



Activating Urban Indicators: Fables for Our Time

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Thank you for your kind introduction and good morning ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to be here and a privilege to take part in this workshop.

I feel a bit like Goldilocks walking into the house of the three bears. There's the big bear, UN-HABITAT, with a global responsibility and a commitment to local action that includes monitoring and reporting. That is a big chair to sit in. Then there's the middle-sized bear, the World Association of the Major Metropolises. That chair is pretty big too, representing about 90 metropolises around the world, fresh from an executive meeting in Toronto, reporting to the World Urban Forum through this workshop co-sponsored by its Commission on Indicators for Monitoring and Managing Cities. And then there's our local host, the Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory, from whom a metropolitan planner like me could be tempted to say that that chair could fit comfortably. But I look again – RVu's innovations and reach are dauntingly impressive, and we will see more launched this week. So in your house this morning I shall stay standing thank you very much.

Our three main sponsors bring a high commitment to action on indicators, and to indicators on action: it is up to us to help them meet the workshop's aim of 'driving action through urban indicators.'

That phrase brings two images to mind to me. First, it sounds like an expression of 'driving a horse and buggy' through an argument that may be too loosely constructed, and in the case of urban indicators, that is just what many of those with power over urban development do do. They never let a good fact get in the way. We shall turn later to the question of whether that is because the

indicators and their targets have given them too wide a way through, whether they are clever at steering around the commitments, or even sometimes, as UN HABITAT reports [Moreno 2005], whether they believe that some goals and targets just do not apply to me.

Second, the driving metaphor brings to mind efforts to build dashboards from indicators, high level monitors that might be good for communication but which can lull us into thinking that someone is in the driver's seat. This is one issue we are addressing over the weekend as we see and talk about how people in developing cities rich and poor are attempting to create their own futures, sometimes helped through the use of indicators that link the local to the global. Our global citizens! But here, too, the metaphor of a driver might not be appropriate to urban systems evolving through millions of people's decisions. As Jay Moor [2005] reminds us, 'more than 95 percent of all development decisions are made by members of civil society, each acting more or less in their own self-interest' rather than through the coordinative systems of governance.

I will return to some lessons we are learning from an effort to construct a dashboard for managing metropolitan Melbourne, and to how urban fragmentation, the scourge of us tidy-minded monitors, may just be helpful in some important respects. I confess the lessons we are learning are not very well formed, and disproportionately come from east and south Asia, so I will try to make them more universal as home-made fables, the impressions of a wayfarer.

We are here today all looking for shared learning, among developed and developing cities, between policy makers and analysts, across the divides of our cities, whether the kampongs of Jakarta or the gated suburbs of Florida. We are looking for ways to support the

efforts that the world's monitors of urban performance bring, often in impoverished and difficult conditions, to reaching urban goals, for strength and understanding as we face some of the challenges ahead, and for inspiration when we learn from the case studies are about to see.

Reaching the Millennium Development Goals in their urban settings, including but not only Target 11, *improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020*, is the greatest of these challenges, and should remain our inspiration even as we seek to change the goals from time to time. I'm conscious that much of the discussion in the days ahead will be about that, the means of localising, or urbanising, the MDGs: for us, the crafters of indicators, the makers of monitors, the communicators of urban performance whether welcome or not, this is an opportunity to prepare for next week.

Cities of many boundaries

Cities can be defined by jurisdictions or contiguous development (among other criteria), and that complicates our task. Cities as municipal governments are nested within national or provincial territories and carry responsibilities for subsets of higher-level targets and contribute to them through their defined functions which are different from higher levels of government. Of course in many systems, especially federations, the division of responsibilities is not always very clear. But in most unitary systems as well, urban planning, infrastructure and utility service responsibilities tend to be vested in local or provincial governments. The translation of global and national goals into local action is hitting barriers where the will is lacking but also where the way is less clear. That is a central issue for this World Urban Forum, and not only for developing countries, but deep into the heart of wellbeing of the developed

countries, and there not only because of their responsibility for global partnerships but because the millennium goals apply with equivalent force, including Target 11. In Australia we have been recently shocked into a national debate about the human settlement conditions of remote indigenous people, among the worst in the world by most standards.

