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Policy influence of indicators likely to increase if policymakers are involved in design

Researchers have explored the influence of indicators in transport policy in two case studies at the EU and Member State levels. In both cases indicators were widely used, however, this did not always translate into direct influence on policies. Involvement of policymakers themselves in the development of the indicators and good links to achievable goals were thought to increase the likelihood of policy influence.

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Indicators, for example, greenhouse gas emissions as a signal of climate change impact, can be used for monitoring or performance assessment or evaluation of policies. There is a widespread assumption that indicators will inform and influence policymakers with a positive effect on decision-making. However, there are few studies regarding what influence they have on the policy design itself. In this study, conducted as part of the EU POINT project[1], researchers use two case studies to examine whether indicators included in policy assessment or analysis reports are (i) used in policymaking, and (ii) what influence they have.

The first case study was at the EU level, and was based around the 2005 ASSESS study used to review the policy objectives drawn up in the 2001 white paper entitled 'European transport policy for 2010: Time to Decide'. The indicators were used to forecast the effects of policy measures in the future, and the study then provided policy recommendations.

After interviewing four core partners from this process, researchers concluded that the indicators from the ASSESS study were used to prepare documents, as well as a basis for meetings and negotiations. The researchers also found evidence of the direct influence of the indicators, as some interviewees felt that they had affected plans for policy change. This was supported by the fact that policy recommendations in official documents published subsequently matched that of the key conclusions of ASSESS.

The researchers caution against exaggerating the direct effects of indicators in this case and point to other factors that may have caused the policy shifts, such as the economic downturn. However, they do conclude that it is likely that the indicators made the reasons for policy change clearer and more justifiable.

The second case study was based on the 2008 Swedish Institute for Transport and Communications Analysis report, which contains several indicators and feeds into the Swedish government's strategy plans for transport. The researchers conducted interviews with 15 individuals involved in implementing transport policy and developing indicators, including politicians, civil servants and experts.

The interviews confirmed that the report was used, as it formed the basis of a small section in the state budget and was also referenced in debates. However, actual influence of indicators included in the report appeared to be low; apart from raising awareness of the issues in a very general sense, the researchers conclude that they could find no policy decisions which had changed as a result of the indicators.

The researchers discuss possible factors contributing to this low influence which might include the limited scope of the indicators and no link to clear actions. Reasons for the greater influence of indicators in the EU case study include better links to clear, achievable goals and the fact that policymakers themselves were involved in the design and development of the indicators. This meant that they trusted and understood them, say the researchers, and consequently were more likely to refer to them.

1.POINT (Policy Influence of Indicators) is supported by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme. See: http://www.point-eufp7.info/