

# Measuring the contribution of culture

## Work continues on developing indicators that will assist councils optimise their investment in cultural activities.

Over the past decade around the world there have been significant developments with indicators of progress that measure issues far beyond the traditional economic paradigm of the Gross Domestic Product. The OECD, for example, has spent almost 10 years in looking at the diverse experiences and living conditions of people and households, focusing on people's wellbeing and societal progress as well as the functioning of the economic system.

Two significant national efforts to measure wider aspects of progress in Australia are the ABS's *Measuring Australia's Progress* (MAP) (ABS, 2011) and the *Australian National Development Index* (ANDI) (ANDI, 2012). MAP is a project of the Australian Bureau of Statistics that tries to answer the question: "Is life in Australia getting better?" It provides a national summary of what the ABS views as the most important areas of progress. In contrast, the ANDI is a new citizen-driven initiative, a collaboration of leading community organisations, church groups, businesses and universities that aims to introduce a holistic measure of progress, with progress being determined by the stakeholders, the people of Australia.

In a parallel development, there are an increasing number of initiatives for measuring change at a local level, notably community indicator projects that provide data for local government. These include Local Government Queensland's Community Wellbeing Indicators, City of Sydney's Community Indicators Framework and Community Indicators Victoria.

Traditionally, the cultural dimension has been absent from international and national initiatives, such as those mentioned above, or if existent, subsumed under other headings, including social. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is that culture has not been universally acknowledged as an essential dimension of public policy (although that acknowledgement is ever-increasing). The second reason is that the definition of what is culture, and therefore what are cultural activities, is very broad. If you aren't sure what it is you are measuring, then you will definitely have difficulties measuring it. A further factor is the so-called intangible nature of culture which, unlike money, for example, can't simply be counted. This provides prospective measurers with many challenges. Given



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that those doing the measuring have traditionally been economists, that difficulties have arisen is not surprising.

However, increasingly, indicator projects, especially those focused on local government, identify the cultural dimension as an area of public activity that needs to be monitored and measured. One project that includes the cultural dimension is Community Indicators Victoria (CIV). This initiative began in 2005 to facilitate stronger evidence-based decision-making in local government, with a focus on community wellbeing. It provides data for Victoria down to a local level on 75 indicators. These are divided into five major domains: social, economic, environmental, governance and cultural, with the cultural dimension delineated as 'culturally rich and vibrant communities'. As CIV's scope is very broad, it includes a modest amount of focus on every topic. It does, however, contribute some valuable data for cultural planning, including questions under the heading of culturally rich and diverse communities about diversity (community acceptance of diverse cultures), leisure and sporting opportunities. The questions it asks community members to determine levels of participation in the arts are: 'perceived opportunities for arts participation in their communities' and 'level of individual arts participation'.

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A second phase of data collection for this project is underway, with a new lot of data to be available in 2012. This will include responses to questions about participation in arts and cultural activities, allowing comparison over time on this dimension within and between LGAs in Victoria.

The City of Sydney, in developing its new indicator framework, has followed CIV's lead and includes data on the same five domains, with several questions being included about cultural, including arts, participation. This will allow comparisons between Sydney and the City of Melbourne.

This interest in indicators for culture is shared by the cultural arm of United Cities for Local Government (UCLG), the international peak body for local government. *Agenda 21 for Culture*, an undertaking of the Commission for Culture of UCLG, published a discussion paper on cultural indicators in 2006. It proposed that development of an indicator framework is essential if culture is to be consolidated as one

of the pillars of development. It suggests the inclusion of these topics:

- description of municipality: organisational structure and budget (%) for culture
- cultural infrastructure and cultural practices
- culture and social inclusion
- culture, territory and public areas
- culture and economy
- governance of cultural policies.

(*Agenda 21 for Culture*, 2006, p. 5)

The Commission for Culture has committed to a development of this preliminary framework into a set of indicators over the next few years, although is, as yet, not able to report on progress.

The Cultural Development Network (CDN) has been working since 2007 to assist local government to understand and measure the impact of their work in and on culture. This work became a focus because few councils had any well-developed strategies to measure their work and its impact, yet most were making significant investment in the area. There was a significant national project, *Benchmarking Cultural Development: Opportunities for Local Government*, initiated by the Australia Council and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) between 1996 and 1999 (UTS Centre, 2000). This pilot project was intended to establish "effective measures of outcomes from cultural development activity in Local Government that could be applied as signifiers of good practice" (p. 4). However, this project seems not to have made a lasting impact on local government nationally, not even for participating councils. Since then, there has been no co-ordinated national attempt in Australia to develop or apply indicators to measure culture in local government.

A set of indicators for measuring arts participation, and councils' contribution towards this, has been developed by CDN (CDN, 2010). This framework is based on the premise that the primary focus of the cultural development sector of local government is the enhancement of cultural vitality. One way that cultural vitality can be measured is through considerations of creation, dissemination, validation and support of arts and culture (Jackson et al, 2006).

Four categories for measurement of the arts are proposed:

- presence of opportunities to participate in arts activity
- rates of participation in arts activity
- support for arts activity
- outcomes of arts participation on cultural, social, economic and environmental dimensions.

This framework includes a large number of indicators, many more indicators than any individual council would wish to apply. Councils would need to select relevant indicators based on the values and goals they have established. However, as Jackson points out, a range of indicators is required, as "the relative standing of a city's cultural vitality can change substantially depending on which element of cultural vitality is being compared." (2006, p. 11)

There are also significant contributions that the arts can make to other dimensions of local governments' responsibility towards their communities, including such areas as social equity, economic viability and environmental sustainability. These are also considered in the framework, but indicators are less well-developed, requiring further consultation and discussion with councils. The practice that John Smithies recommends in the previous article, of councils considering the cultural impacts of their work, could contribute to a set of meaningful indicators. CDN continues a process of discussion with stakeholders so that a useful framework can be established to assist local government to measure the impact of all their work in and through culture.

The recent conference *Making Culture Count: Rethinking measures of cultural vitality, wellbeing and citizenship*, co-ordinated by CDN with the Centre for Cultural Partnerships, University of Melbourne, explored a variety of issues around measurement of culture. Presenters from around the world and various spheres of government (national, state, local), as well as academics, community organisations and individuals, discussed how diverse aspects of the cultural dimension, including vitality, wellbeing, citizenship and heritage, can be measured. The final session of the conference developed a resolution about cultural indicators that Professor Mike Salvaris will take to the *OECD World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy* in October 2012, to assist international deliberations about what should and could be measured about culture. Proceedings from the conference and a book are expected in late 2012, available from [www.culturaldevelopment.net.au](http://www.culturaldevelopment.net.au).

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