

Small Towns: Big Picture — Social Sustainability Indicators and the Arts

Maureen Rogers

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Introduction

It is becoming clear to a growing number of people that economic security in rural areas can neither be expected from traditional agricultural enterprise, nor provided by external companies looking for a town to call home. In addition to the social and economic problems, many rural communities face a declining resource base as soils become saline and water resources become scarce. The rural struggle is often presented in the media as the dying town syndrome, including stereotyped images of a people devoid of good ideas - lobbying governments to 'do something'.

According to Collits (2001: 32-56) some observers believe there is little governments can do to ensure small town survival – particularly in view of the substantial forces ranged against them. Forth (2000:4-10) created a storm with his view that the government should assist declining rural communities with a resettlement program rather than waste limited resources on keeping them going in the face of certain demise. Regardless of individual views, one thing does seem certain – the level of government support will never return to the days of old. It is equally clear that the future of most rural communities lies in their ability to adapt — and as Galson and Baehler (1995) suggest — to adopt forms of innovation that will leave neither individual lives nor the structure of social relations unchanged.

Communities attempting to create a sustainable future need firstly to focus on re-building their social cohesion if they are to generate creative and innovative solutions. According to Max-Neef et. al (1987: 3) the recent pre-occupation with *fixing* society through economic means has '*...dampened our ability to deal forcefully and imaginatively with social, cultural and environmental issues. We have become drowsy managers of a crisis we feel is impossible to solve by our own means*'. Economic viability and environmental sustainability depend on our ability to re-kindle society's creative energies — to design imaginative but viable solutions to our social and environmental problems, and to be responsive, engaged and motivated if we are to meet the challenges of the future.

In recent times there has been much talk about the need to build community capacity — reflecting recognition of the importance of social cohesion to the implementation of community development, natural resource management and other public policy initiatives. This need to build community capacity is linked to the concept of building social capital — that is, to improve trust between people, to encourage cooperation and collaboration, to recognise and enhance individual and organisational networks, and to foster life long learning. Essentially, these descriptors of social capital are also highlighting the need to build energised, responsive, vibrant and engaged communities.

Another topic at the fore of government thinking is the need to evaluate government and industry performance in terms of the Triple Bottom Line — engaging many in the search for and development of measurable indicators of social, environmental and economic progress. Rural communities, like any other government or corporate entity need effective tools for self-evaluation and strategic planning. They certainly need some alternative means of demonstrating viability and progress beyond the traditional economic means. The TBL framework, along with the concept of developing community-based indicators advocated by Salvaris et. al (2001) offer a semi-structured pathway toward building community through shared learning and the development of a sustainability strategy.

The *Small Towns: Big Picture* project is a community development initiative that draws together these concepts of Triple Bottom Line auditing of performance, the development of community-based indicators of progress, and the need to stimulate and engage community in a collaborative and creative process. Over 1500 people from the townships of Dunolly, Wedderburn, Carisbrook, Talbot and Maldon, together with La Trobe University's Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities, the Cultural Development Network (Vic), and a team of community-based artists, have been working together to develop a shared understanding of their progress toward social, economic and environmental sustainability. Integration of the arts in the process has been critical to the community engagement process – enabling greater communication, more fun, and producing surprising, often unexpected outcomes.

Drawing on the work by Max-Neef et. al (1987), Wackernagel and Rees (1998), Rogers and Golding (2002), and Pinge (2001) the project has produced an initial set of benchmark indicators, namely:

- A Community Cohesion Index
- An Energy Footprint measure
- A Community Connections Directory
- An Economic Activity measure

The creative works produced by local artists and the communities involved, include:

- A theatrical performance reflecting issues of community cohesion: *Right Where We Are*
- A range of artworks reflecting people's thoughts about the local impacts of climate change using photography, ceramics, and printmaking as the mediums for creative expression.
- A website for local organizational network development
- A 30-minute video depicting the community engagement and indicator development process.

Given the focus of the Bureau of Rural Science's seminar was on the social dimensions of the TBL in rural Australia, this paper presents the development of the community cohesion component of the *Small Towns: Big Picture* TBL community audit project. It also provides an

insight into how the arts were an integral part of the community-based process and concludes with a brief discussion on how the different TBL indicators are linked.

