

Can data standards improve our common lives?

ISO 37120 and Canadian municipalities

Are data standards what our communities and cities need most? Certainly not. We are in much greater need of aspirations that are far more enriched than that. Our communities already suffer for the lack of aspirations that foster *hope*, rather than despair. Organizing and collecting useful data, however, can be very valuable if, along with that organizing and collecting, we have proper confidence in that data. Information about our communities that is clear, consistent, and available in useful forms can support our efforts to develop well-provisioned, human-centred communities and cities.

Information has always been a critical resource for good decision making. Municipalities rely on all kinds of data to effectively fulfill their various responsibilities – e.g., water quality testing, assessing and collecting taxes, building permits, and information on infrastructure. With this in mind, ISO (International Organization for Standardization) has been working on a new data standard called ISO 37120:2014, designed to help municipalities consistently measure various aspects of sustainability and quality of life.

Indicators for Sustainability and Quality of Life

ISO 37120 is a voluntary standard that provides information for municipalities on 100 factors that ISO has identified as critical for quality of life for citizens and long-term viability

for infrastructure. The standards describe what data to collect and what format the data needs to be in to allow for equivalent comparison with other municipalities. There are 46 core indicators – standards with a “shall” weighting – indicating a requirement that you need these to be an official ISO 37120 participant. These range from firefighting capacity to water quality standards. An additional 54 indicators are “should” weighted and are recommended as supports to the core indicators.

ISO is a post-WWII standards organization that was started to increase the reliability and consistency of processes and information across a wide range of engineering, manufacturing, and management practices: “The foremost aim of international standardization is to facilitate the exchange of goods and services through elimination of technical barriers to trade” (ISO/TC 268 Business Plan). In addition to engineering and manufacturing, ISO standards include IT and data management, as well as social responsibility standards. Some of the standards include certification – achievement of a standard that is verified by ISO and that can be used as an industry benchmark. In the case of ISO 37120, participation is voluntary, meaning the standard is not intended to be a formal certification. Instead, it is designed to provide a framework for internal progress on measures that are deemed important to municipalities and, in turn, provide an opportunity for comparison across

municipalities globally. ISO has identified that confusion on sustainability reference points and access to consistent data are key issues. Clarity and conformity are the objectives being sought with ISO 37120.

Value of Standardization

This interest in standardization for municipal data collection is intended to provide guidance on what kind of data is important to collect and how to organize that data consistently. We know that what gets measured is more likely to be attended to than what does not. The team working on ISO 37120 determined that the indicators selected are foundational for sustainability and quality of life. These base contributors are expected to foster growth and development of economic and social characteristics. Businesses and investors can use this information with greater confidence that what they are seeing is equivalent from one community to another. ISO also notes that it expects that municipalities will be able to use these measures to improve



MILTON FRIESEN is the Program Director of Social Cities at Cardus, a North American public policy think tank based in Hamilton, Ontario. He has served as a municipal councillor and is also working on a PhD at the School of Planning, University of Waterloo, exploring new ways of measuring the social conditions of cities. He can be reached at <mfriesen@cardus.ca>.

ing new ways of measuring the social conditions of cities. He can be reached at <mfriesen@cardus.ca>.

Poverty, homelessness, and inadequate housing remain vital issues – but, measuring them in terms of percentage of a given city that is devoted to slums is not an effective tool.

lending rates, save on insurance costs, and increase their ability to evaluate progress on municipal goals and aspirations.

On the tempestuous seas of contemporary data generation, consistent standards that help leaders identify both what is important and how to measure it are increasingly relevant. We are slowly learning that having huge quantities of data doesn't help if it's the wrong kind of information and doesn't address the questions we are asking.

As municipalities consider adopting ISO 37120, one of the key questions for municipal leaders is: How well does ISO 37120 frame municipal sustainability and quality of life? If a given city collected and organized its data using this specific framework, would the resulting picture of the municipality be adequate? What would be missing?

Additional Considerations

Let me propose four further questions that can help municipal decision makers evaluate the merits and limits of ISO 37120.

