



## **Of, By and For – Realizing the Catalytic Potential of Community-Centered Indicators**

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**Abstract:**

Community-centered indicators (CCI's) place people at the heart of achieving material change in their lives, neighborhoods and regions. Whereas most community indicator projects around the US include residents along with leaders from the various sectors in their agency-driven ventures, CCI's create a seamless relationship between the multiple sectors and the citizens who ultimately must be the drivers of realizing desired outcomes. This paper examines the context in which indicators are effectively used, the nature of communities that learn and the authors' thesis that the authentic value of community measures rests in their being of, by and for the people whose world they ideally reflect. It embraces a clear point of view about the use of data for meaningful social change - e.g. community indicator ventures need to be about far more than simply ensuring "community access to good data." In the spirit of effective citizen democracy, CCI's recognize that authentic learning communities -- where data is selected, applied, reflected and acted upon via effective citizen engagement processes -- are essential to creating and sustaining positive change.

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## **Introduction**

*In the 1990s, a virtual social movement has emerged, focused on community sustainability. . . . While there remain disagreements about how to define, much less to reach, a sustainable society, there seems to be agreement that indicators will play a key role.*

Innes and Booher (1999)

Over the last two decades, a growing number of neighborhoods, communities and regions have begun using a variety of information-based "tools" to help them become healthier, more livable and sustainable communities. In particular, hundreds of communities have developed community indicators, quality of life indicators, community wealth indices, indicators of health and other types of outcome-based measurement systems. Numerous reports have been written and indicators have become a core tool for community improvement processes across the country (and world), cutting across sustainability, quality of life, healthy communities, grassroots neighborhood empowerment and other frameworks for organizing improvement efforts.

While indicators are not new, their development<sup>1</sup> and application at the community level over the past twenty years has characteristics unique from previous phases of indicator development. As noted previously by one of the authors, "This bottom-up approach differs from much previous work done with indicators that was top-down; it represents a new perception of the role of indicators and information in the community. These community indicators efforts are not only about providing information for policy makers but also about empowering and engaging citizens to direct the future of their community."<sup>2</sup>

Why have communities, regions, neighborhoods, organizations and networks expended enormous quantities of financial and human resources to develop sets of indicators? While indicators can be used for a wide range of purposes, the most basic and universal answer is simple - "They know they want the indicators to become part of a public dialogue and somehow to help communities and regions become better at self-management and more self-conscious about the direction they are going. They want the indicators to be influential."<sup>3</sup> And regardless of the specific framework being used or desired outcomes being sought, there is at least one thing in common across these various efforts - people presume that the development and reporting of indicators will help create positive change within their community.

Communities and regions are complex systems containing a wide range of influences coming from many different decisions. Rarely does a single leader or decision-maker control or achieve community outcomes. More often, an accumulation of decisions across various groups, organizations and individuals affects the direction of community or regional change. By shaping the content of information and how it is communicated throughout a community, indicators appear to have potential for changing how decisions

are made. To date, however, the actual impacts indicators are having upon decision-making or "ways of doing things" - i.e., community practices - remains cloudy and contested.<sup>4</sup>

Discussions of indicators as agents for community change need to be complemented by some larger discussion of how indicators "fit" with and support different models for promoting community efficacy. As noted by two observers of past and present efforts to develop indicators, "these efforts . . . have relied on unrealistic expectations and a simplistic model of how information drives policy and public action."<sup>5</sup> Noting that indicators can and do have influence on decision-making, Innes and Booher suggest that:

*The influence came through a much more complex and less observable process than many recognize . . . Indeed, it was not really the indicators themselves or the reports that mattered, but the learning and change that took place during the course of their development and the way the learning led to new shared meanings and changed discourses. This learning and changes in practices, however, was highly contingent on the way information was developed and who was involved.<sup>6</sup>*

Innes and Booher go on to describe lessons from past research and review of indicator efforts that describe when and how indicators have been influential, including:<sup>7</sup>

- Indicators do not drive policy in themselves, but rather influence it through a process of conversion and learning;
- Indicators primary impact occurs through and during the process of developing and discussing them;
- Their influence is felt most through a "collaborative learning process" as those who develop and use them jointly make sense of why the indicators are important, what they mean, and their implications for changes in actions and policies; and
- The full range of anticipated users (i.e., those whose decisions one hopes will be influenced by the indicators) must be involved in the selection, development of and collaborative discussions regarding the meaning of the indicators.

