



## « THE COMMUNITY PULSE – MEASURING WHAT MATTERS »

City of Port Phillip, Australia

*Period of implementation: 2001 - 2011 | Study case written in 2010*

**C**ommunity Pulse involves community members in setting benchmarks, measuring, and analyzing long-term trends to help prevent the aspects that they love about their neighbourhoods from being lost. The indicators stretch across environmental, both natural (penguins) and built (affordable housing), social (Smiles Per Hour), economic (cost of groceries), and cultural (local icons) environments and build evidence to stimulate political and community action. Over the past nine years, Community Pulse has actively reported on 40 locally determined measures from 13 indicators developed within each of the four pillars of sustainability: social, cultural, environmental, and economic. These indicators were identified by City of Port Phillip residents as tools to track progress towards or away from their aspirations. The Community Pulse intentionally uses measures that relate to people's everyday experiences.



The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** was launched in 2008 by the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights with the aim of creating a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. The initiative was developed with the scientific support of Professor Yves Cabannes (University College of London) and the Centre for Social Studies (CES) from the University of Coimbra. At present, the Observatory contains more than sixty study cases mostly developed between 2008 and 2010. Even though many of these cases refer to policies that have already come to an end, they still have much to offer: from capitalizing on the learning acquired by other local authorities to discovering suggestive and alternative means to address social inclusion challenges from a local perspective.

## Context

### *City context*

The original inhabitants of the Port Phillip area are the Bunurong indigenous people with European settlement dating from the 1840s. Spanning part of Port Phillip Bay on the south-eastern tip of Australia, the City of Port Phillip (CoPP) is one of the oldest areas of metropolitan Melbourne and includes a variety of urban villages with close proximity to popular beaches and public transport. The city is marked by rich social diversity: long-term homeowners, young professionals renting flats, regional visitors accessing community health services, and international tourists enjoying natural and entertainment amenities. A mix of residential and industrial land use hosts magnificent heritage buildings, shopping districts, cultural events and recreation facilities, gardens, and parks.

CoPP is known for its proactive approach for actively supporting this social and cultural diversity. Council aims to improve the well-being of the entire community and this commitment to social justice is illustrated by housing programs, funding for community organisations, and services supporting low-income people. CoPP proactively engages residents in decision-making, knowing social engagement and citizen advice are its greatest assets.

### *Government and decentralization context*

There are three levels of government in Australia: federal, state or territory, and local. Local government powers are determined by state authority with chief responsibilities including community facilities, road maintenance, planning and development approvals, and local services such as waste disposal. Services are financed by property tax and grants from state and federal levels. Local governments in Australia are caricatured as being concerned only with the 'three Rs' – Rates, Roads, and Rubbish. However, recent years have seen state governments increasingly devolving powers onto local governments.

The CoPP was established in 1994, following a state government review of local boundaries, amalgamating three former adjacent cities. Port Phillip is divided into seven wards for democratic purposes and these are also identified as distinct neighbourhoods: hubs of social and economic activity.

**Institutional level of policy development:** Municipal and Submunicipal

### *Social context*

Gentrification has considerable impact on the CoPP, as a result of significant development contributing to rapid cultural change over the last decade. The migration of affluence has replaced many long-term working class families, illustrated by local character shifting to increased economic homogeneity. In 2006, a residential population of 85,012 was reported, an 8.7% growth from 2001 census numbers (ABS 2006). Historically, growth accelerated after the 1850s with expansion continuing into the early 1900s. Post war, many migrants moved into the area and public housing estates were built. More growth took place from the 1960s until now, with rapid conversion of industrial land into residential use, at a rate much faster than the Melbourne average. This is a visible sign of wider social change, creating new patterns of housing demand from changing trends in family structures. Working families and older long-term residents may be forced out, as much by the disappearance of familiar landmarks as by rising rents and diminishing services. With this widening gap between high and low income

earners, some residents express concern about the changing local character of their neighbourhoods, resisting development.