The satellite and the chapatti

It is not always sensible to distinguish between high-tech and low-tech means of urban monitoring, nor to associate one with rich cities and the other with poor cities. This can be seen the case of the New Sajay Amar Colony in eastern New Delhi, reporting on their experience with performance measurement, where poor people's own maps of community resources and priorities for the future, determined on the ground through patterns of seeds on sign-posted chapattis, are integrated into a sophisticated public participation GIS [Hoyt et al 2005]. There are like cases of such community-based information systems from cities around the world, as local indicators are aggregated into city-wide patterns, and as local responses to national goals are implemented. The technical capacity in our hands is remarkable, GoogleEarth putting images of almost any neighborhood on earth at our fingertips for example, but the means adequately to engage in sustainable local feedback processes are much more limited. Who will turn indicators to action and complete the cycle of learning by presenting policy makers and law makers with the consequences? Find out in the community-based information systems work this weekend.

Speaking truth to power

Tough, honest urban indicators can be unwelcome news, and its bearers can all too easily be starved of further resources. Even

when the news are not so bad, governments can wind up continuing efforts for ideological or cost-cutting reasons. Too often in lean times the monitoring functions are the first to go. The Victorian government in Australia has set a target for Melbourne of reaching 20 percent of motorised journeys to work by 2020 (low compared with many cities but remember this is a very low density high car-ownership region), and its leaders have the impression that the indicator is rising from 9 percent through 11 percent as energy prices change travel behaviour. But nobody knows for sure, as a previous government outsourced the much of the state's transport survey capacity to one university then another, and as each failed to make money out of it (public universities being as cash-strapped in Australia as elsewhere), they wound up the monitoring centre. Now, expensively, and with gaps in the time series, the government is having to rebuild that capacity. Monitoring urban change should be a core function, not peripheral, for governments responsible for urban development.

Actions versus outcomes

This anecdote of looking behind one indicator is part of an effort to monitor metropolitan Melbourne, which, like Vancouver, is made up of many municipal governments. *Melbourne 2030*, a comprehensive plan driven by goals of urban sustainability, has since 2002 been the subject of a large and generally well-organised program of implementation. A rich website tracks hundreds of actions, some with major resource implications. But there has been no consolidated place to see, in lay terms, whether Melbourne is in fact changing according to the nine directions of the plan; no dashboard. There are elaborate monitoring exercises in various domains, and good ones, but the government and the public up until now aren't easily able to see in one place how the city is

travelling. And this in a city proud of its planning and willing to invest in its monitoring. How much more difficult it is to take the pulse of poorer, more fragmented or more privatised cities.

Actually, a good parallel example is offered by Bogotá's 'How Are We Doing?' monitoring project [Sanchez 2005] and there are some other good examples around the world. The moral of this fable is that we should track outcomes in urban systems and not only the implementation action we take, even when the former is difficult and the means are scarce.

A little fragmentation might be good for you.

The metropolitan plans of cities like Vancouver, Seattle, Portland and Melbourne that compete in the world cup 'most liveable' stakes have much in common, not only because their planners visit one another a lot, but because the plans embody common conventions of good plan-making: urban growth boundaries, compact form, consolidated activity centres, integrated metropolitan transport and utility systems. As someone once responsible for Sydney's metropolitan planning, I was attracted to the vision of urban development and public infrastructure programs that were coordinated, aligned and served the regional plan. Comprehensive, integrated urban plans that drive coordinated services from the centre in a well-staged manner have been features of planning and urban management in developing cities too, but that is not what has happened, nor how developing cities really work, and it may not be how developed cities should work either.