Where indicators have their greatest effect, they are approached as tools for effectively raising questions, providing the basis for people to deliberate, and to help communities come together to develop shared meaning about important issues upon which collaborative action can more effectively be built. It is this "learning and capacity-building" effect of indicator development and use, often viewed as "secondary" or intangible, that we believe to be the most significant and potentially powerful effect of community information systems. From the simultaneous development of shared meaning and stronger networks of caring and trust, action has emerged and been sustained in ways nobody in the project would have predicted. To realize their full potential, the indicators are just one element of a larger set of capacities for community change. They are one piece of a community learning system.

## Communities That Learn

*Learning is a complex process that goes beyond simple acquisition or creation of new knowledge and skills. . . . [L]earning has a transformative aspect, which has to do with understanding values, ideas and pressure from peers that constrain the way we think and act. Learning interactions take place between individuals, sometimes mediated by text or other media. Networks enable people within a community to come together to share their values and interests just as networks operate at regional levels to allow collective learning.*

Kilpatrick (2000)

*An institution that learns while it acts - a reflective institution - will necessarily look different from an institution designed solely to act. In a reflective institution, monitoring and evaluation of activities and projects is not so much a discrete task as a way of thinking which must permeate the structure, philosophy and practices of an institution.*

Dudley and Imbach (1997)

The idea of a "learning organization" has been with us for long enough now that it has become part of the normal set of terms we use to discuss the characteristics and capacities of effective, high-performing private sector companies and public sector agencies<sup>8</sup>. Over the past five years, a few scholars and practitioners have begun to combine the findings and propositions from work in the areas of learning organizations, community capacity, social capital, adult education and adaptive management, and suggest how these have particular relevance for considering why and how some communities seem to be more effective and "high-performing" than others. Specifically, they have begun to identify an emerging set of qualities and characteristics of communities that learn and, as a result, are more effective at adapting to external forces and in shaping their future development path.<sup>9</sup>

Based upon an initial review and synthesis of indicators work around the US and internationally, the authors have identified ten characteristics of a community that learns, including:<sup>10</sup>

### 1. Admitting incomplete knowledge

If one assumes that s/he already knows the answer or has the best approach, or that the "experts" responsible for crafting community policies and plans know how best do address community needs and achieve community goals, learning is unlikely to occur. (Or, the barriers to learning have been raised significantly.) However, when we admit that our communities are very complex systems and that none of us really know the most effective way for achieving our collective well-being, we open ourselves to a new approach to planning and action. Hypotheses within project and strategic planning are made explicit. Plans and strategies are seen as opportunities to test these hypotheses, and to improve community knowledge and shared sense of ownership that can be used to improve future choices and actions.

## 2. Value diversity and engage the whole community.

Once we admit that none of us individually have all the answers, and that all of our decisions can affect the future of our community, then it becomes more apparent that "[e]verybody has a role in the learning and wisdom generating process."<sup>11</sup> Communities that learn create and sustain processes which engage a broad and diverse range of community members, recognizing that every member is both a source of knowledge as well as a potential decision maker who will affect the community's future. "They seek new information and different ideas to add to the local mix of experience and wisdom" and "recognize everyone for their contribution."<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Two-way feedback systems

For learning and change to occur, it is critical that there is a continuous and valued two-way flow of information between community members and community leaders (both formal and informal). Noting that within communities there are thousands of actors whose decisions can and do effect its character and conditions - past, present and future - Innes and Booher suggest that we use not the analogy of a machine but rather an organism "which evolves and changes its direction in response to external events and to its own internal dynamics."<sup>13</sup> Rather than attempt to direct change through a top-down or comprehensive planning intervention, they propose another approach. "Such a system is capable, however, of improving itself in ways we could not predict, but which are more effective than what the most sophisticated analysts could create. Such self-improvement and adaptation however requires feedback - various kinds of information - to flow among the players who make the city what it is."<sup>14</sup>