A Brief Comment on Indicators

While indicators are natural, everywhere, part of everyone's life, they have recently become a widely discussed instrument of change – an essential guide for us to develop sustainably. All of us use indicators to make sense of complex systems – but not everyone relates to the same indicators. Meadows (1998: 7) provides an example in football scores which are only meaningful to football fans while often considered gibberish to the less enthusiastic. Similarly, a farmer can read signals from a field of growing grain that the rest of us don't perceive. Jiggles in stock prices carries vital information – but only to those who watch the market every day.

We need many indicators because there are many purposes. However, when the need for indicators is mentioned in the context of community building or local government best practice, most people seem to feel a little overwhelmed. Comments like, 'how do you choose which indicators to use', or 'there is very little point in creating your own indicators when there needs to be some universal sense made of our progress', or 'everyone is doing *indicators*, I don't want to be recreating the wheel', are commonly heard.

The most important point about indicators is that they are '*...only useful if the carried information is to a mind prepared to receive it, educated to its terms and actively engaged with the system illuminated by that indicator*' (Meadows, 1998: 7) In other words, no matter how difficult it is to develop community-based indicators, or how diverse they may appear to be, indicators that are not locally determined, locally validated and locally used are of little use at the local level. As Kenny (2002) points out, monitoring and evaluation can be tools of empowerment if developed through a community process, or they can be tools of control and disempowerment if imposed by external agents for external purposes.

Max-Neef et. al (1987: 3) argues that our first priority is to come to terms with ourselves: '*... and in so doing, persuade ourselves that the best development we can expect, over and above any of the conventional indicators that often instil an inferiority complex in us, would be the development of communities and cultures capable of being coherent with themselves*'. In other words, unless communities can take control of their own social performance, they are destined for a continuing sense of defeat, loss of will, cynicism and disempowerment; the opposite of what is required to meet the rapidly emerging challenges of our globalised world.

One further point worth making is that the development of community-based indicators requires a certain level of knowledge. People cannot be expected to develop indicators in a void, without structure and purpose. While the process must remain strongly community-based, people need a framework upon which to build their knowledge and skills, and which supports their developing understanding of their own progress. This raises the tension that exists between the empowering functions of self-evaluation and the provision of new knowledge through the engagement of outside expertise. (Kenny, 2002).

If the process is undertaken via a community envisioning and planning exercise, the elements of the desired outcomes need to be unpacked to determine the best course of action. The community then needs to determine the best way to measure its progress. This approach, however, is heavily reliant on the knowledge base of each community, resulting in widely variable outcomes in terms of effectiveness and focus.

On the other hand, a little help from an external source could be very useful in providing a clear framework for direction. For example, the goal of social, environmental, and economic sustainability is arguably the universal goal of all peoples on the planet – so why not start there. Criteria for achieving sustainability has now been well thought through by some of the best minds in the world. Communities should be introduced to these criteria as the basis for thinking about their own development. Through a sound community engagement process, communities can develop some initial indicators which help guide them toward a greater understanding of sustainability, while also building their capacity to take the ideas further with increasing sophistication. The *Small Towns: Big Picture* project adopted the later approach.

The Social Dimension of the TBL Audit

Social Capital has emerged as a key concept in the re-engagement and revitalisation of rural communities. A leading author on social capital, Robert Putnam (1993) describes it as the trust, norms and networks needed to facilitate co-operation. Others such as Cox (1998), and Bullen and Onyx (1998) have described it as the *glue* which holds society and communities together, ‘*created from a myriad of everyday interactions between people*’. Key dimensions defined by Bullen and Onyx (1998) are: valuing self and others; trust (interpersonal and generic); connection (participation and networks); multiple relationships; and reciprocity in relationships.

The concept of social capital has flourished across all areas of government, including human services, natural resource management, and even economic development, recognising the need to re-build social capital if rural communities particularly are to effectively respond to change. This is certainly a positive step for those communities which need new ways to demonstrate their viability beyond the traditional economic and social measures — while they may have negative economic growth and reflect high levels of social disadvantage, they do possess positive levels of social capital.

