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Collaborating with Civil Society: Reflections from Australia

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Collaborating with Civil Society: Reflections from Australia

Jon Hall, David Yencken, Chris Carswell and René Jones

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COLLABORATING WITH CIVIL SOCIETY: REFLECTIONS FROM AUSTRALIA

Jon Hall, David Yencken, Chris Carswell and René Jones[1]

ABSTRACT

There are many reasons why those working on indicator initiatives have an interest in civil society. But two reasons stand out as particularly important. First, representatives from civil society can play a key role in shaping an initiative and are often important users of the indicators themselves. Second, the health of a country's civil society can impact on the progress a nation makes in many areas of economic, social and environmental concern. This paper discusses both aspects, though we focus on the former.

We begin by discussing the role civil society has played in developing three significant, but rather different, indicator initiatives in Australia: the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Measures of Australia's Progress*; the Victorian State Government's *Growing Victoria Together*; and the Tasmanian State Government's *Tasmania Together*. As well as discussing why governments and civil society collaborate, we reflect on the styles of collaboration that work best from both parties' perspectives.

We go on to present material that highlights Australian thinking around indicators of progress in the areas of *social cohesion* and *governance, democracy and citizenship*: areas that are intimately related to the health of our civil society.

Participants in the forum might like to discuss the appropriate level of engagement for civil society organisations in an indicator initiative and how best to ensure that engagement is achieved. They might also like to consider what styles of collaboration are most productive.

1 Jon Hall, Chris Carswell and René Jones are from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. David Yencken is Professor Emeritus at the University of Melbourne, and convenor of the Australian Collaboration.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons why those working on indicator initiatives have an interest in civil society. But two reasons stand out as particularly important. First, representatives from civil society can play a key role in shaping an initiative and are often important users of the indicators themselves. Second, the health of a country's civil society can impact on the progress a nation makes in many areas of economic, social and environmental concern. This paper discusses both aspects, though we focus on the former.

We begin by discussing the role civil society has played in developing three significant, but rather different, indicator initiatives in Australia: the Australian Bureau of Statistic's *Measures of Australia's Progress*; the Victorian State Government's *Growing Victoria Together*; and the Tasmanian State Government's *Tasmania Together*. As well as discussing why governments and civil society collaborate, we reflect on the styles of collaboration that work best from both parties' perspectives. We go on to present material that highlights Australian thinking around indicators of progress in the areas of *social cohesion* and *governance, democracy and citizenship*: areas that are intimately related to the health of our civil society.

1.1 What is 'civil society'?

We should begin by defining what we mean by 'civil society'. Britain's Institute for Development Studies noted, "Definitions of 'civil society' are bewilderingly diverse" (Manor, Robinson and White, 1999). After spending five minutes browsing the web it is clear that many definitions are plain bewildering.

The World Bank's definition is one of the more appealing:

> "the groups and organisations, both formal and informal, which act independently of the state and market, to promote diverse interests in society" (World Bank, 2002).

The London School of Economics' definition provides more detail in a similar vein:

> "*civil society* refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated … Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups." (LSE, 2004).

1.2 Three important Australian indicator initiatives

In recent years, Australia has seen a growing interest in measuring progress, well-being or sustainability. Initiatives have come out of federal, state and local

governments, academia and beyond. We focus on three significant projects in this paper. The initiatives are significant in their size and impact. They make an interesting selection because they differ quite substantially in how they were run and the outcomes they were designed to achieve.

1.2.1 Measures of Australia's Progress

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released the first issue of *Measures of Australia's Progress* (MAP) in 2002. MAP is a facts-based publication that is built around indicators spanning key aspects of Australia's economic, environmental and social progress. It focuses on outcome measures and is designed to inform public debate.

In the foreword to the publication, Dennis Trewin (the Australian Statistician) noted,

> "This publication does not purport to measure every aspect of progress that is important. Nor does it consider all of the many different ways that parts of Australia and groups of Australians are progressing. But it does provide a national summary of many of the most important areas of progress, presenting them in a way which can be quickly understood. MAP will, I hope, inform and stimulate public debate and encourage all Australians to assess the bigger picture when contemplating progress in all its forms." (ABS, 2002).

Although there was a good deal of consultation about MAP's content within government and the community, the ABS took the final decisions about which dimensions of progress to include, and which indicators best measured them.

1.2.2 Tasmania Together

In 1999 the Tasmanian Premier challenged residents to come together to plan the future of the state into the new century. The *Tasmania Together* plan, published by a Tasmanian community leaders group in 2001, sets out a social, environmental and economic plan for Tasmania. It includes clear goals for the state, half of which are benchmarked with indicators that have baseline-data, interim targets and a final target for 2020. The ABS assisted with its statistical development.

The intended outcome is for Tasmania to achieve the goals set in the plan: "through the process of community participation … establish broad goals and specific and concrete benchmarks for the plan, and develop detailed indicators, and an ongoing process, for open, transparent and ongoing measurement of the achievement of the goals." (Salvaris, et al., 1999). Moreover, the initiative might also be viewed as an attempt to embed social capital and community capacity into policy making.