## 4. Effective networks (or "social capital")

There is much evidence that the presence and strength of networks within communities is a key and perhaps necessary ingredient for effective communities<sup>15</sup>. In the case of community learning, three types of networks all play important roles:

- "Strong ties" among group members (Intra-community)
- "Bridging ties" between different groups and/or between communities
- "Linking ties" between public and private institutions

The presence of trust and reciprocity in all three types of networks facilitates the flow of information, resources and the formation of a sense of connectedness and reciprocity among community members that enable collaborative learning. In addition, they enhance access to the wide range of internal resources available to a community through its various community members, local government and private organizations, as well as the resources (knowledge, \$, etc.) available from other "surrounding" communities. As noted by Kilpatrick:<sup>16</sup>

*The presence of bridging (or 'weak') ties between groups within a community and between communities, and linking ties with public and private institutions, in addition to bonding ties [i.e., intra-community networks], has a positive impact on community sustainability. The right mix of the three kinds of ties strengthens the social capital of the community by giving it an external dimension. This enables the community to deal with internal and external problems or changes through access to a wide range of internal and external knowledge, skills and resources.*

## 5. Collective vision of a desired future

The community has articulated an explicit vision, or shared story, or set of desired outcomes for their future that continues to be referred to and enriched by members as they act. Without such a collectively articulated vision, there is no foundation or point of reference for people and organizations to come together to answer the question "are we better off than we were before?" Inherently, the discussion this question initiates starts with another set of questions: "What does better off mean for us? What do we want are community to be, look and feel like in the future?" While individual organizations and community members can and do learn as they engage in their own improvement efforts, efforts to move from individual to community-level learning requires some agreement on answers to these types of questions.

## 6. Holistic perspectives, specific actions

In their recently released report from the Rockefeller Foundation, Figueroa et al note the necessary synergy between individual and social change (or, to use different terminology, individual and collective learning). As they observe, many individual behavior change programs in the public health field typically are designed to achieve outcomes associated with a single, specific aspect of health (e.g., condom promotion for HIV/AIDS prevention). "As a consequence, some individual behavior change may even be limited to a short duration in time unless other measures are taken to ensure that such changes are institutionalized or self-sustaining."<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, if the focus is only on "social change", the capacity or potential for improvement may increase but there may be little or no actual changes in the health and well-being of individuals. In short, what is needed for sustained change is both individual and collective learning.

In communities that learn, members - individual and organizational - seek to understand the interconnections between their interests, issues and activities and the larger community-level systems and desired outcomes (i.e., "the big picture"), but not at the expense of identifying and taking effective actions that address specific issues or problems. Community learning occurs as people take action and then collectively reflect upon how those actions impact desired outcomes. As we often see in collaborative processes, if the focus remains on the desired outcomes, there results a wonderful vision for the community but with no activity to achieve it (and no "text" for learning). Likewise, if there is only action with no reference back to whether community health and well-being is being

improved, there is a lot of heat being generated but not necessarily being translated to energy that is moving the community in the desired direction.

### 7. Culture of inquiry

In a recent evaluation of an effort to improve the capacity of non-profit organizations through the development and use of performance measurement systems, the reviewers concluded that "establishing these systems alone was not enough. In the end, the project's success had less to do with whether measurement systems were developed and more to do with whether the organizations were able to create a culture that valued the process of self-evaluation."<sup>18</sup> The same can be said for communities as they attempt to develop data warehouses and sophisticated systems for measuring performance. Unless learning and reflection occurs throughout the community - and not just as a "special planning project" or as the responsibility of one agency - the use of the data will be limited as will the resulting learning. As they take action, individuals and organizations across the community need to monitor their own results and share lessons with other community members. Learning from action is valued and rewarded. "Good or bad, learning communities share [and systematically review] the results of projects, actions, and events."<sup>19</sup>

### 8. Take time and make space for collective reflection

As Meg Wheatley notes, "Thinking is the place where intelligent actions begin."<sup>20</sup> Yet, both individually and as a society, we are speeding up our processes and giving ourselves less not more time to think and reflect. Learning - individual, group and community - requires that spaces for reflection exist and that institutions and community members reclaim the necessary time to talk, reflect and share their experiences. "Discussion, dialogue, conflict, and reflection are part of the learning process."<sup>21</sup> Yet each one of these processes, if they are to be positive community-building experiences that facilitate collaborative learning, often must move at a slower pace and within longer timeframes than our current decision-making culture supports.