As yet, however, no universally accepted definition or method of measuring social capital currently exists, leaving contemporary researchers and government agencies to compile indices from a range of approximate items. These have included the measurement of such items as the level of trust in government, voting trends, membership in civic organizations, newspaper readership, or hours spent volunteering as proxies for evaluating the amount of *glue* holding a community together.

While the concept of social capital has served to expand our understanding of the role of *community* in its own development – potentially changing the way governments approach community development – the concept may not be enough to help communities become more *coherent with themselves*. The measurement of trust, co-operation and networks may be indicators of change, but they do little to explain the way a community actually functions. They are observable consequences of Community Cohesion, derived without the need for any depth of

understanding of the cause and effect relationships which underpin such outcomes as trust and co-operation. It seems the concept of social capital may lead evaluation efforts to focus on the spot *where the light is*, rather than on the darker corners of poor social performance.

Rural communities, particularly, understand how critical human relationships are to effective mobilisation of local skills and resources. A number of community consultation processes (ie. Bush Talks, The Purple Sage project, The Good Society Survey, and the People Together Project) - have all identified attributes people believe to be essential ingredients of a healthy and socially successful community. Common threads include the need for human warmth, a feeling of safety, a sense of belonging and connectedness, a sense of common purpose and identity, co-operation, mutual respect, and the ability to participate. These attributes would seem a good place to start in terms of creating a criteria for social sustainability, but is it comprehensive enough or well located within a meaningful theoretical structure?

Max-Neef et. al (1987) have developed an evaluative framework aimed at revitalising small and medium-sized urban and rural communities which goes further than the concept of social capital and captures a wider set of attributes than those identified through the community consultation processes. In essence, Max-Neef et al have identified nine fundamental human needs which form part of a systems analysis of the way society functions. The nine needs, as described by Max-Neef, are:

- *Subsistence* Access to food, shelter, employment;
- *Protection* Safety and protection;
- *Affection* Friendships, a good family, emotional care;
- *Understanding* Encouraged to be investigative and curious;
- *Participation* Ability to interact, share ideas and humour, mutual respect;
- *Idleness* Free to imagine a future, reflect on the past, dream, have fun;
- *Creation* Free to express passion, boldness, inventiveness and curiosity;
- *Identity* Sense of belonging, consistency, values, symbols, and
- *Freedom* Be accepted - open mindedness, tolerance.

The development of this framework is based on three main postulates. Firstly, development must be about people and not about objects. We therefore need an indicator of the growth of people – in addition to the GDP indicator of the growth in objects - to assist in decisions about which development is better than another. Secondly, the traditional belief that human needs tend to be infinite, change over time, and are different between cultures and historical periods, is conceptually inaccurate. Max-Neef et. al argue that our fundamental human needs are in fact finite, few and classifiable, and that it is the way in which these needs are satisfied which makes us culturally diverse. Thirdly, it is argued that the inadequate satisfaction of any of the fundamental needs results in collective pathologies – such as widespread distrust, fear and cynicism about the future. Perpetual frustration at not being able to participate, express oneself, be heard and respected can ‘systematically erode the creative capacity of people, leading them slowly from active resentment into apathy and loss of self-esteem’. Does this sound familiar?

If we accept Max-Neef et. al's logic, (only touched on here) then these nine fundamental needs may form the basis for our better understanding of how well our society is functioning and the areas of greatest deficit. This work seems to capture all the essential elements of a sustainable/resilient society including often overlooked factors like the need to foster creativity, cultural diversity, freedom of expression, and inclusion of the disadvantaged. As the crux of rural sustainability lies in our ability to be innovative, these elements would seem the most critical in terms of building community capacity. When compared with the attributes of social capital and the attributes of a successful community, it seems that the Max-Neef et. al approach not only digs deeper and wider, but provides an understanding of the foundations of social capital and the attributes of a healthy community.

The Development of a Community Cohesion Index

Communities where people learn together, share information and knowledge, are creative and innovative, and where wide participation and involvement is fostered, are more likely to be successful. Rogers (2001)

The *Small Towns: Big Picture* project drew on the work by Max-Neef, and the nine basic human needs. However, Max-Neef et al describe and analyse the nine needs in quite complex ways, which are not particularly user friendly by lay people. Consequently, each of the nine needs had to be interpreted in such a way that people could understand their meaning. Secondly, Max-Neef et al's work in exploring these needs with people from a range of different cultures, does not aim to produce a performance rating (refer to Max-Neef et al for more detail). Consequently, a process was devised to produce a subjective numerical rating for each of the nine needs.