## Policy development

This case study describes the development and implementation of The Community Pulse (the Pulse), a participatory democracy initiative developed by local government and residents in CoPP. The Pulse, characterized by principles of social inclusion, is described as an integrated approach to measure and stimulate progress towards the four pillars of sustainability. At the CoPP, sustainability means establishing processes and actions that support economic viability, environmental responsibility, cultural vitality, and social equity to ensure that future generations are provided for (Hawkes 2001).

The Pulse is a cultural indicator project that *measures what matters* in their neighbourhoods and more widely across the city. Over the past nine years, the Pulse has actively reported on 40 locally determined measures from 13 indicators. These indicators were identified by residents as tools to track progress towards or away from their aspirations. Intentionally using measures that relate to people's everyday experiences rather than being solely based on technical validity, the Pulse stimulates social change by creating meaning through participation through the collection, creation and dissemination of data.

## Background

Sustainable Community Progress Indicators (SCPI) was the original name of The Pulse in 2001, a result of a coordinated effort between the Community and Health Development Department and the Sustainability Department. Former CEO, David Spokes, linked these two departments' indicator-development initiatives for a more comprehensive and integrated approach to understand local progress across the four pillars of sustainability. Indicators track particular phenomena through measures, as a sign of broader social change across this local government.

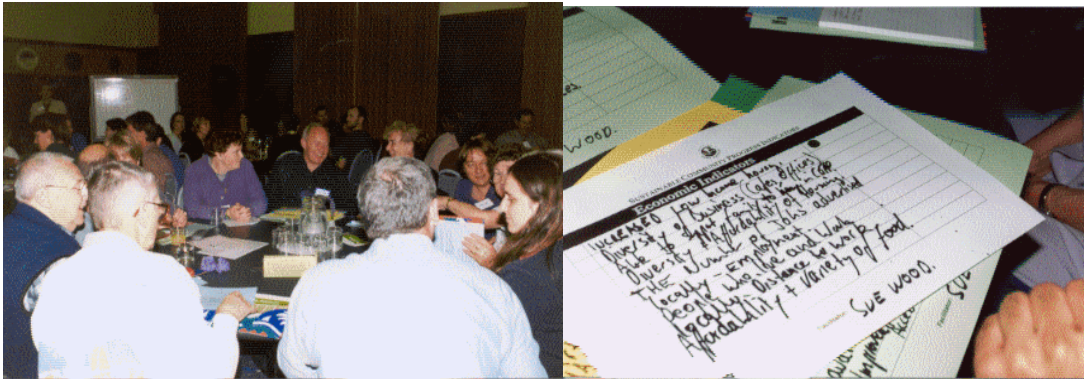
Developed almost a decade ago, SCPI was at the front end of the international resurgence in social indicator practice, which has been theorized internationally (Innes & Booher 2000). Within Council, space was provided for experimentation and research by staff, namely Mandy Press and Peter Streker, within the Department of Community and Health Development. The initial project design was inspired by projects in Newcastle, Australia, and Seattle, U.S.A. Newcastle formed a collaborative partnership with the Australia Institute, a policy research centre, to develop *Indicators of a Sustainable Community: Improving Quality of Life in Newcastle* (Cameron 2000). Sustainable Seattle was at the forefront of defining sustainability in the 1990s with its groundbreaking work on urban and regional indicators and systems thinking.

SCPI took a similar approach, with indicators developed from the *ground up*, not from the *top down*. These projects use indicators to observe and stimulate social change over time, in contrast to the more traditional social indicator practices to measure the effectiveness of local government policy by measuring service provision. Typical social indicators are quantitative evaluative data linked to policy goals and frameworks, intending to measure progress over time, or to compare geographical locations, constituencies, or even nations. Community Indicators Victoria claims that 'while indicators can't change day-to-day reality, they can frame the way we perceive it, endorsing a common understanding of development' (Wiseman et al. 2006: 84). These benchmarks shape a consensus about the goals of progress, about what *indicates* the positive development of society, here, within a framework of sustainability.

While the Seattle project was effectively designed as an external lobby body, SCPI was envisioned to work with an integrated approach. Rather than taking a defensive stance, these

indicators would serve as a partnership – a shared responsibility – between Council and residents, also including community organizations and business.