Graham and Marvin [2001] with others argue that the extreme fragmentation of the world's megacities, the infrastructure and local economies of self-reliance and upgrading *in situ*, local entrepreneurship in urban development, patterns of growth with leapfrogging to new peri-urban places – that these create an almost

ungovernable but somehow resilient form that centralised planning and development cannot deliver. And in developed cities too the technology of city building is encouraging decentralisation and local physical autonomy, with opportunities for net zero effluent, package sewerage plants, local water supply, district energy generation, lower costs of urban telecommunications and dispersed employment and travel patterns. Splintered cities create nightmares for urban monitors, but in some ways they might just be more sustainable into the future. And thus in matters of urban form, developed cities might just learn something from developing cities.

Monitoring settlements getting back onto their feet

Meanwhile we can all learn more from slum formation. Natural disasters, civil and military conflict, movement of refugees and breakdown of some functioning states exacerbate poverty and propel temporary urban settlements into continuing slum status. And yet reconstruction efforts in the cities and towns of Sri Lanka, for example, have created improved monitors of urban development and reconstruction that will serve the future well beyond the humanitarian phase of tsunami recovery.

Some things fall through the cracks

Many point out that the localisation of all the MDGs, not just Target 11, requires the development of urban indicators, urban monitoring regimes and programs of action through urban governments. Consensus is needed on patterns of causation to identify points of urban or local leverage so that relevant, if indirect, indicators can be developed. Still, some things fall through the cracks. A global epidemic of deaths from road trauma, mainly urban, and mainly in poor countries, was a spur for the International Year of Road Safety in 2004. But promoting road safety isn't quite health, it isn't quite

transport infrastructure, it isn't quite enforcement and it certainly isn't one of the MDGs. It has no home in most sector classifications. In the absence of unified responsibilities, data on incidents are typically poorly maintained, as villagers grieve road fatalities without reporting, and as ambulance, hospital, police and other data are almost impossible to collate. Also, point-source data or network data can be intrinsically more difficult to maintain than area-based survey data. Yet solutions often have to be local – e.g. eradication of black spots. As economic development brings more motorisation, mainly about urban areas, this global epidemic is displacing most other causes of death, yet we don't really know its full dimensions. Poor local indicators and monitoring are part of that problem.

Policy monitors, meet the policy makers.

Some technical monitors delude us into thinking that urban indicators are relevant to policy. All too often policy advisers and law makers move in quite different circles from the research environments of the designers of monitoring systems. It may be hard for truth to speak to power when power doesn't want to know, but even when government, business and community leaders really do want to know, we are sometimes unable to tell them. It is good for the 'owners' of areas of policy to meet the 'custodians' of data collection and monitoring. Sometimes – dare I say it in this room? – too many resources can go into data gathering and monitoring, on the wrong things, with not enough effort into serving an informed policy process with timely feedback.

Looking for lost keys under the street light

That observation leads to another fable, that of the drunk looking for his lost keys under the light, not because he lost them there but

because that is where the light is. We are tempted to choose some indicators because the data are already there. Of course, there's a trade-off between practicality and relevance, but all too often the former trumps the latter as there are no resources to invest in meaningful indicators, or because senior levels of government might not want to see unfavourable trends. Official statistics that under-enumerate data from slums and informal settlements are common, understandable for reasons of difficulty but nevertheless all too convenient and sometimes bolstering the case against investing in people's own indicators, measurement, reporting and action.

Some things not to learn from Las Vegas

You may recall Robert Venturi and others' 1971 book *Learning from Las Vegas*. It so happens that the city's slogan is 'what happens here, stays here.' We know what they mean by that, but this is precisely the wrong message for us today. Monitoring and reporting city data and city experience, so well undertaken now by the UN HABITAT Global Urban Observatory, the case studies collated for the Dubai Award, and the growing network of RVu's brother and sister observatories all enable a sharing of experience such as we have never had.

