

Indicators in the science-policy interface – are they influential?

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Abstract

Indicators and indicator sets are increasingly being supplied for communicating evidence to policy processes and to the broader public. The EU FP7 project POINT (Policy Influence of Indicators) aimed to explore the roles that indicators play in different policy processes and contexts, and some of the factors that may be critical for the indicators to be influential in these processes.

The demand for and supply of indicators for environmental and sustainability policies have increased during the last decades. Main drivers behind this trend is adherence to the evidence-based approach to policy making, and indicators viewed as a “knowledge technology” aiming to transfer scientific evidence of wider representation targets to policy makers in an easy-to-interpret manner. Indicators are thought to help highlighting problems, identifying trends, and contributing to the policy formulation and evaluation and monitoring of policy performance. A number of studies however, question to which extent indicators are actually used - and when used, if they are influential on policy processes and outcomes (Gudmundsson 2009, Turnhout 2007)

Results across the POINT project clearly illustrate how indicators are present in a variety of contexts, for a variety of purposes but only sometimes responding to a specific demand. It seems as if the distinction between use and influence of indicators is conducive to the understanding of indicator roles. Use is not exclusively confined to the ‘indicator business’ (producers, institutional users producing texts, evaluation material, decision support documents, etc.) but this community dominates in the user categories found in POINT. The need to transgress this – sometimes overlapping – proximate user and producer group, and to develop and plan for more inclusive processes of indicator selection and assessment, involving broader groups of end-user seems to be of importance to the influence of indicators. This is the case for the instrumental purposes, but also, and maybe even more importantly, for the development of a learning policy environment.

In relation to the indicator settings where policy monitoring, assessment and evaluation are main objectives, one factor of importance to influence stands out across several studies, namely the existence and political weight of a policy plan with binding goals or objectives, and which addresses issues that are sufficiently high on the policy agenda to warrant policy makers’ attention in case of non-compliance. While evidence of (instrumental) influence found in POINT is generally poor (but existing), some explanations regarding time, clarity of objectives, maturity, institutionalisation and financial back-up are at stake.

It should be noticed, however, that a favourable situation vis-à-vis these factors may open up a role for indicators and indicator frameworks as aversive towards new evidence – supporting a ‘tunnel vision’ and depressing new evidence and ‘best practises’.

References:

- Gudmundsson, H., Lehtonen, M., Bauler, T., Sebastien, L & Morse, S. (2009). *Process and results of analytical framework and typology development for POINT*. Deliverable D5, EU-FP7 project POINT, theme SSH-2007-6.1.1: Current Use of and Emerging Needs for Indicators in Policy. <http://www.point-eufp7.info>
- Turnhout E., Hisschemöller M. and Eijsackers H. (2007) *Ecological indicators: between the two fires of science and policy*. *Ecological indicators* 7, 215-228.