**Figures 1 and 2. CoPP Town Hall Meeting, 1997**



Source: CoPP

### *Policy objectives*

The objectives of this project are vast and have been refined over the years by stakeholders, staff, Council, and the Pulse reference committee through planning and evaluation processes. These changes reflect a commitment to accessible language and reference changing policy paradigms, but have not changed the intent of the project.

The purpose of the Pulse is to help achieve local sustainability by:

- Using indicators to demonstrate movement towards or away from sustainability;
- Providing an early warning signs of potential problems;
- Showing the CoPP and community how it can improve its environment, health, and well-being and achieve its vision of a sustainable community; and
- Being the change – engaging the community and asking to help tell the story of 'how our community is fairing', ensuring their role in collectively finding the solutions.

### *Chronological development and implementation*

In 1997, a Community Plan was envisioned by residents with CoPP asking residents *what kind of community they wanted* (CoPP 1997). Consultation resulted in a document articulating the community's vision of a more sustainable future for their city. SCPI project revisited this Community Plan, in consultation with the community, to see if progress had been made towards the community's vision, asking *'How do you know your neighbourhood is getting better?'*






Approximately 90 residents attended a 'town hall meeting' in 2001, assisted by Alan Atkisson, a consultant from Sustainable Seattle. Participation was open to all local residents and businesses, promoted through the newspaper and direct invitations sent to constituents of Council departments and services. This direct invitation to constituents helped ensure the participation of a diversity of residents, including clients of many social agencies. Residents brainstormed 220 indicators for measurement, which were then refined and a means of measuring their progress devised. As intended, the indicators and measures are not scientific and complex, but are things noticeable in everyday life. This means that they are easy to relate to and offer a simple way of assessing whether progress is occurring.

Among the many aspirations expressed regarding safety in public spaces, sense of community, and civic pride, participants declared that they wanted *a community where they feel a sense of control over their destiny*. This philosophy of self-determination is fundamental to the project. Targets are incorporated into the 13 resulting SCPI indicators and 40 measures with action words such as *maintain, increase, improve, conserve, reduce, value, and retain*. In this sense, the indicators are strategic directions that promote sustainability.

Development of the existing framework took almost a year once a reference committee of residents and staff was appointed. The final choice of indicators considered: measureableness, meaningfulness, cost effectiveness, consistency in data collection, and timeliness. When accessing secondary source data, some agents have significant time lags on public data dissemination; therefore, SCPI decided not to include these measures. While many other indicators could be chosen, there was extensive research, consideration, engagement, and care in the commitment to this selection. As an interconnected whole, the indicators represent a broad picture of the community.

As originally intended, the SCPI responded to community and political shifts over the first few years. Once established, SCPI was overseen for a short time by the Governance Department where it moved to more mainstream indicators of service provision evaluation. Once returned to Community and Health Development, a strategic and manageable workplan was developed along with a name change to the more understandable Community Pulse. The appeal of this new branding was in its description: *measuring what matters*. Like the simplicity of the indicators, this new title made the program more easily understood. The project is organic and its direction is evolving. While governed by a formal advisory committee, direction is also very much determined by project partnerships and staff relationships. The danger of this project is its huge scope – literally extending CoPP’s ten-year Community Plan – and therefore, must be strategic.

**Figure 3. Community Pulse Data reported in October 2010**

Indicator	Community Pulse Data reported in October 2010	Towards or away from sustainability?
Connectedness	Do we know our neighbours? Can we count on them and them on us?	
Native plants and animals	Can our local plants and animals thrive?	
Crime & safety	Do we feel safe in our homes and on the streets of Port Phillip?	
Sustainable usage	Are we using energy resources efficiently and responsibly?	
Affordable housing	Is Port Phillip a place we can all afford to live?	

Transport	Are we utilising active and public transport means to get around Port Phillip?	
Participation	Are we involved in our community? Are we making a difference?	
Employment and volunteering	Is there a range of working and volunteering opportunities available in Port Phillip?	
Pollution – air, water, noise, and waste	Are we recycling? Are we keeping our streets and beaches clean? Do we care for the Bay?	
Cost of living	Are we coping with the rising costs of living?	
Diversity	Do people from a diverse range of social and cultural backgrounds really feel welcome here?	
Local icons and character	Can we still see the old Port Phillip amongst the new?	
Neighbourhood shopping needs	Can you buy the things you need locally?	