Tasmania Together is a process that reflects — and depends — on the collaborative and collective actions of civil society, business and government. A board has responsibility for monitoring the plan's progress. It is an independent statutory authority and has made three reports direct to parliament, and through parliament, to

the people of Tasmania. Government has a particular interest in the reports, because budgets and policies are linked to the plan. Civil society is keenly interested too, because the plan reflects both the aspirations of, and contributions from, the Tasmanian people.

1.2.3 Growing Victoria Together

In 2001, the Hon. Steve Bracks M.P., Premier of Victoria, launched *Growing Victoria Together* (GVT), a document that expresses a broad vision for the future of Victoria through a list of goals and priority actions. This Victorian State Government document also lists indicators and targets that will be used to demonstrate progress towards the articulated goals.

GVT has its origins in the public policy environment of 2000. The initiative aimed to develop policy that integrated the economic, social and environmental; and draw upon the knowledge within civil society to formulate and implement policy. It aims both to communicate the Victorian Government's priorities to the public, and to help the public sector deliver a whole of government approach.

Like *Tasmania Together* and MAP, GVT is a 'live' initiative. The first publication made clear that "the priority actions and measures of progress will continue to be developed to ensure that they are responsive to community concerns". A second, updated version of GVT is being prepared. This version will be based on input from Ministers, all departments and research into community attitudes. The updates are likely to focus on re-examining the issues and measures covered in GVT; and improving the way government works at all levels to achieve the GVT outcomes.

2. CIVIL SOCIETY'S ROLE IN DEVELOPING AUSTRALIAN INDICATOR INITIATIVES

Section 1 described the background to three significant Australian indicator initiatives. Each project differed in purpose, and each project had a different approach to collaborating with civil society. This section describes those approaches.

2.1 Measures of Australia's Progress

The ABS began work on the MAP project in early 2000, with the first issue of the publication released in April 2002. Most of 2000 and 2001 was spent developing and discussing the thinking around progress and its measurement — rather than preparing the actual document *per se*. The publication itself took about six months to write, peer review and publish. The consultation around its development took nearly two years.

Before and during MAP's development a range of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) had called for new and better measures of progress to supplement Gross Domestic Product. In the mid-1990s the ABS began discussions with academics, scientists and policy makers about ways to measure progress. And in 1997 the ABS co-sponsored an important conference 'Measuring National Progress: Is Life in Australia Getting Better, or Worse?', the proceedings of which were published (Eckersley, 1998). Another notable call came from the Australian Collaboration, (a group of major national non-governmental organisation peak bodies) in 2001. Section 3 of this paper talks in more detail about the work of the Collaboration.

2.1.1 Strengths and weaknesses of the ABS approach

Progress is a nebulous, subjective and potentially controversial topic for a national statistical agency to try to measure. And so, at the beginning of the MAP project, the ABS recognised a need to consult very widely within and outside government. Those consultations needed to take account of the views of civil society if the publication was to resonate with a broad Australian audience.

The ABS is fortunate in having comprehensive links with civil society. The ABS has a systematic program for consulting users of statistics. Through this program, hundreds of government agencies, academic researchers, businesses and business councils, community organisations and individual Australians have told the ABS what they think it is important that it measures. And so, during the design of MAP, the selection of progress dimensions and indicators were guided by past and current ABS consultations. The choices were tested through several further rounds of consultation undertaken specifically for MAP (and 20 or so members of CSOs attended those consultations). The final choice of indicators was made by the ABS after taking account of the full spectrum of views.

The ABS invited a small group of external advisors to sit on an 'expert reference group' to inform MAP's development and provide a sounding board for ABS ideas. This group comprised several academics, a scientist and the heads of two prominent civil society organisations: the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) — "the peak council of the community services and welfare sector and the national voice for the needs of people affected by poverty and inequality" (ACOSS, 2003) — and the Australia Institute — an independent public policy research centre, "concerned about the impact on Australian society of the priority given to a narrow definition of economic efficiency over community, environmental and ethical considerations in public and private decision making" (Australia Institute, 2004).

The group met three times, and played several roles. Individually, their expertise in several areas with which the ABS was less familiar helped guide the selection of indicators and potential sources of non-ABS data that could be used to populate those indicators. Collectively, their diverse backgrounds helped ensure that the ABS view of progress was palatable to a broad cross-section of Australia. And, almost as important as the advice they provided, their involvement in the process of developing MAP helped to ensure that they supported the final publication. The group's links with civil society meant that they were able to draw on wide range of opinions when commenting on the MAP project. These links also helped to ensure that news of the MAP project was passed back to civil society who became increasingly interested.

There was, however, at least one weakness to the ABS approach that on reflection might have been avoided. It involves the importance of perception: perception around the role of, and perceived bias in the expert group, even though the Australian Statistician made the final choices on dimensions and indicators.

