Using indicators in a decision-making process – challenges and opportunities

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ESAC Workshop “Indicators: user requirements, methodological issues and communication challenges”
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Outline
(three questions I was asked to address)

1. How can indicators contribute to decision-making?
2. Where and how do users come in?
3. How could academia contribute further?
1. How can indicators contribute to decision-making?
Multiple types of use, but also non-use – and misuse?

- High expectations – often also great disappointments
- Non-use as a norm?
- Misuse? Manipulation?
- Attempts to
  - ensure indicators are used correctly (user guidelines, etc.)
  - safeguard the neutrality of indicators through ensuring the independence of statistics offices
Indicators are expected to fulfil a variety of functions – hence the disappointment?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
<th>Question the performance indicator can help to answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EVALUATE</td>
<td>How well the organization is performing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTROL</td>
<td>Whether the employees are doing ‘the right thing’</td>
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<tr>
<td>BUDGET</td>
<td>Which programmes, people, or projects will be allocated funding?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOTIVATE</td>
<td>How to inspire staff, managers, citizens, etc. in order to improve performance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROMOTE</td>
<td>How to convince external stakeholders that the organization is performing well?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELEBRATE</td>
<td>Cause for celebration of success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEARN</td>
<td>Which measures and activities are successful/unsuccessful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPROVE</td>
<td>What measures can improve performance?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Roles of indicators in the policy cycle
The policy cycle
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning stage</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Monitoring and description of the initial situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Analysis of the initial situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming, realization</td>
<td>Prognostic</td>
<td>Characterization of expected or potential development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Programming</td>
<td>Reflection on overall goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Reflection on medium- and long-term goals</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social normatives</td>
<td>Quantification of goals and means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Description of the final situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact indicators</td>
<td>Reflection on outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effectiveness indicators</td>
<td>Reflection on effectiveness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Debate on policy objectives

Elections: holding politicians to account

Agenda-setting; identification of emerging issues

Policy design: choice of models, instruments and measures

Ex post evaluation

Ex ante appraisal
Actual roles of indicators
Use ≠ influence

ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE/CONCEPTION OF POLICYMAKING

- **Instrumental/Rational-positivist**
- **Conceptual/Discursive-interpretative**
- **Political/Strategic**

**Process** ➔ **Indicators**

**Argumentation & dialogue**
- Persuasion, Legitimisation
- Critique, Defence

**INFLUENCE**

- **Intended policy**
  - Decisions and actions
    - New shared understandings (learning, framing, agenda-set.)
  - Networking
  - Legitimacy (internal, external)

- **Other policies**

- **Non-policy impacts**
Explaining influence

Producer factors
- Repertoires
- Beliefs
- Interests

Policy factors
- Long-term framework
- Short-term politics
- Indic purpose, pol. stage
- Issue characteristics

User factors
- Repertoires
- Beliefs
- Interests

Dynamics of indicator design
- Argumentation
- Dialogue

Indicator factors
- Validity
- Reliability
- Timeliness
- Relevance

Dynamics of indicator use
- Argumentation
- Dialogue

Other policies
- Decisions & actions (policy change)

Intended policy
- New shared understandings (Learning, framing, agenda-setting)

Non-policy impacts
- Networking
- Legitimacy (internal & external)

I N F L U E N C E
Four indicator roles

Instrumental
• Indicators used for specific decisions
• linear “rationalist-positivist” model of policymaking

Conceptual or ‘enlightenment’ (Weiss)
• Indicators as a source of general information
• Framing; conceptual frameworks; definitions; interpretations

Political
• Indicators justify & legitimise policies, decisions and actors
• Strategic power play and competition between private interests
• But, legitimising an outcome/decision vs. legitimising the process

Systemic
• Indicators embedded in broader societal structures, institutions, cultures
2. Where and how do users come in?
A few observations on the Lisbon memorandum
“Adequate dialogue with the users”

• who are “the users”?  
• users & producers or…  
• epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions, instrument constituencies?  
• like-minded experts and policy actors: shared epistemological commitments and a shared policy mission  
• sector-specific, international  
• promote the institutionalisation of indicator systems and the development of an ’indicator culture’  
• Statistics offices & statistics experts (e.g. ENV indicators)  
• International organisations (OECD, Eurostat)
Indicators are not neutral

- Indicators carry visions and worldviews
- Indicators are embedded in broader institutions and prevailing ideas/ideologies in society
  - Evidence-based policy, New Public Management, “audit culture”, economic efficiency…
- Recognising the underlying assumptions and shared, taken-for-granted “truths”
  - Including e.g. the assumed causal mechanisms between indicators and policy action
What is “adequate dialogue”? 

- “Adequate” for whom? Adequate for which purposes?
- Vast literature and reservoir of accumulated experience on public participation/engagement
- Power and dialogue/participation/engagement: including discursive, ideational, ideological power
- Framing: who defines what is important, relevant; whose knowledge counts?
- Statistics offices as gatekeepers?
Types of expertise

- “statistical literacy” of users (ESAC 2015, July)
- Beware of the knowledge-deficit model!

1. Knowledge-deficit model (post-War)

2. Public understanding of science / scientific literacy (1980s)

3. Public engagement and co-production of knowledge (1990s – )
Types of expertise: three waves of science studies
(Collins & Evans 2002)
Types of expertise (Collins and Evans 2002; 2007)

- **Ubiquitous**: expertise that “every member of a society must possess in order to live in it”
- **Interactional**: “ability to master the language of a specialist domain in the absence of practical competence”
- **Contributory**: expertise needed to allow one “to do an activity with competence”
ESAC 2015: *The Users of Statistics and their role in the European Society*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTIONAL</th>
<th>NON-INSTITUTIONAL</th>
<th>General interest</th>
<th>Specific interest</th>
<th>Research interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heavy users</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light users</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non users</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
3. How could academia contribute further?
“to scale-up research on the interaction between statistical indicators and public policies”

- An important and overlooked issue…

- …but need to go further: beyond public policies to “the society at large”

- Beyond the intended impacts of indicators; beyond the “intended use by intended users”

- Not only the direct, instrumental role, but also the conceptual, political and systemic roles of indicators
Roles of indicators

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Contribution of social science

- Provide empirical evidence on the actual use and influence of indicators
- Highlight the unintended uses and unanticipated impacts of indicators – including notably their systemic impacts
- Draw on research in various disciplines and concerning other fields of policymaking (e.g. public engagement, science and technology studies, urban studies…)
- Instrumental vs. enlightenment role of academic research – opening up vs. closing down
  - Assist indicator producers in their efforts to develop more usable, effective, indicators
  - Help shake established frameworks of thought and mental models, call into question received wisdoms