

## **Measurement Indicators of State Performance: A Critical Review**

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### **Abstract**

*State capacity and performance across the world are periodically reviewed to measure commitment to espoused targets of human development and economic growth. In this vein, indicators emerge as tools for assessment and index however depleted with methodological limitations. In cognizance of this reality, this study assess critically globally acclaimed measurement indicators and rankings. From qualitative design, the paper revealed that in spite of the import of measurable indicators in their classifications there are still concerns in inaccuracies, errors in measurement and misleading data. From these findings, the paper recommends for transparency and clarity in the use of indicators as measurement institutions subject their procedures and methodology to public scrutiny among other measures to bolster the value of indicators and its generalizations for wider acceptance and use.*

**Keywords:** *Development, Global Rankings, Governance, Indicators*

### **Introduction**

In most situations, attempts to quantify development and governance turns out to be a fruitless endeavour. Yet throughout history, metrics, rankings, and several other quantification techniques have been employed as instruments to measure trends and propensities of state power and governance. One of such techniques for evaluating a variety of phenomena is the use of indicators. Examples include indicators of economic development, the rule of law, sector reform, violence against women, and ease of doing business among many other phenomena.

In any effective monitoring and evaluation system, the use of indicators is an essential component. Its current and rapidly increasing use as a tool of global governance assessment is ubiquitous in economics, business management and several other development policies. However, there have been debates among policy makers, researchers and practitioners on the use of indicators to simplify complex data and present such data in a way to aid measurement or definition of a phenomenon. Studies on effectiveness, reliability and impact of indicators on policy decisions and governance have in the recent times elicited an understanding into the possibilities and pitfalls of this practice. Without arguing in favour or against the widespread use of indicators, it is pertinent to note that though indicators become a formally accepted way of understanding the phenomenon it is perceived to be real and directional however some argued it merely exist to "indicate".

This discourse therefore examined the reliance on indicators as a new form of knowledge production and tool of global governance assessment in an attempt to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of the practice. For this purpose, the paper is streamlined in four sections, this introduction, conceptual discourse, growing interest and reliance on indicators, assessing the limitations and benefits of measurement indicators and conclusion and recommendations.

### **Conceptual Discourse**

Basically, Davies (2010) posit that indicators act as signs or signals that a phenomenon exists. Although, there is no an agreed definition. However, indicators subsumes the use of rankings, indexes and aggregation of complex data into simplified statistical records. The data simplified and processed are used to compare particular units of analysis such as countries, institutions and corporations. Furthermore, indicators often created by development agencies for global or national level are rapidly used by different sectors as tools for assessing and promoting a variety of social justice and reform strategies around the world. Users and Producers include; The World Bank, the United Nations, national governmental aid agencies, global businesses and investors; human rights treaty monitoring bodies, advocacy groups, NGOs etc. For instance, the World Bank have created a range of indicators which are widely used and accepted as indicators for global governance, rule of law and Gross Domestic Product (Merry 2009). Similarly, Davies and Kingsbury (2010) stressed that the production of these indicators by agencies is often a data collection process involving a large network of actors or participants while the methods used to process the raw data typically rely on contributions from some segment of the scientific community.

Subsequently, the data gathered through quantitative procedure represents a qualitative description of social phenomena and representation of which are likely to convey different impressions and stimulate different responds in ways that vary with the type of audience. These variations make up the components of indicators and the standards by which its users largely rely on them. The major characteristics of any standard indicator include its ability to simplify complex data through naming the phenomenon which it claims to measure, in some kind of systematic order, usually a rank-ordered structure..This development therefore underscores the need to re-examine the rapidity of interest and reliance in measurement indicators among practitioners, agencies and scholars.