To begin, a working group was set up, including fellow academics, representatives from the Department of Human Services, and Natural Resources and Environment, local government, and St Lukes Anglicare. This group worked through each of the nine human needs and came up with an interpretation that would ultimately be put to a series of focus groups as triggers for open discussion. These were as follows.

- *Freedom* Does your community encourage independent thought and action?
- *Sustenance* Does your community take care of its disadvantaged?
- *Reflection* Does your community take time to dream, have fun, reflect on the past, and fantasise about the future?
- *Affection* How welcoming and friendly is your community?
- *Creativity* Does your community encourage imagination, boldness, inventiveness, and curiosity?
- *Understanding* Is your community a learning community?
- *Protection* Does your community provide for a safe environment?
- *Participation* Does your community encourage participation?
- *Identity* Does your community have a strong sense of identity?

These were then tested on community representatives and modified where necessary. The task of distilling the meaning of each word down to a manageable interpretation was a challenge in itself – and one worth undertaking to gain a sound understanding of the interconnectedness of all the fundamental needs.

Twenty focus groups comprising 4 different demographic groupings, namely young people (high school age), business people, senior members, and a group we called the volunteers group made up of people who were involved in the community but who did not hold official office were held during April 2002. The process for each focus group meeting involved an open discussion about each word in turn. It soon became clear that people understood the essential meaning of the words well beyond the trigger statements – demonstrated by the full and vibrant discussions that were had. Then each participant was asked to write down their own thoughts about the community's performance from their own perspective. These comments were collected, anonymously, for each word. The participants were then asked to rate their community's performance on a scale between 1 and 6, where 1 was 'performs poorly' and 6 was 'performs very well'.

Clearly, the scoring system is highly subjective rendering the outcomes limited in terms of the rigours required for scholarly comparisons between groups or communities. The most obvious example of this is the difference between one person's perception of what constitutes *boldness* compared to another. A focus group in Maldon thought their community was very bold in that it accepted a group of women who often danced naked on top of Mt Tarrengower (so it is said), while another group thought their Fleece and Flower show was quite bold in its approach. They both rated their community at 5 in terms of boldness and creativity. Nonetheless, the scoring provides a starting point for improvement. More importantly, the narrative information provides a deeper understanding of what is behind the score. Appendix 1 illustrates an example of the findings from one of the five communities.

The Art of Engagement

To help engage the community in the process of developing the Community Cohesion Index, playwright Craig Christie was commissioned to create a theatrical performance. Christie attended all 20 of the focus group discussions, gathering information and insights into the issues confronting these small rural communities. The play called *Right Where We Are* was very successful in drawing together the different generational perspectives on what is happening in these towns. For example, the senior members of all the communities seemed the most satisfied and were doing *all right where they are*, while the young people generally felt that *nothing was going right where they are* - even though their parents were planning to *stay right where they are*.

All the actors were drawn from across the 5 towns, performing at each of the 5 town events where all the artwork, benchmark data, website and theatrical performance were bought together. Basically the play was made up of 6 separate, yet connected scenes, depicting different perspectives on life in a small town. In response to the commonly held view across all 20 groups that it was difficult to change things — to do things differently — Christie produced the following lyrics, which were sung by Jesse Bickerton, an 18 year old from Talbot:

NOT THE WAY WE DO IT

(1st verse and chorus)

I buggered up
I made a big mistake
I shouldn't try to spit into the wind
I should have known
I should have cottoned on
I should have stopped myself before I sinned
When they asked for my opinion look what I did instead
Of keeping my big mouth shut and just nodding my head.
I made a good suggestion, well I thought it was okay
And then I kept repeating it so they'd see things my way

And they said WHAT?
You want to do WHAT?
You want to change WHAT?
I don't believe I'm hearing this
You better sit and listen
'Cause it's not the way we do it in this town
You can't just barge in and start messing around
With the way we do the things we do round here
It's not the way we do it in this town
Don't rock the boat or we'll be bringing you down
If a thing ain't broke don't fix it, is that clear
It's not the way we do it.

