

# ecologic

CREATING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



## Indicators of sustainability

### What are they?

Ecologically sustainable development is an ideal. We can chart progress towards this ideal because the conditions for sustainability are measurable. These measurements or indicators provide information to communities on what is sustainable and what is not. A good indicator alerts society to a problem before it gets too bad and helps communities recognise what needs to be done to fix the problem.

Society already has a number of established indicators. However, the indicators we are most familiar with reflect assumptions about the sort of society we want and the values our society reflect. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a traditional indicator, which measures the amount of money being spent in a country. It is generally reported

as a measure of the country's economic wellbeing: the more money being spent, the higher the GDP and the better the overall economic wellbeing is assumed to be. However, because GDP reflects only the amount of economic activity, regardless of the effect of that activity on the community's social and environmental health, GDP can go up when overall community health goes down. For example, when there is a 10-car pile-up on the highway, the GDP goes up because of the money spent on medical fees and repair costs. On the other hand, if 10 people decide not to buy cars and walk to work instead, their individual health and wealth might improve but the GDP goes down.

Sustainability requires an integrated view of the world and its indicators show the links between the economy, environment, and society. Consider

Traditional indicator	Sustainability indicator	Underlying value
Average income	Number of hours of paid employment at the average wage required to support basic needs	What wages can actually buy
Tons of solid waste generated	Percentage of products produced which are durable, repairable, or readily recyclable or compostable	Conservative and cyclical use of materials
Pedestrian deaths	The number of streets that have a footpath on either side of the road	Pedestrian friendly streets

the difference between traditional and sustainable indicators in the table above.

To be effective, indicators need to be quantifiable, not just a vague clue. Indicators are:

- **relevant** – they show you something about the system that you need to know
- **easy to understand** – even by people who are not experts
- **reliable** – you can trust the information that the indicator is providing
- based on **accessible data** – the information is available or can be gathered while there is still time to act.

### How are they used?

Indicators of sustainability are useful to different communities for different reasons. For healthy communities, indicators can help maintain wellbeing by identifying negative trends before they become a problem. For communities with economic, social, or environmental problems, indicators can point the way to a better future. For all communities, indicators can generate discussion among people

with different backgrounds and viewpoints and, in the process, help create a shared vision of what the community should be.

Environmental reporting is achieving more interest locally and internationally. The Environmental Protection Authority of NSW is required to prepare a report on the state of the environment (SoE) every three years. Provisions under the Local Government Act 1993 require municipal councils to prepare a local SoE each year. An Australian SoE report is required every five years. Companies required to prepare annual reports must include details of their performance in relation to environmental regulation. While organisations such as the World Bank are attempting to integrate sustainability concepts into their policies and practices, Australian institutions currently do not routinely provide comprehensive assessments of economic, environmental and economic data.

### Why are they important?

Indicators can help motivate change. They can:

- focus our attention on specific issues
- focus our attention on the goal of sustainability – where do we want to go, have we got there yet?

- promote sustainability
- change people, organisations and communities in the process of creating and maintaining indicators
- provide critical feedback loops
- spread ideas
- combine the new with the familiar

Indicators can also make the concept of long-term and interconnected trends easier to understand. For instance, it might be difficult to measure ‘the quality of life’ in a small town because it is made up of many different things and people might have different opinions on which conditions count most. One simple indicator may be ‘number of people moving into the town’ compared to ‘number moving out.’

Sustainable indicators do not provide solutions to problems. They are only a tool – but an important one to use in achieving a sustainable future. To be really effective, indicators need to be combined with policies, strategies and action plans for change.

### Want to know more?

These websites provide more information.

- [www.Sustainablemeasures.com](http://www.Sustainablemeasures.com)
- [www.context.org/ICLIB/IC37/AtKisson.htm](http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC37/AtKisson.htm)
- [www.iisd.org/](http://www.iisd.org/)  
The International Institute for Sustainable Development

## Activities for students at home and at school

### 1. Rewriting the school report

Each child receives a school report twice a year. Ask the children to write the indicators for their own report.

#### *Step 1*

Investigate the standard school report. Identify the existing indicators on the report and how they work.

#### *Step 2*

Ask the children to imagine the sort of classroom they would like to have and the results they would like to achieve as a group. Data may include the 'look' of the room, the 'feel' of the room (too hot? too cold?), the furniture, whether the children are happy to come to school, where they sit, who they sit next to, whether everyone gets a fair say in the classroom, their marks, other reward systems, the display of artwork, speeches given in class, acts of kindness.

#### *Step 3*

Review the possible indicators. What data is relevant, easy to understand, reliable, based on accessible data, or quantifiable?

#### *Step 4*

Prepare a series of indicators and decide who would collect them and how.

#### *Step 5*

Collect the information.

#### *Step 6*

Review the indicators.

### 2. School environmental management plan

Under the recently released Environmental Education Policy, government schools must develop their own School Environmental Management Plan. This plan requires the use of indicators. Focus on one issue and write three indicators for it. For example, an important issue may be reducing the amount of litter in the playground. Brainstorm the best indicators that would tell the school whether litter had been reduced.

### 3. The local council

All municipal councils must prepare a State of Environment Report (SoE). Write to your local council and ask whether it has prepared a State of Environment Report for your area or something similar.

Ask to see a copy of the report and also request a guest speaker from the Council to talk about the report.

Invite the children to consider what they value about their local area and how they could measure these things.