Some dimensions of progress attract more debate than others. There is, for example, a good deal of discussion about what changes in the distribution of income mean *vis-à-vis* progress. Some people equate a move to a more equal distribution of income with progress. Others feel that progress is achieved if people are earning more on average, even if the distribution of income widens. It is important that those designing an indicator initiative are aware of these areas of potential controversy and make a special effort to consult with people of all persuasions. Simply relying on responses to invitations to public consultations and the like might not be enough. And so an organization might need to go out of its way to ensure that sufficiently diverse viewpoints are represented when it consults stakeholders.

Nearly all of the coverage about MAP has been favourable. But the first issue attracted one quite prominent critic from Australia's Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), a leading independent public-policy think tank that is "actively engaged in support of a free enterprise economy and a free society under limited government where

individuals can prosper and fully develop their talents" (CIS, 2004). The CIS is an organization that fits within our definition of 'civil society'.

The critic claimed that the ABS had fallen unwitting victim to a broadly green and left wing agenda (Saunders, 2002). He cited a number of pieces of evidence to back up his claims, including "The ABS selected its indicators on the advice of a 'panel of experts' whose composition was skewed towards people concerned with environmental and/or social inequality issues." (Saunders, 2002).

Could the ABS have avoided this criticism? Perhaps not. But with hindsight a couple of actions might have tempered it. First, the critic may have thought that the expert group had more control in the selection of indicators than they actually did. If the ABS had been more explicit about the group's role in developing the publication, some criticism might have been avoided. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the ABS might have thought more carefully about the perceived balance of the group's political persuasions. Members were selected for their expertise in measuring progress, or aspects thereof: the ABS didn't take account of the overall balance of political views among the group, or the perception thereof. It might have been both politic and useful to the publication's development to have ensured the full political spectrum was perceived to have been better covered by the group.

2.2 Tasmania Together

Tasmania Together describes itself as a people's plan based on shared ideas and dreams. Civil society has had — and continues to have — a very significant role in its development. Although all the major political parties contributed, the initiative engaged the community from the outset. *Tasmania Together* wanted to generate a plan that extended beyond the government of the day to include input from civil society. And that input went beyond the planning phase to encompass the implementation and achievement of long-term policy objectives. The involvement of civil society is critical to the success of *Tasmania Together* — in both its development and achievement. *Tasmania Together* requires collaboration among all sectors of the community to achieve its goals and benchmarks. It also sits outside the electoral process.

When the initiative began, a public nomination process led to the appointment of 22 community-based people (the leaders group) who led the plan's development. A conference in 1999, conducted by the leaders group and involving 60 other members of the Tasmanian community, drafted a vision statement. The consultation on the draft plan included 60 community forums and consulted 100 community organisations. A database recorded the views presented at forums, along with 679 responses to an attitudinal survey; 4,000 comments about particular goals; 2,500 postcard responses from householders; 6,200 web-forum messages; and 160 detailed

written submissions from business, not-for-profit organisations and individuals. Results from the database were analysed, and published in October 2000. They provided a solid foundation for the plan.

The community leaders group formed benchmarking committees to cover the broad domains of community, economy, governance, culture, sustainable development and nature conservation. Members were drawn from peak business and labour organisations, community groups and interested individuals. The benchmarking process prepared concrete *standards* that reflected the goals of the plan; selected *indicators* to evaluate progress; and set the interim *targets* required to achieve the Year 2020 goals. The initiative also depends on community involvement to achieve those goals.

2.2.1 Strengths and weaknesses of the Tasmanian approach

The *Tasmania Together* plan was developed after extensive community consultation at every stage. Engaging the community in broad-based planning helped to ensure the indicator set reflects progress towards the community's aspirations: the plan provided an opportunity for all Tasmanians to discuss the state's future. The goals and benchmarks of the plan can be linked directly to the issues raised in the community consultation, and the target setting exercise involved representatives from the government (state and local), business and community sectors. The plan offers common ground for partnerships between civil society and government to meet the benchmark targets. The government has aligned budget processes with the plan and made provision for regular reports to the community on progress.

Civil society has been able to use the profile of benchmarks and indicator reporting to support funding applications and proposals for policy change. One indicator — whose goal calls for an end to clear-felling old-growth forest by 2010 — has generated a particularly large amount of debate. This is one of only three indicators (all environmental) about which there was no consensus when the plan was published, reflecting the apparently irreconcilable social and nature conservation values that surround native forest use in Tasmania. People debate both the way in which civil society contributed to the development of the benchmark, and the likely outcomes of policy to meet the target.

The Tasmania Together Progress Board continues to engage civil society in partnerships and forums to help achieve the benchmarks and long-term goals. Five-yearly reviews involving community consultation will be conducted to update and refine the goals and benchmarks. But, despite what, by most reckoning, was an exceptional amount of consultation, the Board recognize that some sectors and individuals did not have sufficient input to the plan. The plan does not include issues specifically relevant to people with disabilities, older Tasmanians, families with very

young children, and sport and recreation participants. This will be addressed. Moreover, the issues that were of greatest concern to the Tasmanian community in 2001 are not identical to those of 2004. Housing affordability has emerged as a significant topic, now rivaling the prominence given to unemployment (unemployment has declined sharply in recent years).