The case studies of indicators and action today and tomorrow are good examples of cities that learn from one another, that do not keep their own lessons to themselves. Good indicator design and monitoring help keep the promotional presentations of mayors and other leaders honest, and raise confidence elsewhere in the use of transferable experience.

Don't throw out the old series

Janice Perlman once did a meticulous study on living conditions in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Years later she went back to the

same areas, in some cases the same households, and found that notwithstanding significant improvements to water supply, shelter and the physical conditions of life, other factors like economic insecurity and fear of extortion and violence had risen. In other words, and typically, some indicators had improved and some had not.

Cities can suffer from serial adoption of new monitoring regimes, each starting afresh and ignoring or criticising earlier regimes (especially if under different governments). Those who can patch together useful time series from discontinuous data to monitor a city's change over a long period of time – and professional statisticians are rarely among them, being bred for handling purer data – are worth their weight in gold. On some dimensions cities change slowly, and sponsors of plans and their implementers succeed when they can build long-term constituencies with local citizens and across changes of administration.

Indicators²: who monitors the monitors?

Who monitors the monitors? That is relatively easy to answer – it includes the UN HABITAT Global Urban Observatory and the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and they do a good job. I am sure the proportion of countries with a dedicated monitoring tool such as an urban observatory has risen above the half that Farouk Tebbal reported in 2005. As for our propensity to monitor the monitors, I suppose it goes with the territory: people with aptitudes for measuring and reporting turn their talents to gathering data sets about what their colleagues do too. But seriously to bridge the local and the global that is the only way; and international networks of urban observatories are making a difference now and will make a larger impact in the future. We will see some of that work this weekend. The chances for success

depend in part on the social climate for monitoring information and political conditions, and so building monitoring and reporting capacity, a learning cycle, needs attention at the highest levels.

Turning around the de-activators

Successful advocacy for urban indicators is hard, and following through into action on the results in a sustained way harder still. We must also watch for the wrong signals and help governments in particular make corrections that block action. Take road safety again as an example. Vietnam is not alone having road trauma the main cause of death among young people; and unless we arrest the trend it is rising to be the third cause of death by 2020 among all ages across the world. In Vietnam most such deaths are caused by a lethal combination of motorcycle crashes and failure to wear crash helmets (admittedly not very affordable, perceived as hot as rice cookers and not stylish). So does the national government mandate helmets on all roads? No, only on national highways. They would otherwise face the political risk of obvious non-compliance. And, to get to my point, some in the national government have recently discouraged provincial governments from *their* enforcement action on the grounds that national highways aren't their business. To their credit, Vietnam is planning to take out the first road-safety-only loan from the World Bank, which includes provision for building monitoring and enforcement capability.

A useful example of the national use of indicators used to encourage urban management capacity are the China Development Bank's indices of urban management capacity [Dollar et al 2004]. Looking something like credit ratings, that Bank and the World Bank Institute measured the readiness of cities in China to manage the massive surge of infrastructure and urban development investments

they need to make, going so far as to tie the ratings to domestic loans for urban management capacity development. The rankings of the cities are interesting, and not what one might intuitively expect from a visitor's understanding of the cities.

Other good examples from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are relevant in this context: a useful cities data book, *Urban Indicators for Managing Cities* [Westfall and de Villa eds 2001] with intelligent and practical guidelines for different kinds of indicators; and an honest report on the mixed success of ADB's promotion of City Development Strategies through the region, including urban indicators and performance measurement [ADB 2004].

Good cases of the use of performance indicators in the developing world abound, e.g. in Brazil (Belem, Recife, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador de Bahia), Morocco and Senegal (*villes sans bidonvilles*), South Africa (eThekweni, Ekurhuleni, Tshwane), Tunisia, Swaziland (Mbabane), Tanzania (Dar es Salaam), India (Mumbai), Pakistan (Karachi, Faisalabad, Orangi): so many other places as well. Good examples are multiplying as toolkits like the one from UNDP get used around the world [UNDP 2005]. Today we will also hear of some interesting experience across Canada and beyond.