Source: CoPP

## *Stakeholders, beneficiaries and participatory methodologies*

### **Agents involved**

To address complex issues like the future of a city, a collaborative approach with perspectives from many agents, including residents, community organizations, multiple municipal departments, businesses, and professionals, is required. CoPP recognizes that it is but *one agent* in a much broader system of services and personal realities in this geographic area. Key to this philosophy is mobilizing community members to voice their vision and supporting their control of evaluating progress towards or away from their aspirations. Each of these agents are also beneficiaries, including all levels of stakeholders in the process of knowledge creation and translation.

### **Beneficiaries**

While the citizens of CoPP are the primary beneficiaries, multiple partnerships exist within the project from data collection, to dissemination, to sharing best practice. Existing and natural partnerships have evolved where there is synergy within the context and the content of particular indicators, but also new connections have been mobilized. Within Council, there is interdepartmental collaboration and horizontal exchange of information, and potential for more in the future. Housing Development, Health Services, Waste Management, Street and Beach

Cleaning, Sustainable Transport, Community and Health Development, and Governance departments all work to coordinate data, are intimately involved, and benefit from these efforts.

When reliable second source data is available, it may be aggregated and utilized by the Community Pulse. Public data is currently sourced from federal and state government levels, coupled with data from private power and water companies. State sources include Victoria Police, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Office of Housing, Department of Education and Early Learning, and the Victorian Electoral Commission. The federal source is the Australian Bureau of Statistics. These relationships have all evolved over time and while these partners source the data, they also benefit from extended dissemination through the Pulse's reporting.

### **Participation processes implemented**

The most effective way to illustrate the Pulse's social inclusion approach is by highlighting specific examples of indicator activity where citizen groups and community organizations are involved in collecting data. For example, the EcoCentre<sup>1</sup> and Earthcare<sup>2</sup> collect statistics on local flora and fauna, monitoring environmental changes. The Citizen's Monitoring Network gathers data in neighbourhoods regarding street and beach cleanliness and the effectiveness of Council waste management. Activities include face-to-face meetings between these residents and CoPP maintenance staff to better understand processes and problem areas. Local schools monitor how children are transported to school – walking, public transport, or private cars – to better understand local transport limitations and opportunities. Port Phillip Community Group<sup>3</sup> and South Port Uniting Care<sup>4</sup> clients shop for quality and cost-effective lunches to compare affordability across the seven neighbourhoods. These agency clients who may experience social exclusion due to economic, mobility, and mental health barriers collect the data for the Pulse. However, this engagement is not solely for data collection, but also for the creation of meaning through experience.

Extended research was undertaken to additionally ensure the expressed values embedded in the indicators and measures was representative of the local diversity. Cultural indicators (local character and acceptance of cultural diversity) were explored within targeted social inclusion agencies through extended consultation, using flexible and creative methods. Data was provided by residents with disabilities (acquired brain injury), individuals who work in the street sex trade, and youth through workshops. This data was found to be generally aligned with the Pulse results from local surveys, community-engaged collection, and secondary sources.

A quintessential Pulse indicator is the unique Smiles Per Hour. It is not only a measure of neighbourhood connectedness, but it also attempts to catalyze this behaviour. Smiles Per Hour is one of four measures of social connectedness that determine whether streets are becoming friendlier. Residents have expressed that they feel happier and safer when they know their neighbours better. These benefits of health and well being provided by social connectedness are empirically well established (Wilkinson & Marmot 2003).