*If we feel we're changing in ways we don't like, or seeing things in the world that make us feel sorrowful, then we need time to think about this. We need time to think about what we might do and where we might start to change things. We need time to develop clarity and courage. If we want our world to be different, our first act needs to be reclaiming time to think. Nothing will change for the better until we do that.<sup>22</sup>*

### 9. Collaboration and group process skills

An essential component of community (as opposed to individual) learning is "the capacity of individuals to come together and share their knowledge and skills to solve local problems. Partnerships and collaboration in communities mean a wider range of skills are acquired by people, and this enhances community capacity to manage change."<sup>23</sup> If people and groups are unable to bridge their diverse perspectives and experiences, then it

becomes more difficult to imagine how the communication and joint action necessary for community learning will occur.

#### 10. Facilitative leadership developed throughout the community

Recognizing that sustained community change results from the combined behaviors, actions, practices and policies of all the individuals and groups in and serving a community - the notion of where leadership is centered must be expanded. Leadership is distributed, even if unequally, wherever choices are made: in the kitchen, schoolyard, senior center, place of worship etc as well as halls of government and agency board rooms. Tapping the power of shared aspiration, positive choice and caring in every corner of the community is a prerequisite to a healthy community and a healthy democracy.

### **Envisioning the Ideal**

What would an ideal vision of a community learning and performance improvement system look like? What would public agencies, residents, businesses and other community members do and what would it look like? How would data move to meaningful information, and then applied knowledge, and ideally become shared wisdom used to guide effective public, private, non-profit sector policy and practice?

As the "communities movement"<sup>24</sup> has emerged and matured, individual neighborhood and community improvement efforts have begun to develop their own answers to the above questions. As we look across these efforts, we see a complementary and synergistic set of institutions and capacities emerging that form the foundation upon which an effective community learning and performance improvement system can be built.

#### 1) Information Infrastructure

A core element of learning-based community improvement is a system of information that allows community members - both individual and organizational - to track the status of the health and well-being of their community over time, the activities that they and others are taking to improve conditions, and to compare the relationship among and between different sets of outcomes, assets and activities. Components of the information system include a data warehouse containing indicators for community-selected domains embracing the broad definition of health and quality of life for all people and neighborhoods. The warehouse itself is a user-friendly web-based system focused on a range of audiences (e.g., community residents, organizational staff, policymakers) and providing for a range of features enabling users to conduct their own retrieval and analysis of the data in response to their specific questions. The system would also allow for community members to collect and input "their" data, contributing to the overall knowledge basis of the community.

Even if a wide range of relevant data about a particular neighborhood or community exists, it is of limited value unless an equally wide range of community members can both access



and begin the process of transforming data into community information. As noted previously by one of the authors, the capacity to gather information, use information and communicate information to others "together constitute a neighborhood's information capacity."<sup>25</sup> In addition to making the data warehouse "user-friendly," an effective community learning system invests in building the capacity among potential data users to access, collectively make sense of and use data for positive change.

## 2) Collaborative Action Capacity

The ability to access and make collective sense of community data is somewhat akin to being able to retrieve and reach agreement on the meaning of the language and symbols on the map (including your current location). The capacity for collaborative action, however, requires an additional set of abilities: reaching agreement on where you want to go together on the map, developing the means of transportation that will get everyone to the desired destination, agreeing upon the different roles and contributions to the success of the journey of different travelers, etc. Communities with effective learning and improvement systems value and invest in their social capital and civic infrastructure - those collections of "skills, formal and informal processes, practices and networks that communities use to make decisions and solve problems."<sup>26</sup> Central to this effort is the presence of convening or mediating organizations that support the development of credible information, facilitate and create the "safe spaces" for authentic community discussions regarding problems and opportunities for enhancing community well-being, and seek to build the capacity across all community members to participate effectively in collaborative deliberation, planning and action.