Community involvement has to be a continuing commitment if indicators are to remain relevant, and this is reflected in legislation that provides a mechanism to amend, delete or add to the goals and benchmarks to reflect changes in community aspirations. This can be done at any time, but the legislation requires reviews every five years and stipulates public consultation. It is important, though, to recognize that while some things could have been done differently, a different approach would have had costs as well as benefits. Broader or more frequent community input would have cost time and money.

2.3 Growing Victoria Together

Civil society had a much more limited role in designing GVT than it had in *Tasmania Together*, reflecting the two initiatives' very different purposes. *Tasmania Together* allowed the community to set the state's goals and monitor progress towards them. *Growing Victoria Together* was designed by government to set government direction: one of its primary aims was to encourage government departments to work better together when tackling crosscutting issues of concern.

Civil society was involved early in the initiative's life. Consultation was broad and included community forums, policy summits and round table discussions between the government and a range of people from civil society including trade unionists and those with an interest in social and environmental concerns. In March 2000 the Growing Victoria Together summit, chaired by former Prime Minister Bob Hawke, brought together 100 participants from business, unions, community organisations and local government.

In November 2001 the Premier launched the GVT document. It set out the Victorian Government's vision for the medium-term (5–10 years), balancing the government's economic, social and environmental responsibilities through a triple bottom line approach.

2.3.1 Strengths and weaknesses of the Victorian approach

One important determinant of civil society's role in GVT was the balance the Victorian Government decided to strike between 'top down' and 'bottom up' direction setting. There have been various Australian and international experiments in developing integrated, whole of government strategies and progress measures. These range from centrally managed models, to highly decentralised community consultation initiatives

(such as *Tasmania Together*). GVT took a middle path. It drew on an extensive consultation but did not establish an ongoing community consultation process. As a result, GVT's main engagement with civil society has been to communicate the government's priorities to Victorians.

One potential weakness of the initiative is a lack of 'buy-in' from communities and line departments. Most community input into the measures has come from research into community attitudes. While this provides useful insight into the pulse of a community, it doesn't generate a high degree of ownership.

If communities fail to give adequate support to an initiative it is, perhaps, not unsurprising that government departments are less enthusiastic than they might be. Evert Lindquist, from Canada's University of Victoria, has argued that whole of government approaches are most enthusiastically implemented when they have the support of voters. But voters are unlikely to care greatly about whole of government policy formulation and delivery *per se*. Rather, they are concerned with the tangible outcomes of better policy making and delivery, outcomes that can be proven through indicator initiatives. But that proof is not particularly useful if the public isn't aware — or supportive — of the indicators. Perhaps the tension between the document's two aims — communicating government priorities to the public, and a tool to drive public sector performance and management towards more joined-up government — is difficult to overcome. To overcome this potential problem and get buy-in, the Victorian Government see the future challenges for GVT include: strengthening planning and delivery on whole-of-government issues and improving performance information, management and reporting; delivering and communicate positive outcomes on important issues; and improving community and stakeholder engagement.

3. THE VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE: SOME REFLECTIONS FROM DAVID YENCKEN ON CIVIL SOCIETY'S PERSPECTIVE

Community groups take a vital interest in monitoring and reporting regimes.

They put great store on regular, comprehensive and independent reporting of social, cultural, environmental and economic conditions and trends. One illustration is the work of the Australian Collaboration. The Australian Collaboration is a collaboration of seven of the most influential national community organisations in Australia. When the Collaboration first came into being in July 2000, the heads of the various member bodies met to consider what it should first do. The Steering Committee decided to prepare a report on social and environmental issues facing the nation and what should be done about them. This was eventually published as *A Just and Sustainable Australia* (Yencken and Porter, 2001). Significantly, the Collaboration also determined to prepare a report on monitoring and reporting regimes at all levels of government and across all sectors. This was eventually published as *Where are we going: Social, cultural, environmental and economic reporting* (Yencken, 2001).

Why the interest in monitoring and reporting? In its report the Collaboration argued that without good reporting, key trends aren't known to citizens and their governments and there is an inadequate basis for decision-making. Where reporting regimes are well-established, trends and issues are given media attention, and they are kept in the forefront of the consciousness of citizens. In this way they gain standing in public opinion and in political debates. These are the essential preludes to action. Where reporting is poor or non-existent, issues are buried, neglected by the media and given scant attention by politicians.

Of particular concern to community organizations such as the Australian Collaboration is unbalanced reporting since, by weighting some forms of human activity highly and ignoring or paying insufficient attention to others, the community remains poorly informed and policy is distorted. In Australia as in other countries there are long established regimes for reporting economic conditions and trends. Only recently have state-of-the-environment reporting programs been established. While there is a well-developed national program and regimes of some kind in all States and Territories, they are hampered by inadequate funding. Full independence for the reporting bodies is also the exception rather that the norm. Full independence requires the establishment of a Commissioner, Commission or other body appointed by statute and dedicated staff reporting directly to the Commissioner or Commission rather than to a host department.[2]

2 Although not a commission per se, the Australian State of Environment Committee operates under a legislative provision which ensures that it operates independently of the government of the day. The Australian Statistician has been appointed to the last two Committees to reinforce this independence.