Given that the development of locally meaningful indicators requires broad community involvement and support, the process of engagement has taken a number of steps. Initially, only a representative group from each town was involved, then through the arts more and more people were introduced to the concepts. The town events were hugely successful in that they attracted an audience sufficient to overflow each of the town halls. Talbot, with a population of 450, had over 200 people in the audience. As each event brought all the information together in one place Each event brought together a variety of local acts, the artwork produced by their community concerning environmental sustainability, the theatrical performance, and the set of benchmark indicators. This helped people to begin to put the Big Picture together – however, it will be through the development of the action plans more people will gain a deeper understanding of it all.

The Sustainability Dashboard and the Integration of Social, Environmental, Economic Reporting

There were four indicator areas explored through the *Small Towns: Big Picture* project (Figure 1); the Community Cohesion Index, Energy Footprint, Economic Activity, and Organisational Networks, with the latter being reflected through a website depicting the links between organizations, or the lack thereof (note, the latter is not depicted in the dashboard image below).

The Energy Footprint was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, because it is a straight forward calculation once a measure of the amount of energy consumed, and its source, has been identified (Rogers, 2002), Secondly, because of the existence of the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance, which has 10 shire councils, the Bendigo Bank, La Trobe University, and others as financial members committed to developing a region-wide approach to climate change and our greenhouse gas emissions. This group are working on a number of regional projects including streetlight retrofits, piloting CSIRO technologies such as hydrogen cells, and piloting a Community Power Company through the Bendigo Bank. These initiatives meant that the development of the Energy Footprint as an indicator of progress, actually had the potential to be improved through community involvement in the region-wide program. There are real opportunities for small town development in this area.

The dashboard image of sustainability was first crafted by *Redefining Progress* (USA). While sustainability and the TBL concept is often depicted as a 3 legged stool, indicating the need for balance, the dashboard metaphor highlights the need to know more about *where and how* we might be travelling rather than only knowing *how fast* we are travelling – with GDP being seen as the indicator of speed. Similarly to the gauges in a motor vehicle, the dashboard image depicts information in an inherently integrated way – that is, changes in one area has direct implications for another. This creates the opportunity for people to explore the connections in new and inquiring ways – enabling people to question the relationship between economic growth and community cohesion and environmental impacts. It provides communities with the ability to explore the notion that growing people first, then focusing on environmental sustainability will ultimately lead to positive changes in their economic structure and viability.

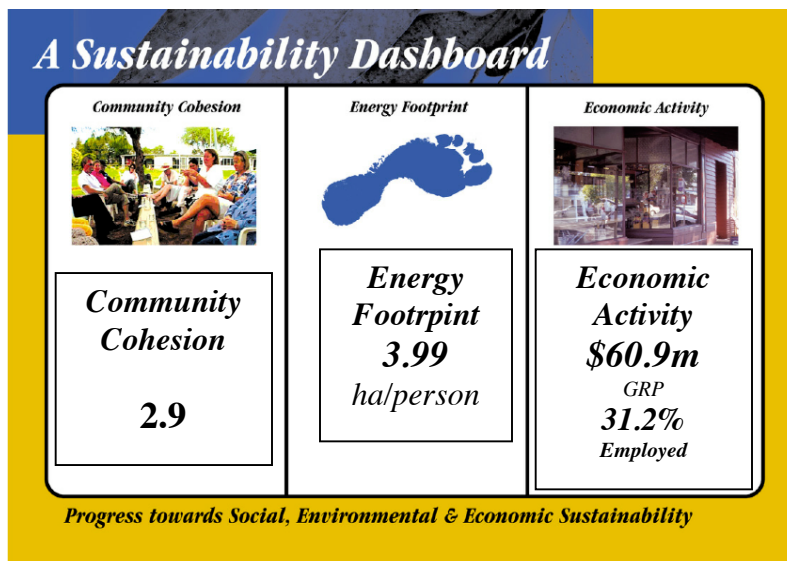


Figure 1: The Sustainability Dashboard

Clearly, the aim is to INCREASE the community cohesion score, while trying to DECREASE the energy footprint, with the hope that improvements in these two components will lead to changes in the economic activity levels. Each of the indicators have been developed in such a way that each of the communities can ultimately continue to measure their own progress. The TBL framework, cast in this way, will enable the community to see more clearly how different development decisions can affect their social, environmental and economic progress.

