting the data and publicizing your findings. Remember that each indicator you are tracking has one or more time-specific targets.

There is, of course, no easy step-by-step process to writing a progress report of your community's sustainability program. The task requires careful analysis of the data you have gathered, and clear explication of the conclusions to be drawn. The interpretation of your data will clearly depend on the targets and indicators you are tracking. The conclusions will depend on the nature of your sustainability program — whether it is a partnership involving local government, civil society, academia, and businesses, or a more limited partnership involving a subset of these players (and possibly others).

Earth Charter Principle *#10d. Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.*

Despite the individual nature of each sustainability plan, meaningful reports have a number of traits in common. In general, the report should assess the success of the current program — both in terms of meeting established targets, and regarding its longer term prospects to realize the community vision. All sustainability reports should:

- Analyze the indicators data to convey the pace and extent of progress being made toward targets;
- Assess reasons for successes, or the lack thereof;
- Recommend changes to strategies to keep them on track in meeting community targets;
- Assess whether the body of targets and goals are sufficient to meet the community vision, or whether they need to be revised.

It is important that the report represent a unified voice of the Stakeholder Group. While you will probably choose a smaller committee to draft the report, all of the recommendations should be agreed to by the entire group, and it should be issued with the signatures of each stakeholder who participated in the process.

Generate a Report Outline

An sample outline for a sustainability report is provided below. You can use this as a starting point, adding elements and fleshing out each section as the data becomes available. The document may begin to feel long and unwieldy, but be sure not to eliminate too much background material, because many readers will not have previous knowledge about the sustainability plan.

- **Executive Summary**
- **Introduction:**
  - History of the sustainability plan
  - Participants and contributors
  - Plan elements: Vision, Goals, Targets, Strategies
- **Analysis and Assessment:**
  - Report of progress being made toward the targets and goals using indicators data
  - Assessment of the effectiveness of the strategies
- **Recommendations** for improving the effectiveness of strategies
- **Evaluation** of the adequacy of current goals and targets for meeting community vision and sustainability
- **Technical Appendix**
  - Data and metadata, including an assessment of any data inadequacies

After following all the steps in this workbook, your sustainability report will be a cutting edge document, even if it feels inadequate to you. Your community is now one of a small number that is making an effort to change based on community consensus and transparent governance, backed by high-quality indicators. If you are unable to report on some indicators due to unavailable or incomplete data, or because public officials haven't been forthcoming, that problem should be highlighted. If a number of communities begin to express disappointment with the availability and quality of data, the ministries and departments responsible may feel pressured to improve their data collection.

Remember to Consider your Audiences

Who are the target audiences for the report and its messages? You identified some target audiences at the very beginning of this process. The audiences for this report will often overlap, but the sustainability project, and public reaction to it, may have changed significantly enough that you will want to substantially revise the list. Consider who the main target audiences are and who the secondary audiences are. This will depend to some extent on who has participated in the planning, who has been responsible for most of the implementation, and whether there are any audiences you would like to win over to participate in the future. Some target audiences may include: members of local government, civil society organizations, business leaders, spiritual leaders, media outlets, and the general public. Everybody who has participated in the sustainability effort, certainly, should receive copies.

Analyze Indicators Data

The first step once you have sufficient data in hand is to analyze what the data say about how well the community is doing in its efforts to reach the targets and goals. Specifically, where does the community stand in relation to the targets? Is the rate of progress being made toward the targets sufficient to expect they will be met? What is the pace of progress, and how is this rate changing over time?

Assess Reasons for Successes or Lack of Progress

What accounts for the trends the data present? If progress thus far appears to be insufficient for meeting the target, why is that the case? Also, is there reason, under the current strategy, to expect that the pace of change will increase in the coming years? For example, if a strategy calls for replacing the city's vehicle fleet with alternative-fuel vehicles as they are retired, one wouldn't expect to see significant changes for the first 3 to 7 years. If progress is on track or exceeding expectations, what are the factors that have contributed to this success? Is there a way they can be brought to bear on other strategies that have been less successful thus far?

Recommend Changes to Strategies

Do the strategies for targets that are in danger of not being met need to be revised or expanded? How does the Stakeholder Group recommend that they be changed?

Assess the Adequacy of Community Goals and Targets

Assess whether the targets and goals you have established remain sufficient to meet the community vision. Are trends outside the community's control, or issues that were unforeseen by the community when setting its goals and targets, making them irrelevant in terms of reaching the vision? Stated differently, does it now appear possible that, even if all the targets were met, the vision would remain unattained?

ACTION STEP

Publish and Disseminate the Report

After you have completed your Community Sustainability Report, make sure it is made widely available to all interested parties in your community. Luckily, you will already have done much of the thinking for this step at the very beginning of the process, when you planned a public outreach campaign to launch the project. Update that outreach strategy, using the steps below, to serve as the outreach plan for your Sustainability Progress Report.

➢ **Prepare to Reproduce the Documents**

Before you begin to layout the documents for printing and sign a contract with a printer, you should answer a few preliminary questions. Considering your audiences, should you produce a short promotional report in addition to the longer technical one? Many communities produce both. The short document is meant to be educational, and promotes the sustainability efforts by outlining the program and what it has accomplished in a brief, attractive and approachable format. This allows your community leaders to provide an attractive document that presents the community in a positive light, and can result in goodwill toward the sustainability planning by inviting praise for the leaders and the efforts the are making. A short document will also be cheaper to print than the full report.

In addition, you will want to determine the extent that you can use electronic formats instead of hard copies to disseminate the report to some audiences. Does everyone in your target audience need to receive a hard copy, or can you send some or most recipients an electronic version? Is there a community website to post the report to, or does someone in the Stakeholder Group have the technical skills to produce the report? How many hard copies do you want to hold in reserve in case other interested communities or other officials or individuals request one?

➢ **Layout**

An attractive layout can make an enormous contribution to the aesthetics and readability of your report. Ideally there will be someone in the community who is willing to offer their professional services for free. Otherwise, try to find someone with experience to do this for you. If necessary, do the best you can using a commercial word processing or graphics program.

➢ **Decide How Many Copies**

The number of copies you want to print will be based on the foregoing questions and on cost considerations. If you are printing a short version of the report, you can limit the print run of the technical documents. Sometimes it even makes sense to avoid spending the money on professional printing of the technical document, and photocopy and bind a limited number by hand instead. If you choose this approach, you will be able to spend more of the overall printing budget on the promotional version. Printing costs can vary considerably, so be sure to shop around.

➢ **Get it Out to the Public**

Once again using the launch media strategy as a starting place, you should plan how you will gain media coverage for the release of your report. You want to create broad public awareness of the report and its messages. Customize the key findings of the report into short pieces that contain the most vital information you want each audience to take away. For example, you will want the business community to know that the businesses that participated played a meaningful role by implementing certain activities. If the business community has been mostly skeptical of the process, it may be useful to point out that the projects businesses have undertaken were not expensive and that some, like reducing energy use, may have saved them money. Each stakeholder should play a role in reaching out to their specific community with the message.

For media coverage, be sure to contact the editors of local papers and public television stations well in advance of the report's release, and be prepared to send them a pre-release draft of the report. If necessary, draft a sample story for media use. In addition, prepare a press release and issue it the day the report is released.

Be present at town events. During the release of the report and beyond, be sure to be visible. Hold a booth at festivals where citizens can get the report and information about how they can participate during the process of revising the plan.