

# Toronto Environmental Database Project – Overview

## Background

Modern cities face a diverse array of pressing environmental issues that affect the quality of life and economic viability of their residents. Toronto is no exception, and has for many years made efforts to improve the environmental quality of the city. In April 2000, Toronto City Council adopted its first environmental plan, entitled “Clean, Green and Healthy”. This was the outcome of a two-year process guided by an Environmental Task Force and articulates the City’s long term environmental vision as well as establishes a near term agenda for protecting and enhancing Toronto’s natural environment.

In the process of developing and now implementing the Environmental Plan, City of Toronto staff and the Environmental Task Force realized the inherent difficulties of knowing when one environmental problem has been sufficiently addressed (or at least mitigated), and when another potential problem area requires more public action. Because the City of Toronto has only finite resources available to improve its environmental conditions, it is forced to develop effective methods in assisting with the difficult task of choosing environmental priorities. Many cities throughout the world are in similar situations and due to restricted finances, must make challenging decisions that affect future environment conditions.

One effective evaluation tool that helps governments study and assess progress made towards improving environmental conditions, and achieving healthier and safe living conditions for residents, are indicators. Many local municipalities around the world, including Toronto, have spent considerable time and resources to develop indicators to measure the health of ecosystems. The information that has been collected and analyzed has greatly assisted the ability of decision-makers make better choices about environmental issues.

## Purpose

The Toronto Environmental Database (TED) Project is currently being designed by the City of Toronto and the International Council for Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) to aid the City to make more informed decisions regarding the investments it makes in improving the urban environmental quality of Toronto. In completing this project, an environmental database will be developed and housed in the W&ES department, and will be focussed primarily on technical environmental data. This will assist the City of Toronto to provide accurate, consistent and timely responses to internal and external requests for environmental information.

While improving the efficiencies in the work of the environmental professionals within the City, and further advancing technical environment indicators, this project will develop an enhanced dialogue at an international level, between the participating cities about the environmental conditions of urban areas.

## Project Overview

Approximately 6-10 interested cities from around the world will be selected to participate in the TED project. Criteria for determining which cities are comparable to the City of Toronto include:

- population size and territorial area;
- socio-economic conditions including culture/societal values, education of citizenry, and income/capita;
- topographic and geographic conditions (e.g. near a large body of freshwater with several watercourses draining into it);
- existing environmental stresses and conditions;
- local climatic conditions;
- previously demonstrated interest in environmental indicator projects; and
- having the adequate local data to support this initiative and the ability to employ the same techniques in data collection and measurement.

The selected cities will work with lists of technical indicators under the categories of Air, Water and Soil Quality. The list of indicators (including the relevant criteria/guidelines of acceptable pollution discharges into the air, land and water) will be determined at the outset of the project by the City of Toronto in consultation with ICLEI.

Categories such as Energy, Transportation, Food, Urban Form, Waste, Pesticides could be considered in any next phases of this project. These secondary categories, which contain indicators of the human consumption of natural capital, would be a critical next step to foster a better understanding of the linkages between human actions and environmental consequences, and improve the ability of cities to prioritize environmental issues.

## **Project Objectives**

At the outset, there are four main objectives of the TED Project. They include:

- to further develop work in environmental quality indicators in the context of the local municipality;
- to collect, analyze and present data for environmental indicators and improve the ability of W&ES to respond to internal and external information and data requests;
- to assist the City of Toronto, and the other selected local governments, in determining future environmental priorities based on technical information; and
- to compare amongst participant cities:
  - the methodologies used to collect indicator data
  - the criteria/guidelines of acceptable environmental pollution discharge.

## **Deliverables**

The main deliverables of the TED project would include:

- a consultant report documenting the process, summarizing the results of the investigation into environmental indicators, and the provision of recommendations for future research into environmental indicators and evaluating the environmental priorities of cities, and international partnership;
- an electronic database containing the applicable information and data that was provided by the participating cities for the indicators determined at the outset of the project; and
- a live network of technical experts from each participating city .

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