Concluding Comments

The importance of the social dimension to environmental and economic performance is more acutely apparent in the small rural community context than it might be in the larger urban/metropolitan context. People are recognised as their most important resource. The sustainable future of these communities largely depends on the social dimension, and therefore, they need assistance in understanding how to make the most of what they have.

Rogelj (2003) believes '*we must become a society of artists if we are to achieve sustainability - we need to be willing to take creative risks, to make connections and leap across disciplines and cultures in ways previously not attempted, or even imagined*'. A society riddled with frustration, disempowerment and apathy confronts some major challenges if it is to become spontaneous, motivated and creative. Essentially, people are the creators of economies, solvers of problems, providers of inspiration. It is essential that people be put back at the centre of our development decisions.

The Max-Neef based model of community cohesion and at subsequent measurement through Small Towns: Big Picture offers a way to build community capacity from the inside out, through the process of measurement and action, while also providing a structure through which to develop a region-wide, state-wide, and even nation-wide perspective on how well our communities are functioning.

The Sustainability Dashboard concept establishes an understanding of the links between our social development, and our environmental and economic outcomes. This is particularly enhanced if the environmental component is grounded in a wider initiative - where the newly emerging technologies and concepts are being driven by groupings and organizations with the power to make things happen. Small rural communities on their own are generally unable to access revolutionary or transitional technologies without being able to tap into an existing driving force. Consequently, the choice of environmental indicator will be determined by the kind of region-wide initiatives that exist. The *Small Towns: Big Picture* project has been very successful in engaging five rural communities in a community planning process which attempts to make the TBL concept useful at the community level. The community cohesion component is proving to be a powerful tool for achieving greater understanding of how a community functions, warts 'n' all.

APPENDIX 1

Overall Average Rating 2.9 – out of 6

FREEDOM: (Community Rating 2.9)

Does your community encourage independent thought and action?

- Not much opposition to personal freedom – people encouraged to speak out.
- This town is run by committees, and if you don't live by their rules you can find yourself excluded.
- Some people are more tolerant than others.
- Freedom of thought and action exists – it is neither fostered nor frowned upon.
- People here have experienced life's hard times – and are not so judgemental of others.

AFFECTION: (Community Rating 2.9)

How welcoming and friendly is your community?

- Affection depends on your social standing.
- Its not very friendly. We arrived here 8 years ago and my mother is still not yet considered a member of the community. We relate to our new neighbours, but they don't fit in either.
- Friendly on the surface...but hard to find special friends.
- Friendly now – after 27 years.

CREATIVITY: (Community Rating 2.3)

Does your community encourage imagination, boldness, inventiveness, and curiosity?

- This community is scared of change – particularly if it comes from outside.
- People here don't know what creativity is – and they certainly don't support individuals.
- There is a growing sense of creativity here. Outsiders are encouraging it along.
- Tolerates boldness, but slow to participate.
- Becoming more open to try new things – growing in confidence to have a go.

PROTECTION: (Community Rating 3.0)

Does your community provide for a safe environment?

- This place is a bit scary – I'm not brave enough to walk around at night by myself.
- Its not the safest place, particularly at night when fights break out in the pubs.
- There's drugs all over the place and the police don't seem to do anything.
- Not as safe as it used to be – drugs/needles/lack of law presence, shire out of town.
- The town doesn't seem to self-regulate very well.
- No police available when needed.

PARTICIPATION: (Community Rating 2.7)

Does your community encourage participation?

- If you're not one of the big people or the footy heads, you don't really have a say in anything.
- To participate you have to take the first step yourself.
- Not enough people participate – the same people do everything.
- Very few young people get involved.
- Clashes of personality can affect participation.
- Not all opinions are valued.
- Participation for a select few – let down from previous experience.

IDENTITY: (Community Rating 3.0)

Does your community have a strong sense of identity?

- A community in transition
- No true identity
- The town may not want an identity.
- A town with a good end and a bad end
- Typical small town with its footy club. Renowned for drugs.
- Pubs, footy, drugs and gold.
- Space, freedom, quiet.

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