This creative reporting is a significant feature of the Pulse. Rather than solely publishing an annual report, data is provided in many varied and meaningful ways: in local and state papers, on street signs, in bus shelter ads, and as postcards. Fourteen smile signs are permanently posted around CoPP. Staff *walk the talk* by personifying the principles of sustainability: using

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<sup>1</sup> EcoCentre URL: <http://www.ecocentre.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Earthcare URL: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~earthcar/>

<sup>3</sup> Port Phillip Community Group, URL: <http://www.ppcg.org.au/>

<sup>4</sup> South Port Uniting Care URL: <http://www.southportuniting.org.au/uniting.html>

pedal bikes, cooking with local food, and extending the project's mandate into local events through the Community Pulse Home Grown Sustainability Series. The series provides opportunities for social inclusion, based around capacity building or skill sharing. Data is also fed back up the food chain to Council in regular formal reports, to other departments for their own communication and decision-making processes and, most importantly, back to CoPP residents as timely information but also as a methodology for local action planning groups. Citizens may act on this new knowledge by participating in their community, adjusting their own behaviour, or extending their understanding about these important local issues.

The Smiles Per Hour measure is a good example of participation processes enacted through the Pulse with straightforward and easily understood methodology. Local residents act as researchers on designated streets. While maintaining a neutral expression, eye contact is made with passers-by and the number of people who smile first are counted. Baseline measures are obtained in low, medium, and high pedestrian traffic streets and shopping centres in each of the seven neighbourhoods. Volunteers are trained as Smile Spies to measure Smiles Per Hour on a quarterly basis. Like other indicators, Smiles Per Hour measures a particular local value by engaging residents in the data collection. This is a very real way for individuals to understand the impact of social connectedness and to further the agenda of social change.

A second indicator to illustrate the Pulse's participation processes is the Local Character and Cultural Icons indicator. The very real experience of gentrification has many residents longing for earlier days or actively resisting development. Some of these expressions of value are difficult to capture with numbers and requires flexible and creative exploration. A Pulse initiative to be launched in 2011 is *For Love and Lore: The People and Places of Port Phillip*, a participatory arts activity where residents are invited to photograph local cultural icons to express their connection to Port Phillip. Their selected photos will be contributed to an evolving online database, to track how these priorities may change over time. Creative engagement will promote interest in the local icons and the character of CoPP.

Each indicator has its own unique character and potential to engage and inform multiple stakeholders in what citizens have identified as priorities. Inarguably, there is value in the data itself, but the Pulse sees its real value is in the process of engagement, empowering residents to become involved in their own futures and the future of their city. These principles with the processes of participatory democracy are about self-determination: local ownership of local knowledge and being able to put it to use. These partnerships developed recognize the Pulse's commitment to engage with the concerns of and reflect the diversity of residents of CoPP.

## *Institutionalizing and financing*

### **Institutionalization processes**

Auspiced by the Community and Health Development Department, a part-time Community Pulse project officer is resourced by Council to coordinate the efforts of the many partners and individuals involved. Comprised of a City Councillor, community members, and Council staff, the project is also supported by a reference committee. The committee sits between formal Council roles and more grassroots community models: it has the ability to shift between the roles of an independent and external lobby body to a more formal advisory role or program to Council. The future of Community Pulse is uncertain. Whilst it is clearly a useful program based on political and community feedback, the program is in its final year of initially designated support from Council. Extensive evaluation and clear strategic directions must be taken by staff and residents in this final year regarding the focus, scope, and communication of the Pulse.

### **Financing**



Approximately \$50,000 is provided per annum over ten years as a commitment from Council. These meager resources, in some instances, has limited the scope of the project, but has also stimulated an entrepreneurial approach to partnerships.

## Outcomes and reflections

### *Key results and achievements*

The Pulse is in its ninth year of a ten-year commitment from Council with key results including cultural change within both government and community. In part, the Pulse's impact has influenced perceptions regarding measurement and knowledge. Through engagement on many levels, meaning has been created surrounding local concerns through the identification of values, collection of data, and dissemination of this knowledge. The initiative has experienced minimal and isolated criticism; over time, it has become evident that the Pulse is a cost-effective way for government to catalyze engagement in community-identified issues. In response to criticism of Smiles Per Hour, one CoPP councillor responded, 'Why should happiness not be a concern of public policy? It's free and good for everyone!'