By far the greatest deficiency is social reporting. There are now long-term studies under way such as the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children, but there is no independent national body equivalent to the Australian State of the Environment Committee charged with overall social monitoring and reporting. As a consequence, there is not a strategic understanding of, and approach to, poverty and disadvantage in Australia.

Another groundswell of community and expert concern has related to the use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the standard summary measure of progress, despite its many distortions of social and environmental progress. Dennis Trewin the Australian Statistician's response was immediate. The options for him were to use another summary measure such as the Genuine Progress Indicator or to take a different course. He judged that the Genuine Progress Indicator had too many subjective components. His solution was to prepare a composite list of separate social, environmental and economic indices of progress as is described in the discussion of the MAP project in this paper.

From the perspective of an academic and head of a group of community organizations, the model had two attractions. The first was that Australia at last had a full set of indicators that put the social and environmental conditions and trends on an equal footing with economic indicators and forced attention to be paid to them. The second attraction of the model was the way it was developed. The overall consultative approach has already been described. Small working meetings formed part of that consultation. Those who had previously shown an active interest in reporting regimes were invited to take part in discussions about the way the indicators might be developed. Later when the Bureau of Statistics wanted feedback about the first edition of MAP and ideas about the development of a strong conceptual framework for the choice of the individual indicators, the absence of which had been a criticism of the first edition, the ABS hosted a workshop of experts.

Although the detailed work on the MAP program had been done by others, in each instance the Australian Statistician was present and thus able to hear the view of the advisory group personally. Thus when radical ideas about the framework were put forward he did not hear about them second or third hand. There was, furthermore, great openness and willingness to listen from all the Bureau staff. When therefore the proposal for the new framework was jointly developed by the original proposer (an external member of the advisory committee) and the manager of the MAP project, despite objections to it, there was a fertile environment for its adoption.

Membership of an advisory body to government can be a very frustrating experience. All too often the views of the advisory body are ignored. Often they are seen to be too adventurous. This is particularly a problem with middle management in bureaucracies

when they are uncertain about the views of the head of the department or agency or the minister. Hence the great importance of leadership and the openness of the institutional environment in which government employees work. In passing, it is a reason why monitoring and review tasks are best done by statutory bodies. The way expert consultation for the MAP project was carried out was exemplary. This is to put a somewhat different perspective on the so-called failings of the expert consultation program reported earlier in this paper. It is true that there were attacks on the Bureau for, as it was claimed, exceeding its mandate, listening to too many so called 'greenies and lefties' and including indicators for which there was inadequate statistical validity. These attacks were, however, nonsensical. No person on any of the advisory committees had any other motive than the most accurate description of environmental, social and economic trends in Australia. Even if any one had had an ulterior ideological motive, a national statistical agency would have given such attitudes short shift.

The Bureau acted carefully and responsibly to ensure that the prominent and influential critic and others like him were fully consulted the second time round. An important concession was made. The indicators were no longer presented under the title *Measuring Australia's Progress* but under the title *Measures of Australia's Progress*. Readers of the document were therefore left to make their own choices about the measures that that they thought mattered.

The best initiatives, and MAP is an outstanding and widely praised one, usually require courage and risk. Smart operators also know how important it is to respond quickly and effectively to any criticism. The Australian Statistician and the managers of the program had the courage and took the risk and then acted quickly to deal with them. This is an example of expert public consultation. There are many other forms of public consultation and participation which there is no space to explore in this paper. Suffice it to say that public consultation by government bodies is a very complex matter and that it can be done for many different reasons and in many different ways. There are rules of thumb that need to be recognized. They include that the smaller the group of people involved the less representative it will be, that there is unequal opportunity to participate for reasons of access, education, confidence and the like and that consultation without genuine commitment to listen and respond is quite counterproductive. The MAP consultation served its purpose well and produced a good outcome. A different project might need an entirely different approach.

4. LESSONS IN COLLABORATION

4.1 The benefits of collaboration

There are many reasons why government and civil society collaborate on indicator initiatives.

From civil society's perspective, the benefits of collaborating on an indicator initiative include having a structured conversation about how progress (or well-being etc.) should be measured. Such conversations, lead — almost inevitably — to a discussion about what progress actually means; that is, people begin to get a clearer understanding of what progress amounts (or should amount) too. This benefit potentially goes much wider than the indicator initiative itself.

First, a publication can provide an important reference document. The information within MAP has helped inform debate within civil society. Indicators in *Tasmania Together* have provided civil society with the facts and platform to advance particular causes. And second, indicator initiatives often influence — directly or indirectly — government policy. *Tasmania Together* set out to provide a framework to guide government policy. *Growing Victoria Together* sought to promote inter-governmental cooperation to better achieve key outcomes. And MAP was influential (both directly and indirectly) on policy-maker's thinking. In each case, civil society had a vital interest in the initiative, because civil society is (nearly) always particularly concerned with government policy.

