BOOK REVIEW


We live in a world of indicators. Universities are ranked by indicators. Governments determine legislative and economic policy using indicators. Human rights organisations use indicators to draw attention to human rights violations. Scholarship dedicated to the study and critique of indicators is also mushrooming. Sally Engle Merry, Kevin E. Davis, and Benedict Kingsbury’s new edited volume makes a unique contribution to this field by focusing on a specific type of indicator – ‘governance indicators’. These indicators measure the economic performance of countries and assess the functioning of their government institutions.

Unlike some edited collections, The Quiet Power of Indicators has a consistent theme across the chapters. Some chapters provide an in-depth analysis of the deployment of one indicator in a specific country. Migai Akech, for example, investigates the use and application of corruption indicators in Kenya (248–83). Other chapters examine the same indicator across several countries. Christopher G. Bradley’s chapter focuses on the historical development of a global indicator used by Freedom House to rank countries on the basis of civil and political openness (27–74).

The editors of the volume provide a very useful categorisation of the indicator development process. According to them, the trajectory of indicator development involves five stages – conceptualisation, production, use, impact, and contestation (10–17). The contributing authors raise a number of useful critiques of indicators. I categorise several of these critiques using the framework articulated by the book editors. I point out that many of the problems identified by the contributing authors are less about the use of indicators and more about the context in which governance indicators are deployed.

The first stage of the indicator development trajectory is conceptualisation. The people who design an indicator inscribe a set of values and a worldview in the process. Prada Uribe argues that indicators designed by the World Bank and IMF assume a model of development that prioritises certain economic policies over others and fails to recognise the importance of human rights (150–51). Uribe’s critique does not directly relate to indicators, but to the power dynamics between the actors.

The conceptualisation phase also involves translating values into measureable concepts. But there is sometimes a ‘slippage’ problem in doing this. The proxy chosen to measure a concept may only partially measure it. An example of this comes from Akech’s case study. He points out that Transparency International’s indicator to measure corruption in Kenya was inadequate because it only measured one form of corruption – bribery (249). Transparency International could readily address this problem by broadening the types of corruption they measure.

Production is the second stage in the indicator development process. During this stage, relevant data is matched to the indicator. Mihaela Serban’s critique of Romanian rule of law indicators loudly rings at this stage. Serban points out that the results of these indicators were widely considered to be unreliable because the data used was a survey of people’s opinions. This calls for the need for more objective data to measure rule of law (216). The trouble is that this data may simply not exist or be too expensive to generate.

In the third phase, once the results of indicators are known, organisations or governments will use these results. Sometimes the results of governance indicators are used to allocate
funding to developing countries. If an indicator suggests that a country has not improved its economic or political position, it may receive less funding from the Global North organisation than it previously did. Uribe argues that using indicators in this manner allows Global North development organisations to wield power over countries in the Global South (150). Moreover, she argues that this process suggests that developing countries are to blame for their own underdevelopment and poverty (140). These concerns, while important, are not an assault on indicators more generally; they again oppose the context in which governance indicators play out.

Sarfaty’s chapter points out that sometimes indicators are used in unexpected ways. She describes how corporations co-opted a corporate accountability index developed by non-profit organisations (118). Sarfaty argues that a corporation’s use of the index is simply ‘box-ticking’ and ‘superficial compliance’. The real problem may be that the indicator itself has little teeth rather than the fact that a corporation is using it.

The fourth phase involves measuring impact. The increase in the number of children attending primary school in any given country from one year to another is likely to be seen as a positive change. Yet indicators, particularly those produced by non-profit organisations, risk irrelevance if government agencies simply ignore them. Akech argues that this is exactly what has happened with Kenya’s bribery index (249). A critique from the other side of the spectrum is that a government may give too much weight to governance indicators. The country will adopt policies to maximise indicator performance and neglect to take into account broader priorities and constituencies in the country in developing its policies (319).

Filtering the critiques raised by the contributing authors through the lens outlined by the editors demonstrates that many of the critiques are not inherent to the process of indicator development. Rather they are criticisms of the context in which government indicators are conceptualised and used. For example, Uribe points out that governance indicators perpetuate global inequalities between countries and impose a fixed-economic agenda on Global South countries. These are not inherent problems with indicators, but instead lament the asymmetric balance of power between those who are judging and those who are being judged by governance indicators.

While the structural inequalities inherent to governance indicators will be hard to change, other problems identified by the contributing authors could be addressed by tinkering with the indicator development process. Indicators that are being co-opted by those that they intend to regulate should be strengthened. Indicators that do not adequately measure concepts they intend to measure should be reformulated. Where reliable data does not exist to measure certain concepts, it should be developed.

Governance indicators give those who are already powerful the ability to measure, monitor and control those who are less powerful in the global political environment. These power dynamics do not hold in other contexts. When it comes to human rights indicators, those with less power (non-profit organisations) attempt to change the behaviour of those with greater power (countries). Used in this way, indicators do not further exacerbate power inequalities, but are a way to ameliorate them. I recommend this book to both audiences that are interested in indicators more generally and specifically to economic development scholars and professionals.

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