



Citizen progress measures: a new democratic paradigm?

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Abstract

This paper examines some critical issues and opportunities for democracy and public policy posed by the growth of the global progress measurement movement. From the democratic perspective, these include: citizen progress measurement as itself a new and promising form of democratic re-engagement; the re-examination of democracy and the development of new indicators to define and measure a 'healthy' democracy; and the demonstration of clear linkages between healthy democratic and human rights regimes and outcomes, and broader individual and societal well-being.

In public policy, a global movement is now becoming a paradigm shift, that threatens to replace two long dominant assumptions: the primacy of continuous economic growth as the key driver of wellbeing; and the historically powerful but deterministic notion of the 'inevitability of progress'. In their place it offers a more holistic, integrated and nuanced model, that recognises the interdependence of economic, social, cultural, environmental and democratic dimensions for genuine well-being, progress and sustainability. And interestingly, this models signals a possible convergence between European and Asian public policy models, as from different starting points (Positivism, Buddhism) both seek to move 'Beyond GDP' and towards 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH).

The paper reviews work in Australia over the past decade at both local community and national levels as examples of these trends. Examined in particular are the development of citizen-engaged community planning and neighbourhood renewal schemes in which progress and well-being indicators play a central role; the development in several Australian states of state-wide local progress measurement frameworks as part of a commitment to devolved planning and stronger local democracy; and the evolution of national progress measurement systems, starting with the pioneering work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics on 'Measures of Australia's Progress' (a key inspiration for the OECD global project).

Finally, the paper discusses a more recent proposal for a broader, community engaged National Development Index (NDI) for Australia that aims to draw on the best practice of other models such as the Canadian Index of Well-being, Bhutan's GNH project and the outstanding OECD global project, 'Measuring the progress of society'.



The challenges for the Australian NDI will be substantial: to enable broad democratic and community engagement in its values and specific measures; to develop a satisfactory technical model of progress and well-being and an attractive and accessible public platform on which to display it; to produce a common set of indicators which can be used at all three levels of government (local, state and federal) to enable shared planning and goals; and finally, through concrete indicators and benchmarks, to build a credible long term vision for Australia's development.

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Short Biography

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Mike Salvaris is Adjunct Professor, Applied Human Rights and Community Wellbeing Research, in the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia.

Formerly a legal aid lawyer, community researcher, and chief policy adviser to the Premier of the State of Victoria, he has specialised for ten years in strategic public policy and the links between wellbeing measurement, democracy and human rights.

Mike has led and worked on many projects on these themes, internationally (with the UN and governments in Europe and Vietnam) and within Australia, at every level from national and state governments to local communities. He was a consultant to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in its internationally recognised 'Measures of Australia's Progress' (MAP).

His recent and current projects include:

- new processes for community based planning and wellbeing measures for seventy nine Victorian local governments (see: www.communityindicators.net.au ;
- an annual audit of human rights in Australia;
- an Australian National Development Index to be developed with community participation, to comprehensively measure progress and wellbeing in economic, social, environmental, cultural and democratic dimensions, aimed to improve public debate, clarity about national development goals and government accountability (drawing on similar work in Canada and elsewhere).
- Designing a multi-nation collaborative project as part of the OECD's global project 'Measuring the Progress of Societies' (<http://www.oecd.org/oecdworldforum>) with partners including Australia, Bhutan, Canada, New Zealand and Sweden..

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Detail

Citizen based progress measurement has become a global movement in the past two decades, with increasingly important implications and possibilities for a stronger and healthier democracy, and a new paradigm of public policy focused on well-being, harmony and sustainability, rather than economic output.

From a democratic perspective, this movement has demonstrated at least two clear benefits. It has, firstly, itself become a new and important kind of democratic tool, a means to engage increasingly disillusioned and alienated citizens and to arrest the democratic deficit that has been observed in many developed countries. Participation in the design of well-being measures and by extension, in community planning and visioning is both an innovative and a meaningful task for citizens; and some might say, a way to reclaim the rightful role increasingly stolen from them by a process of expert application centralisation and bureaucratisation public policy.

The second benefit has been to throw a spotlight on the meaning of democracy (and related concepts such as human rights, social solidarity and citizenship) and their current state of health. It has done this by making us consider these important and taken for granted ideas not just in their own right, but as invaluable elements – one might say, necessary preconditions - of a comprehensive model of true progress, well-being and sustainability.

Democracy is a concept that is much acclaimed but little debated, at least in concrete terms. Much political comment proceeds from complacent and unchallenged assumptions, rather than revealing a carefully thought through model of democracy in practice, a healthy working democracy, going beyond both the rhetoric and the more obvious formal structures such as Parliaments and elections.

As accelerating and broadening debate about the meaning of progress and well-being driven by this global movement has forced us to construct a better, more inclusive and more integrated model of true progress and well-being, it has become clear that the range of issues around democracy deserve a strong place in such a model and have been neglected in conventional statistics and policy frameworks.

This has led to an important part of the global progress and well-being measurement movement focusing on the measurement of democracy itself and the development of the indicators of a healthy democracy.

The range of issues around the health of democracy, human rights citizenship and social solidarity themselves, are increasingly seen as necessary components of progress and well-being themselves, and not simply instruments. This approach has also been strengthened by new work in the past two decades that clearly demonstrates the links between social participation, social inclusion, empowerment and local democracy, on the one hand, and general improvements in health and well-being of both individuals and communities.

It also throws the spotlight more fiercely on the important of what constitutes progress and a state of health in democracy and human rights and what are the most important indicators of progress in this field. An area traditionally missing from state statistics, and underdeveloped in much political science analysis, which is tended to focus on the formal structure structures of government such as Parliament elections, while neglecting the social



health of democracy, the level of democratic education, the representation of women in government, support for democratic principles in the community, and many other indicators of a truly healthy democracy.

In the past two decades significant work has been done to develop a concrete and operational set of progress indicators for democracy itself and these are very revealing when applied to particular countries as well as being helpful to focus our thoughts about what are the most important elements of democracy and to create a real debate at the level of communities and ordinary people about what is to be valued in democracy and what is the evidence that it is working. Complacent assumption especially in the Western world about the virtues of democracy and its health in practice, especially when the key democracy indicators were taken to be the existence of free markets and some form of formal elections.

Changing the paradigm of public policy

From the perspective of public policy, this global movement has perhaps even more potency. Over time it is forcing a change in the core paradigm of public policy, which in most of the Western world has been based upon the assumption that continuous economic growth will produce progress in other dimensions, or even more arrogantly, that economic growth is itself progress.

It is now widely accepted that economic growth is not in any sense a proxy for progress and well-being. Despite the historical contestation of the term progress and its power as an injunction and a national slogan, the evidence now clearly shows that large-scale and continuous economic production, (or more accurately growth in the traded value of the economic product) by no means automatically generates well-being in social and environmental dimensions but on the contrary increasingly generates social and environmental dis-benefits.

As local and national well-being frameworks have become better established and more confident, and can better and more comprehensively describe a balanced and integrated view of progress, that is humanistic and more naturally centred, what is gradually happening is that the core paradigm of public policy shifting to a model that we might call an integrated well-being and sustainability model: that is, a model that recognises the interdependence of economic, social, cultural, environmental and democratic dimensions of well-being; and above all recognises the dependence of any form of well-being upon the maintenance of our ecology.

Paper draws on: work of : (references, experts, OECD etc)

Additional points:

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