From a government, or statistical agency, point of view, the benefits from collaborating with civil society include tapping into some of the nation's leading thinkers and experts who often seem to be involved with civil society organisations (CSOs). Collaborating with them provides access to their skills, knowledge and resources. Moreover, when trying to understand and measure something as nebulous as progress it is important to recognise that there are many ways to look at the world. Understanding the opinions of civil society organisations can help ensure that the indicators do not reflect the potentially narrow viewpoint of the statistician or bureaucrat.

Working alongside CSOs can foster a wider level of ownership and support for a project, which can help to ensure it achieves its outcomes. And collaboration with CSOs can help ensure that the publication is promoted and reaches its intended audience. And, finally, projects like MAP need to evolve as views or thinking about progress change. CSOs can provide a source of inspiration and information on ways in which a publication should improve.

4.2 Successful mechanisms for collaboration

We have demonstrated that there are often good reasons for collaboration between government and civil society. But what things help to ensure that that collaboration works well? It is wise to pay attention to the choice of collaborators, the pace of collaboration and the ways in which collaborators interact.

4.2.1 Choice of collaborators

Collaboration on an indicator initiative can take many forms. Many initiatives undergo some form of public consultation. These are useful in many ways: as a source of ideas; a way to foster support; a means to promote the initiative; and a way to defend the initiative against accusations of bias. It is important though, that such consultations, even if not truly 'public', seek the views of a broad range of stakeholders. Simply relying on an open invitation may not attract a particularly diverse audience, and care should be taken to ensure that a range of opinions and population groups are involved. *Tasmania Together*, for instance, undertook a massive consultation exercise. But still there is evidence that some stakeholders — such as the elderly, disabled or those with young children — were not well represented (it is perhaps not a coincidence that these groups are among those least able to have attended open consultation sessions).

The diversity of collaborators is particularly important if an indicator initiative appoints — as with the MAP project — some sort of *expert group* to help guide the publication. Such a group provides most benefit when its combined membership provides expertise across a range of aspects of progress and a diversity of backgrounds and political philosophy. And finally, as the ABS found, the perception of the style and diversity of consultation is important too.

4.2.2 Pace of collaboration

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the pace of collaboration can be a significant determinant of success. The speed of an initiative's development should depend on many factors, such as the diversity of stakeholders, the political environment, and the complexity of the topic. But, because the process of collaborating can inculcate a sense of ownership of in a project, it shouldn't be rushed. We're aware of initiatives that have foundered because consultation and collaboration was initiated too late in the piece or undertaken too quickly. That said, consultation on a prototype version can provide a more focused discussion than something more open-ended. Moreover, one needs to guard against over consultation, which is expensive, can lead to stakeholder 'fatigue', and create frustrations that a project is stagnating.

4.2.3 Interaction between collaborators

Many of the *dos and don'ts* that determine the effectiveness of collaboration between government and civil society apply equally to successful relationships. In successful collaborations, government and civil society listen to one another; are open to new ideas and act on them; and understand the wider systems in which their partners operate. These facets in turn help build a shared trust. And when collaborators feel they have genuine influence over an initiative, they bring a greater energy and enthusiasm to the collaboration.

A useful handbook is the OECD's *Citizens as Partners: A handbook on consultation and public participation in policy making* (OECD, 2001). It discusses ten tips for government officials wanting to strengthen government–citizens relationships (see Appendix A).

Finally, it is important to recognise, that collaboration should be ongoing. Issues important to indicator initiatives change over time, and continued collaboration can ensure that such issues are recognised and measured as they arise.

5. MEASURING PROGRESS: THE STRENGTH AND HEALTH OF CIVIL SOCIETY

This paper is primarily about the ways in which government and civil society can best collaborate to develop indicator initiatives. But it also provides an opportunity to discuss current thinking in Australia around measuring the contribution civil society makes to national progress.

In recent years, the ABS and others in Australia have begun to pay more attention to understanding and measuring the impact that civil society has on the quality of national life. It is an area of statistics that is still in its formative years. ABS work has not focused on the role of civil society per se, but it has touched on key aspects of civil society: most notably *social capital*, *social cohesion* and *governance, democracy and citizenship*. Both the *Tasmania Together* project and the Victorian Government have worked in this area too.

5.1 The ABS social capital framework

Considerable ABS effort has been focused on social capital. Social capital can potentially make a positive contribution to outcomes in diverse areas of social concern such as health, community safety and education. This has led to a demand for statistics that measure the concept of social capital, and that can be applied to policy development and research. There is a strong interest in understanding the links between social capital and why some communities adapt better to change than others, why some communities are able to do better with a given set of resources, and what influences community confidence in achieving goals. The ABS has produced a conceptual framework, in which dimensions of social capital have been defined and described, and possible indicators suggested for each element (ABS, 2004a). The ABS has chosen to use the OECD definition to guide work on the development of measures of social capital: "networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or among groups".

5.2 Measures of Australia's Progress

The second and latest issue of MAP (ABS, 2004b) includes statistics and commentary around two dimensions of progress closely linked to the health of Australian civil society: *Family, community and social cohesion* and *Democracy, governance and citizenship*.