Significant achievements are scattered across the evolution of the project, but staff and volunteers all express that key moments are grounded within community engagement practice. They are the 'ah ha' moments of volunteers collecting data when they understand their role is not only to measure but to *be* the change. CoPP's long-term endorsement of the project is a measure of success. But unlike the rest of Council activities, the Pulse is measured not in outcomes but in the quality of the engagement process. In fact, the Pulse provides detailed tracking of the community vision and plan, not measuring Council provision but by understanding if this community as a whole is moving towards progress. Each indicator and measure links directly into the strategic aims of CoPP services and community organizations, providing external evaluative data. This data is used not only organizationally for evaluation, but to change public perception in the local culture. For example, Health Services uses the increase of 'safe disposal of syringes' not simply as a measure of local drug use, but to explain the increasing responsibility of injection users. This addresses social stigma and helps to change public perception of this interest group in the wider public. A second example is the collection of data on local penguins. Not only do residents become interested in the penguins, but a broader awareness regarding care for the environment is stimulated.

Social inclusion and participatory democracy are ongoing in multiple layers within this project. This engagement spans across the unique cultures of each of the seven neighbourhoods, partnering with social inclusion agencies who support local marginalized individuals. The Pulse seeks to engage not only those traditionally considered disadvantaged, but is also aware of the increasing number of more affluent yet socially isolated individuals who are also affected by gentrification and sustainability issues.

### *Overall assessment and replicability or adaptation elsewhere*

#### **Main obstacles**

The primary challenges in this project are two-fold. Firstly, the positioning of the project between Council and community means its role is in a constant state of shifting tension. Is the Pulse a direct program of Council or do citizens drive it as a lobby body? Originally, the staff person physically sat outside Council offices to keep this position arm's length, not to be consumed or directed by Council, but it is also funded directly by CoPP. The second challenge is the minimal resources provided to the project by Council, coupled with its broad scope. Each

these issues may be considered obstacles, their identification provides important tensions for the project. Constant reinterpretation of the role and priorities of this evolving project is required. This continual self-reflection as part of its broader organic qualities keeps the project contemporary, locally relevant, and vital.

### **Replicability or adaptation of policy elsewhere**

Not only has the Community Pulse inspired local residents, but it has also inspired the development of other social change indicator projects. The ground-breaking Smiles Per Hour project has featured in articles in 16 newspapers throughout Europe, North and South America, Asia, and the Middle East. In nearby Darebin in 2007, Neighbourhood Watch developed their own Smiles Per Hour indicator, kick-started by the local Police Services. Local Council in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, has been provided with a Smiles Per Hour street sign and data collection kit upon request. Additionally, the development of another indicator project in Regina, Canada, has been modelled after the Pulse's methodology.

### **Pre-requisites and Recommendations**

When asked about the Community Pulse's replicability, staff and volunteers have clear advice: it's about place-based values and local citizen vision. This advice builds on the underlying principles of the initiative: self-determination, creativity, and grassroots engagement processes. Community indicators are messy, not clear cut, and require a long-term commitment to process. Most importantly, indicators can be developed with the support of theory and connection to policy, but must be determined locally. The methodology can be modified to new places and communities, but only the people who experience the community can determine what progress means locally.

They also recommend that such an initiative needs to have long-term, high-level support (i.e., CEO) in its development phase and a clear, but arm's length, relationship to Council. This independence ensures indicators are not consumed by Council's priorities and can mobilize community leadership. When indicators are determined by citizens as *what matters*, they are more likely to become involved not only in the data collection, but also in *being the change*. This social change is both measured and stimulated by the chosen suite of indicators. While some measures and indicators can stand on their own, it is important to understand the broader context, within a framework of the four pillars of sustainability: economic, social, cultural, and environmental. Meaning is created only through engagement and over time through interesting and accessible projects, therefore, local indicators need to be determined locally.

## **Further information**

Content been provided by a number of individuals, including Alicia Hooper, Community Pulse Project Coordinator, CoPP; Peter Streker, former Co-ordinator Community and Health Development; Janet Bolitho, CoPP Councilor; and Anne Garrow, advisory community member of the Community Pulse and resident of the CoPP. The case study was researched and written by Marnie Badham under the supervision of Dr. Nancy Duxbury, Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, in 2010.

### **UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights**

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