The best use of urban indicators and monitoring regimes involves government, business and community working together. Some international networks make trisectoralism their hallmark, for example the UN Global Compact Cities Program which I represent here at the conference. In the localisation of MDGs, business has tended to be a weak partner other than through the emergence of local enterprise. This UN program is creating a network of joining cities in which projects are developed to address otherwise-intractable problems in novel ways that involve the three sectors

working together in neutral space, mobilising expertise and leadership and using appropriate indicators.

The MDG campaign must not be lost...

The HABITAT Agenda Process seeks to add value in three ways, through monitoring and advocacy, knowledge sharing, and networking and partnerships. A large part of the effort in localising MDGs is overcoming local lack of awareness of them, a potentially massive communication effort that has a long way to go. As UN HABITAT itself points out [Lopez 2005], different countries have interpreted the status of the MDGs in different ways, in some cases such as to render localisation irrelevant. In the case of target 11, this is even more the case as responsibilities for action lie primarily below the nation state. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and the National Development Strategy Framework papers (depending on whether low or middle income country) have not strongly addressed urban poverty and few have seriously addressed slum upgrading either. Developing clear, robust regimes for measuring and monitoring progress at the urban level, however defined, are necessary parts of that, but the communication and persuasion task goes well beyond what indicator regimes alone can provide.

In Bangalore, before its present boom (which has produced well-publicised problems of its own), feedback over poor public services through rigorously-prepared citizen report cards brought change because they were based on good methodology, their voice was clear and the method was replicatable across India.

Indicators can be fun...

But enough of appropriate indicators, what about inappropriate ones? Perhaps we should have a competition for the silliest indicator, such as the number of alligator sightings in city sewers.

Or for the worst city slogans, like 'keep Austin weird' or for Walla Walla in Washington USA 'the city was so nice they named it twice.'

... and would be even more so if we were succeeding

Developing cities are grappling in so many ways to support and directly implement the MDGs, and it's a job well beyond our scope this weekend to judge how that is going. But Target 11, on the whole, is moving further away. This might sound unfair: there is so much variation among countries and, if all too invisibly, within countries and within urban regions. But as we make headway to improve the lives of 100m people who live in slums, now well defined (in terms of lacking access to improved water, access to improved sanitation, security of tenure, durability of housing or sufficient living area), there are over 800m people in equivalent conditions and another half billion will join them or make new slums by 2020 [Bazoglu 2005], forced to live under everyday conditions so unacceptable by any standard of human dignity. I look forward to learning more from discussion about the appropriateness of setting a numeric indicator for target 11 – as distinct from the percentiles that apply to most other targets – and whether, as upgrades *in situ* over the criteria remove slums by definition, the elimination of slums physically instead can still be defended.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the rich and poor spectrum (we antipodeans don't feel very comfortable with the language of 'north-south', as we politely discourage our northern hemisphere hegemonists from using terms such as a 'summer' conference), developed cities are falling behind on their path to sustainability. I see Canadian and Australian cities, for example, with growing ecological footprints (and they are both high up in the per capita global warming stakes too, Australian cities even worse despite our milder winters). There are excellent monitoring programs for urban

sustainability – witness RVu’s work – but how much progress are we in developed cities really making?

I was tempted to end with a fable that follows the Arab maxim – the dogs bark in the night, but the caravan moves on. And we don’t have to subscribe to James Lovelock’s conclusion that it is too late for a sustainable future and that survival alone should now be our key goal as a species, to agree that the world’s cities are not advancing to sustainability as we normally define it.

But the stories of urban monitoring that activate cities are so powerful, the passion, dedication and integrity of people working in this field so inspiring, the gap between the vision of a world without slums (in the best sense of that phrase) so capable of being bridged in our world rich with talent, understanding and resources – all these lead me to say yes, the dogs will keep on barking, yes, our informed voices should be loud, but we have joined the caravan. Now, over the coming period, let us take indicators to the action, let us lead urban development.

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