These sections were among the more difficult parts of MAP to write. The difficulty stemmed in part from the paucity of available data with which to measure aspects of the dimensions. But, more importantly, there appears little consensus around the relationship of these areas to progress: that lack of consensus made it quite difficult

for the ABS to select indicators that were unambiguous measures of progress (i.e. measures which (almost) everyone would agree reflect progress).

Moreover, the area is sometimes shrouded by impenetrable academic language that can hinder understanding by the general reader. MAP tries to present information about key aspects of progress in an accessible way, and one that resonates with a general readership. Terms like social attachment, social capital and even social cohesion and civil society are quite poorly understood, but there seem few 'plain English' alternatives that might be used to describe these quite difficult concepts in a way which the public might identify with.

5.2.1 MAP: Family, community and social cohesion

The 2002 issue of MAP included a dimension entitled 'Social attachment' that included indicators of people's participation in social events, along with information about marriage, divorce and suicide rates. This was one of the more experimental sections in MAP, and the ABS recognised that future editions would be informed by the growing ABS and international work on social capital.

By the time the second issue of MAP was released in 2004, the ABS social capital framework had been published. MAP 2004 built on this work to describe progress in a dimension entitled *Family, community and social cohesion*. MAP moved away from the term *social attachment* because few readers seemed to understand it. MAP adopted *social cohesion* as its focus because — conceptually — it covered both social capital and social exclusion.

The commentary presents indicators of aspects of family and community life in Australia, particularly those that are important to social cohesion. The discussion covered two broad areas: *families and family functioning*, and *community support*.

Indicators include the proportion of adults undertaking voluntary work, and donations to charity. Appendix B.1 includes some more information.

5.2.2 MAP: Democracy, governance and citizenship

Another section of MAP relevant to civil society is a progress dimension entitled *Democracy, governance and citizenship*. Again, this was new territory for the ABS. MAP 2002 simply noted the importance of the area, and said the ABS hoped to develop this section in future editions of the publication. MAP 2004 includes four pages of indicators and commentary.

The Bureau's starting point for the commentary was a framework for democracy assessment developed by the Swedish-based Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2004). But the ABS commentary did not cover every aspect of progress in the *governance, citizenship and democracy* dimension: "The discussion

that follows needs to be read with some qualification. It is not intended as a comprehensive discussion of all the elements of democracy set out in the IDEA framework (partly because data are not available for some elements, and others are not regarded as significant issues for Australia). It is intended only to illustrate some issues where reasonably good data already exist; it does not imply that these issues have a higher priority than others not discussed. Issues such as corruption in public life, and the availability of social and economic rights are also important" (ABS, 2004b).

The commentary covers nationhood and citizenship; political participation; and civil society and civic participation. Appendix B.2 includes some more information.

5.3 Tasmania Together's indicators of community and democracy

Several of *Tasmania Together's* goals identify key roles for civil society's contribution to Tasmania's progress. Relevant goals from the plan include recognising and valuing the contributions of volunteers and unpaid workers; increasing the participation of young people in community groups; and providing more opportunity to participate in decision-making. Benchmarks and indicators have been set up to measure progress in these areas.

5.4 The Victorian State Government's indicators of community strength

The Victorian State Government has also undertaken work in the area of social capital/cohesion and produced indicators of community strength. The Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) considers that "a strong community is one constituted by people that understand its social, economic and environmental assets and are working towards sustainability … [and that] to do these things, members of a strong community need to engaged, feel involved, feel capable of working through issues and be supported through external partnerships" (DVC, 2004).

The DVC has developed an outcomes framework "based on research that has shown successful community strengthening strategies deliver benefits to communities in three ways: *improved services*, *improved community connectedness* and *improved community strength*" (DVC, 2004). The indicators are drawn from the Victorian Survey of Population Health. Questions of particular relevance to civil society include whether people are members of community or professional groups, and whether those groups have taken any local action on behalf of the community, together with a question that asks whether people have opportunities to have a real say on issues that they find important.

6. A ROLE FOR THE OECD

The organisers of this forum asked us to consider what role the OECD might play in this area. Events such as this one, which seek to share best practice, are clearly important, as is the fact that representatives from civil society have been invited. The OECD could also provide a forum for pooling concepts and measures that might assess the health of civil society and perhaps develop some international measures in this area. In the longer term, a project that sought to assess the economic and social benefits that are thought to flow from social capital would be of considerable interest, and might perhaps be run across different countries.

Another area where the OECD might seek greater involvement is around designing frameworks and indicators to measure progress or well-being for specific — potentially controversial — areas.

It is often the case that CSOs are actively involved in key political debates. Australia is not alone in experiencing considerable public debate around areas like poverty; the trade-offs between economic activity and environmental protection; the treatment of our Indigenous peoples; and policies towards refugees and asylum seekers. It is very often the case (indeed almost by definition) that the debates that attract most attention from civil society are the most controversial. Such debates are often areas that an indicator initiative would feel most reluctant to develop measures of progress for, because the debate that ensued would likely generate more heat than light.