First, how well suited is this international standard to Canadian municipalities? Given that this is an international standard, the particularities of our context needs to be considered. Interested users will notice there are a number of indicators that don't apply to most Canadian communities. One of them is in the required "transportation" indicator section, where the core measure is the number of kilometres of high-capacity public transportation per 100,000 residents. This could be pro-rated for smaller municipalities; but, the category may simply not ap-

ply given that there are only about 50 municipalities in Canada with populations larger than 100,000. More than 3,600 of Canada's municipalities are smaller communities, where high-capacity transit isn't relevant. Other measures for transportation will likely be more useful as a base infrastructure indicator outside of major metropolitan areas. Another measure that reflects the international dimensions is found in the "shelter" section, where the indicator used is a percentage of city population living in slums. Though Canadian cities have had slum areas in the past, current legal and formal developments have changed the nature of housing shortages and migration patterns in Canada. Poverty, homelessness, and inadequate housing remain vital issues – but, measuring them in terms of percentage of a given city that is devoted to slums is not an effective tool.

A second question when considering ISO 37120 is to ask what is missing in terms of measuring sustainability and quality of life. One of the most notable gaps is a lack of higher-order human needs, such as purpose, meaning, and belonging, as they relate to quality of life and sustainability. The needs addressed in the standard are very basic, located near the two lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs – physiological and safety/security. While these are critical needs, and necessary for effective municipal function, they are clearly not comprehensive indicators. Canadian municipalities are required to meet these needs as a requirement of laws outlining municipal responsibilities. It is possible to meet these

basic needs, but leave significant issues unaddressed. Higher-order matters are particularly vital to quality of life – belonging, esteem, self-actualization. These are the arenas of purpose, meaning, and belonging that are essential for full citizenship. Similarly, the sustainability measures reflect very basic, functional matters that do not address more difficult overarching issues – such as the gap between the many who have much and the few who have little, and what narrowing that gap might mean for global resource development. In cities and communities, basic needs and higher-order needs are deeply interrelated and consistent delivery of basic services is dependent on matters such as collective trust, acceptance of legal institutions, investments in education, and so on. What isn't clear, or included in the 198 Swiss Francs (\$275 CAD) document's standards, is a rationale for the choices made in developing the standard. ISO 26000:2010 (the standard for social responsibility and other wellbeing indicators) may need to be carefully considered alongside ISO 37120.

Third, does this standard provide a data framework that will save administrators and managers time? Does it simplify the often difficult process of deciding what data is important and how it can be collected and communicated to decision makers? Wide adoption of the standard will require that its simplifications make it useful for navigating the emerging data landscape without being simplistic. One way to evaluate this sense of it would be to identify, independently, what key municipal issues are in a given context and then look at ISO 37120

to determine how those key issues are addressed (or not) by the indicators.

This would prevent the *standard* from determining what matters to a municipality. For example, the “urban planning” section requirement only asks about the hectares of green areas present per 100,000 residents. This is important; but, for most Canadian municipalities, it would not rank high as a single measure on the planning priorities list in the same way that it might in global, informal developments, where green space can be exceedingly rare.

Finally, if ISO 37120 was widely adopted in Canada, would it provide a sufficiently useful framework such that organizations like the Federation

of Canadian Municipalities would find it valuable for lateral comparisons? How would it fit within or alongside other national data such as that from the National Household Survey, the various cycles of the General Social Survey, Census data, the Standards Council of Canada, or various types of market-derived data? Comparing ISO 37120 with the role that these data sources play in current municipal practice will be required in order to clearly identify where the gaps and overlaps are.

Safeguarding the Process

The ISO does not claim to be comprehensive or sufficient for all measurement. Standards related to

resilience (an important aspect of sustainability) are being developed, for example, and ISO will continue to add new standards to the more than 20,000 that have been developed since the 1940s. Disciplined, focused, and common standards can be very useful for municipal leaders as they navigate the changing conditions of their various communities, as long as we are aware that there are many assumptions, blind spots, and deep values that are quietly built into all measures. We can safeguard the process by making a parallel investment in understanding what those assumptions are and how they will shape the long-term direction of our communities and cities. [MW](#)

as published in

Municipal World

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE – SINCE 1891

1-888-368-6125

www.municipalworld.com