## 3) Policy Infrastructure

As noted previously, the accumulation of hundreds or thousands of "routine" decisions made everyday by and within organizations can have profound impacts on community well-being. If the use of community information for collective learning is viewed as somehow separate from the processes that inform these routine decisions, the full potential of the system will not be reached and the traction for effective change lessened. Instead, community learning and performance improvement systems seek to create strong linkages between community and organizational (public, private and non-profit sectors) performance. Organizational commitments to improve community performance are negotiated and leaders and organizations are held accountable to commitments as tracked and trended by the indicators. Organizations and groups use community indicators and resources in their own work to improve performance (internally and with their constituencies), and their subsequent contributions to community well-being are acknowledged and celebrated. Performance evaluation and reward systems - both formal and informal - are adjusted to reflect positive contributions to community outcomes. Over time, as increasing numbers of community members seek to align their efforts with one or more community outcomes, new opportunities for alignment and collaboration across different sectors and organizations emerge naturally as people and groups recognize synergies between their part in contributing to broader community values (even as they

pursue their own interests/agenda) and the complementary efforts of other community actors.

### **Realizing the Catalytic Power of Indicators for Community Learning**

A primary function of indicators is to communicate information about complex systems (in this case, community health, neighborhood vitality, or sustainability) in order to promote decisions and actions that will improve those systems. As outlined above, it appears that a primary mechanism for this is through the learning - both individual and collective - that occurs as community members engage with one another in the various discussions and tasks necessary for selecting, building and using the indicators. Both the process of developing indicators and using them can potentially act as catalysts for learning. However, as we have suggested throughout this paper, indicators and community information systems - regardless of their sophistication and "user-friendliness" - are necessary but insufficient elements of an effective community change process. By themselves, they are just as likely to lead down paths of individual learning and heightened disparities in performance as those people and organizations with capacity to use the information do so to achieve their desired outcomes.

Given the complexity of how communities function and the uncertainty regarding cause-and-effect relationships in the problems they face, communities need to design flexible, resilient systems that seek to engage broader sets of people (a) in sharing and making collective meaning with their knowledge and perspectives, (b) in generating shared hypotheses or "best practices" regarding community improvement strategies, (c) reflecting on and learning from the results of those strategies and (d) adjusting their plans, strategies and practices. While indicators are fundamental components of these systems, we must look to create and sustain the broader sets of capacities for community learning if indicators are to be effective tools for community improvement. We must seek to develop and utilize:

- capacities and systems for collaborative "learning-deciding-acting-reflection-adaptation" cycles within and among community organizations, associations and members;
- institutional structures within the community for convening people and groups across different sectors and provide a neutral place for deliberation, learning, and collaborative problem-solving;
- community data systems that facilitate access to information at time and geographic scales relevant to a wide range of community members; and
- capacities for dialogue and authentic communication within and across the community.

If the promise of our democracy, and the vitality of our communities is to be fully realized – authentic citizen engagement around quality data is a prerequisite, not a panacea. It is but the foundation upon which great additional cooperative work must occur to create healthier, vital and resilient neighborhoods, communities and regions.

## References

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller review of the history of indicator efforts, see Randa Gahin and Chris Paterson, "Community Indicators: Past, Present and Future," *National Civic Review* 90 (Winter 2001), pp. 347-361.

<sup>2</sup> Gahin and Paterson, p. 351

<sup>3</sup> Innes, J. E. and Booher, D.E. *Indicators for Sustainable Communities: A Strategy Building on Complexity Theory and Distributed Intelligence*. Working Paper 99-04. Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California at Berkeley. Sept. 1999, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion of past research on the various aspects of indicator systems, how they are developed and their subsequent impact on decisions, see Gahin and Paterson (2001). For a brief review of some emerging propositions from indicator practitioners regarding their effectiveness, see Chris Paterson, "Community Indicators and Community Learning: An Exploration" (October 2002), [Community Initiatives](#)

<sup>5</sup> Innes and Booher (Sept. 1999), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Innes and Booher, p. 6

<sup>7</sup> Innes and Booher are not the only authors who have sought to review and comment upon those characteristics of past indicator efforts which seem to lead to greater impact. For an introduction to and review of the wider range of literature, see Randa Gahin and Chris Paterson, "Community Indicators: Past, Present and Future," *National Civic Review* v. 90 (Winter 2001), pp. 347-361.