The ABS sees a good progress measure as having an unambiguously 'good/bad' direction of movement: ideally nearly all would agree that a movement in one direction represented progress (and a movement in the other regress), other things kept equal. Such agreement is most difficult to find when an area is subject to controversy. Although many members of civil society can understand the need for caution in these areas, that caution can prove disappointing to those who want to see a suite of indicators that portray all the key aspects of progress. A set of internationally agreed measures that portray progress in some of these more controversial areas would provide a useful way for an indicator initiative to venture into more difficult waters. In the face of criticism, reference to an international standard can be of great assistance.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Collaboration with civil society seems almost a necessary condition for an indicator initiative to get broad acceptance. Not only can collaboration strengthen the content of the indicators, the process itself can build a solid foundation of support. Those in government wishing to collaborate with civil society, might do well to ensure that the collaboration begins at an early stage; that the pace of development is appropriate; and that the a diverse range of collaborators express their views and become involved.

Without indicators, arguments are often based on anecdote rather than fact. Moreover, indicators can have a positive effect on civil society: the reports can become agents of change. It is arguably their main purpose. As Gahin et al. (2003) say in *Do Indicators Help Create Sustainable Communities?*,

> "Indicators build connections between people, foster discussion in the community, and provide a powerful educational tool to raise awareness. As a source of data about the community, indicators empower community members, leading to positive change in planning, advocacy, and decision-making. Clearly, indicators are not a substitute for action, but help to create the social knowledge, connections, and inspiration for meaningful action. In this way, indicators can lead to progress, albeit slowly and incrementally, toward community sustainability and well-being."

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The views in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the Australian Collaboration. Where quoted or used they should be attributed to the authors.

APPENDIXES

A. TEN TIPS FOR GOVERNMENT — CIVIL SOCIETY INTERACTION

These ten tips for government officials wanting to strengthen government–citizens relationships come from the OECD's *Citizens as Partners: A handbook on consultation and public participation in policy making* (OECD, 2001).

- Take it seriously
- Start from the citizen's point of view
- Deliver what you promise
- Watch timing
- Be creative and dynamic
- Balance different interests
- Be prepared for criticism
- Involve your staff
- Develop a coherent policy
- Act now

B. EXTRACTS FROM "MEASURES OF AUSTRALIA'S PROGRESS"

B.1 Family, community and social cohesion

Progress and this dimension

Measures of Australia's Progress noted:

> "Family and community are important aspects of society, but the way in which they contribute to progress is difficult to define and measure. The quality and strength of people's relationships and bonds with others — their family, friends and the wider community — are important ingredients of the level of social cohesion. And a more cohesive society is one in which communities are strong and inclusive, and where fewer people fall through the cracks."

Civil society's role

On civil society's role, the ABS said,

> "Strong community bonds can be formed through things like volunteering and donating money to groups and organisations in the community. Such networks may involve people who do not normally associate with one another, and in this way help to form bridging relationships between these community members. When the support offered by people's families and communities declines or is absent, it can contribute to serious social exclusion and problems such as homelessness, suicide and deaths from drug taking.
>
> The likelihood that people will voluntarily give their time to do some work for an organisation or group might be regarded as one of the stronger expressions of social capital, as it involves providing assistance, fulfilling needs and providing opportunities in the community. Participation in voluntary work also reinforces networks and adds to the richness of community life."

B.2 Democracy, governance and citizenship

Progress and this dimension

Discussing the links between this area and progress, the ABS wrote:

> "National life is influenced, not just by material qualities such as economic output, health and education, but also by many intangible qualities such as the quality of our public life, the fairness of our society, the health of democracy and the extent to which citizens of Australia participate actively in their communities or cooperate with one another. For a long time these qualities, although often publicly agreed to be of critical importance, were seldom measured statistically. This was partly because they were harder to measure than more concrete statistics, e.g. the value of goods produced or the rate of infant mortality; and partly because they were regarded as more controversial … The strength and health of our democracy in practice is the product of many factors, such as the effectiveness of political institutions like Parliament, fair elections, an independent judiciary, equal laws and a free press. Other important factors include the trust that citizens have in government and public institutions, and the degree to which they participate in civic and community life and value and understand their rights and duties as citizens." (ABS, 2004b).

Civil society's role

On civil society's role, the ABS said:

> "Civic participation describes activities reflecting interest and engagement with governance and democracy, such as membership of political parties and trade unions/professional associations, or serving on committees of clubs and associations. It has been defined as a two way communication process between the government and citizens. The overall goal is for better decisions, supported by the public and fostering the increased well-being of the population (World Bank, 2002b). Some people suggest that active citizen engagement is important for better government. Researchers and commentators, such as Robert Putnam, argue that civic engagement is associated with better government in two ways: citizens in civic communities expect better government, and (in part through their own efforts) get it, and that the performance of representative government is improved by the social infrastructure of civic communities and by the democratic values of both officials and citizens (Putnam, 1993). Civic participation involves both collective and individual activities, including the membership of civic organisations, such as political parties and trade unions, and serving on committees of clubs, voluntary organisations and associations. More recent forms of civic participation include support for global or local advocacy groups or campaigns, email networks, or one day activities such as 'Clean Up Australia' events … These activities extend social networks of those participating, and help people develop important skills for participating in democracy and governance."

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