

Over the last month, Stephanie spoke with [Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance](#) (MD), [Communities Count](#) in King County (WA), and [Data You Can Use](#) (WI). These organizations have built and maintained indicator projects with various levels of aggregation, data sources, and community input. The purpose of these informational interviews was to understand how the organizations steward the data, ensure relevancy overtime, and long-term outcomes and changes to the indicator project.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Formalized community input through user groups or advisory groups seems to be an important aspect of long-term relevancy and sustainability
- Funders generally do have a place in the advisory or user groups
- Figuring out how to anticipate future data needs can help ensure relevancy
- More data isn't always better and whittling down indicators should be a community endeavor
- Workshops, trainings, and other user-oriented events are important
- Collecting use case information and other analytics is challenging, time consuming, and not often systematic

### **Baltimore Neighborhoods Indicators Alliance (BNIA)**

The BNIA project was founded in 1999 with a series of 90 indicators and has grown to 150. Originally a report, similar to an encyclopedia of neighborhood data. It has since transformed into an online, interactive project with various iterations of indicators. Recently released a new tool called "Compare my Neighborhood" so that people can choose similar neighborhoods based on a set of indicators, compare to surrounding neighborhoods, or compare to the city.

Identifying indicators is a group effort and incorporates funders, the community, and BNIA's staff. Staying plugged into the various projects and initiatives around the city helps BNIA anticipate future data needs. For example, the funders started convening an arts and culture table back in 2000 so BNIA started brainstorming where and what data they could get related to that and were able to integrate the project in that space. Being proactive to help understand what the community might need in 3-4 years is helpful in data acquisition and makes you instantly relevant when people start looking for that information.

One way BNIA tracks interest in indicators over time is a community wish list. If they keep hearing a data need in the community, it is added to this list. Sometimes it takes 10 years to operationalize an indicator, but the list provides BNIA with a fundraising opportunity.

One of the keys to long-term sustainability has been to maintain contact with all the organizations who are providing data. Some of those data providers sit on the advisory group. The relationship-building and maintaining is a huge proportion of the job. She said, "If you're struggling to get data, you can't prepare the next year's report."

In terms of long-term funding, it's important to remember that data becomes more valuable over time. What you are collecting now will be more valuable in 10 years. BNIA started losing money after about 15 years. The outward facing components were failing because the data

infrastructure was becoming too expensive and too complicated. In the early 2010s, BNIA developed a new business model to sell data to other researchers who are doing work in Baltimore and need their historical data. Today, about 1/3 of funding is from academics, nonprofits, and vendors who need access to that data.

One of the main pivots over the last decade has been moving from providing data to training people to create and use data. BNIA views data science as a learning tool and have received a few National Science Foundation grants to work with the next generation of students. This pivot happened as a result of strategic planning efforts with the staff in 2007 and 2012 to identify long-term goals for the project.

### **Communities Count (CC)**

CC has existed for nearly 25 years as a subsidiary of the King County Health Department. They support the county in understanding health equity indicators and technical supports. CC used to administer a county-wide survey to understand social well-being and connectedness, but this has transitioned to utilizing other data sources and narrowing down the indicators that are of interest to the community.

CC works closely with a user group. Recently they narrowed down the indicator list over a series of three working sessions held over a nine month period. The group helped answer questions like: What data they use; What data is difficult to find; What data is or isn't available. The working group focused especially on indicators that described similar topics but had varying levels of reliability or accessibility.

The user group is an informal network of people who know about and use Communities Count. There is a core group that attends including local foundations, nonprofit organizations, health clinics, and community development organizations. The user group meets semi quarterly and focuses on a variety of topics including:

- New data indicators that have been recently updated
- New data that has been acquired
- Introduction to new tools
- Reviewing dashboards or other outputs
- Feedback on community priorities
- Learning how to use data sources
- Experts outside of CC providing in depth context to certain indicators and action items.

The data sources are generally secondary at this point. The Health Department weights data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System for the community. In addition to BRFSS and American Community Survey data, they are starting to utilize local administrative data more often as well as the health department's own data sources like maternal-child health. The data for smaller geographies is modeled and they have created customized health reporting areas to help disaggregate data from the county-level.

The funding streams have changed over time. Being part of the Health Department provides stability but there are also foundation, local city partners, and other organizations that provide funding.

Similarly to BNIA, CC found that after releasing the indicators, capacity building through trainings and workshops is an important aspect of the indicator project. The workshops provide capacity building opportunities but also help CC understand what people need and continue to build the relationships needed to iterate on the indicators themselves.

### **Data You Can Use (DYCU)**

This indicator project started with static maps and 22 indicators across four domains. The data is from 2016 and has not been updated recently. They have identified a fifth domain to add in indicators and plan to expand and update in the near future. However, they won't update the data until the Census Bureau figures out 2020 data releases.

The indicators were originally selected by an advisory committee comprised of the funders, city employees, and community organizers. DYCU user tested every step of the way with the community. Once the indicators were released, they also conducted workshops on each of the domains. These workshops helped them understand that it doesn't matter if the data is available because people don't understand how they can use it. The workshops focused on providing examples in neighborhoods and helping people understand how to (1) access, (2) sort and manipulate data, and (3) understand what they find.

The user groups are really helpful for data literacy as well. Often community members ask for a particular datapoint and the discussion around it helps identify exactly what they want to measure. DYCU uses those opportunities to explain why things might or might not be helpful in that context as well as any nuance to the data that exists. They stressed the importance of creating a limited indicator list and being judicious in adding new ones.

In addition to the new domain of data, DYCU is currently working on an interactive platform to replace the static maps. The interactive maps came from requests from funders and the broader community. DYCU repeatedly emphasized the importance of incremental, sustainable changes and regular user testing with community members.

DYCU is governed by a set of principles, which helps them deal with conflicts between the user group's desires and DYCU's expertise in data. For example, at the beginning, funders generally just wanted more all the time and DYCU could point to their principle of "less is more". They are also very committed to ensuring that each indicator has a purpose and is connected to something, which is detailed in the "Why is this important" section of the indicator website. Always having an answer for why something is the way it is when asked is important when working with funders and the community members.

Additionally, identifying the primary audience of the tool is important and guides their decision making with regards to adding indicators. Often more data savvy users want more complicated

indicators, but they choose to stick to the most straightforward and useful since their primary audience is community organizers.

One of their methods of ensuring data isn't weaponized is not providing neighborhood comparisons or making it easy to compare neighborhood data on the website. The data is always compared to the city overall. DYCU also tries to avoid value-driven language like "best" and "worst" in describing where a neighborhood is benchmarking. The most valuable data that could be weaponized in their indicator list is market value data, but there are other easier sources for people to obtain that data from.