<sup>8</sup> This paper will not seek to discuss the history nor principles embedded within the idea of a learning organization. Although many people have worked to develop this idea and its translation to practice, the early work of Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline*, 1990) remains the foundation for the field and is the referent and point of departure for this discussion.

<sup>9</sup> The following synthesis is based upon a review of the following:

- Ian Falk and Lesley Harrison, "Community Learning and Social Capital: 'just having a little chat'," *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, Vol 50 (1998): 609-627;
- Sue Kilpatrick, "Community Learning and Sustainability: Practice and Policy," Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia Discussion Paper D6/2000, University of Tasmania (2000);
- Allen B. Moore and Rusty Brooks, "Learning Communities and Community Development: Describing the Process," *Learning Communities: International Journal of Adult and Vocational Learning*, Issue 1 (November 2000); 1-15;
- Ron Faris and Wayne Peterson, "Learning-Based Community Development: Lessons Learned for British Columbia," Report to the Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers, Province of British Columbia, Canada (July 2000);
- Eric Dudley and Alejandro Imbach, *Reflective Institutions: Eight Characteristics of Institutions that Encourage and Respond to Learning by Doing*, International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (1997), *An Approach to Assessing Progress Toward Sustainability - Tools and Training Series*;
- Michael Gurstein, "Community Learning, Community Economic Development and the New Economy (DRAFT)," Report to the Community Learning Networks Secretariat, Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources Development Canada (2000);

- Shanna Ratner, "Emerging Issues in Learning Communities," Yellow Wood Associates, Inc. (1997);
- Denis Ralph, "Learning Communities: The Return of Camelot?" Presentation to the Australian National Training Authority National Conference (2000). Accessed at <http://www.premcab.sa.gov.au/lifelong-learning/>.

<sup>10</sup> The following characteristics are similar and complementary to a series of "design principles" for effective community-based partnerships, collaboratives and local improvement efforts. See Tyler Norris, "Civic Gemstones: The Emergent Communities Movement," National Civic Review 90 (Winter 2001)

<sup>11</sup> Allen B. Moore and Rusty Brooks, "Learning Communities and Community Development," Learning Communities: International Journal of Adult and Vocational Learning, v. 1 (2000), p. 11

<sup>12</sup> Moore and Brooks, p. 11

<sup>13</sup> Innes and Booher, p. 6

<sup>14</sup> Innes and Booher, pp. 6-7

<sup>15</sup> Brett Lane and Diane Dorfman, "Strengthening Community Networks: The Basis for Sustainable Community Renewal" (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; June 1997)

<sup>16</sup> Sue Kilpatrick, "Community Learning and Sustainability: Practice and Policy," CRLRA Discussion Paper D6/2000 (2000), p. 4

<sup>17</sup> Maria Elena Figueroa, D. Lawrence Kincaid, Manju Rani, Gary Lewis; Communication for Social Change: An Integrated Model for Measuring the Process and Its Outcomes, Rockefeller Foundation (2002), p. 13

<sup>18</sup> Georgiana Hernandez and Mary Visher, Creating a Culture of Inquiry, James Irvine Foundation (2001), p. 2

<sup>19</sup> Moore and Brooks, p. 12

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Wheatley, "Can We Reclaim Time to Think?" Shambhala Sun (September 2001). Accessed at <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/timetothink.html>

<sup>21</sup> Moore and Brooks, p. 11

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Wheatley, "Can We Reclaim Time to Think?" Shambhala Sun (September 2001). Accessed at <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/timetothink.html>

<sup>23</sup> Sue Kilpatrick, "Community Learning and Sustainability: Practice and Policy," CRLRA Discussion Paper D6/2000 (2000), p. 4

<sup>24</sup> For a fuller description and discussion of a proposed "communities movement, see Norris, "Civic Gemstones: The Emergent Communities Movement," National Civic Review 90 (Winter 2001)

<sup>25</sup> Terri J. Bailey, "Building Community Capacity to Use Information," The Urban Institute (October 1997), p. 1

<sup>26</sup> Civic Index: Measuring Your Community's Civic Health, 2nd Edition, National Civic League, Denver, CO (1999)