



SOME PERSPECTIVES ON INDICATORS OF PROGRESS/PERFORMANCE/SUCCESS/ IMPACT

Tom Wilbanks

Panel on Measuring Success/Performance Measures,
Climate Information Products and Applications Program
Review, Climate Working Group

Broomfield, CO, July 15, 2009

A Great Deal of Interest in Indicators of Problems and Progress toward Resolving Them, e.g.:

- Sustainability indicators:
 - NRC, 1999
 - CENS, current
- Vulnerability indicators: Heinz Center, others
- Resilience indicators: CARRI, NRC/BESR

A Great Deal of Interest in Indicators of Problems and Progress toward Resolving Them:

- Much of this interest is focused on contextual conditions, program priorities rather than program impacts:
 - Indicators of what's going on in the real world
 - What the priorities appear to be for allocating resources
- Generally, the research community is cautious about the development and use of indicators for these purposes:
 - Most indicators are static, while most processes are dynamic
 - Most societal responses show emergent properties: unexpected developments, hard to capture in indicators
 - No one set of indicators is appropriate for all purposes
 - Efforts to define indicators are usually more valuable for stimulating discussion than for developing metrics for program implementation: the process is more important than the product

Metrics for Program Evaluation Are a Different Science/Art:

- The more relevant base of experience is probably efforts to comply with the Government Performance and Results Act (GCPRA), which have taught us some lessons, e.g.:
 - It is easier to measure success in achieving product goals than process goals
 - It is harder to measure program contributions to efforts involving multiple contributors than efforts that can be attributed directly to a single program
 - It is easier to focus on near-term results than long-term results
 - It is risky to define intended results in terms of what a program aspires to do vs. what it is sure it can accomplish
- In other words, measurement approaches often focus on internal metrics related to near-term bureaucratic accountability rather than on outcome or impact metrics related to societal benefit

Metrics for Program Evaluation Are a Different Science/Art:

- The trickiest challenges may be:
 - Avoiding the temptation to fall back to easy-to-measure input metrics, e.g., how many people attended...
 - Finding unambiguous measures of outcomes, e.g., “how many people are using...” (what constitutes “is using”?) or “how many decisions have been improved” (what constitutes improvement? did other factors contribute? might it have happened anyway?) – many program leaders love ambiguity
 - Using metrics to motivate desired program manager behaviors, not just to provide a scorecard
- The aim should be to work back from desired outcomes to measures that motivate those outcomes...