### **Growing Interest and Reliance on Indicators**

The empirical study in understanding indicators as tools of global governance assessment or as actors and how the numbers produce effects around the world would be incomplete without an insight of its genealogy and why such indicators exist. Theories abound which explain the increased interest in and existence of indicators. Using the Foucault notion of power in 'governmentality theory', indicators as actors and tools of global governance can be understood in a number of ways. Firstly, this concept of power works to highlight the trends that exist to maintain hegemonic, which refers to as '*the conduct of conduct*'. Foucault, rather than focusing on specific governmental institutions, focuses on the practices of government to manipulate and/or mold the conduct of individuals. This myriad of practices, which work to normalize conducts stem largely from economies and business management but also cuts across governmental boundaries and trickle down various subject areas (Davies and Kingsbury, 2010). This act of normalization is perpetuated

through these practices instilling in individuals the mentality to self-regulate suggesting that one should modify their behaviour for one's own welfare and security (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002, Lemke, 2002). In applying this concept, one does not have to search far to find the exercise of this system of control in the practice of indicators. For example, there are indicators that are widely used for decisions such as where to allocate foreign aid, where to build infrastructure, how to allocate taxes, which countries are on the brink of a revolution or which countries offer the best conditions for business development to mention a few (Davies & Kingsbury, 2010). This evaluation, monitoring and auditing undertaken by the promulgators work to assess success or failure of policy initiatives, and are in itself a technology of power within international development. Moreover, it works as a disciplinary tool of surveillance which simply means, if individuals or nations are aware there are being monitored they are more likely to self-regulate. The network within which an indicator acts becomes clearer as a means of tacit control between the governed and those who govern (Davies, 2010).

Subsequently, there is also the concern that by giving them various weights or credibility, the numbers may reflect the concerns of the index compilers rather than a value-neutral interpretation (Green, 2001). Other than the practice of global governance assessment in this form, there are factors which determine how influential indicators are or become, and by extension, also explain the growing reliance on them. In this regard, Davies (2010) opined that conventional economic theory suggests that a key determinant of the influence of indicators would be the cost of assessing them. It therefore follows that if an indicator is inexpensive and is freely accessible through some standard search and user-friendly format or technique, users would be more inclined to rely on them. Again, a few indicators enjoy a monopoly of markets which subject any given user to rely on it as a source. Typically, demand will depend on the availability of other sources of information and substitute indicators.

Invariably, the WHO/UNICEF immunization coverage indicators are sometimes used as measures of overall quality of national health care systems. Partly because of the absence of any other single indicator suitable to provide such information. Again, the Corruption Perception Index, CPI developed by Transparency International in 1995, was probably the oldest and best known as instrument of measurement of corruption and the most used in macroeconomic studies of corruption (Roubaud, 2010). However, there has been strong competition from the governance database developed by the World Bank (WB) which is directly comparable with the CPI. The WB '*Control of Corruption Indicator*' (CCI) though similar to Corruption Perception Index, CPI has differences in their coverage and construction but the two indicators strongly correlated. The correlations between the composite indicators are seen as a form of indirect validation of their pertinence. Indicators may gain credibility and endorsements from its association with particularly prominent individual scholars and scientific communities. In this vein, Kaufmann and Kraay (2010) assert that World Governance Indicators are more reliable because they are published in scientific journals and peer-reviewed.

Basically, the emergence of the demand for indicators may also be attributed to prospective users generating interest in indicators that provide information for shock value. For instance, the promulgators of the Failed State Index have said that most users unfamiliar with the practice are drawn to the indicator when certain states are placed close in ranking with already known failed states (Roubaud 2010). In this vein, Davies (2010) suggests that additional factors such as popularity of the indicators due to its generation of positive network effects or popularity based on how successful it is anticipated to be in

the future. The authors also draw attention to the social mobilization channel which they explain garners credibility owing to the actors involved in the production process and their ability to exert influence over others in their social networks. There are a plethora of factors that determine how much weight or indirect influence an indicator produces but the challenging aspect of this practice is that very little is known about the prominent or influential indicators or how they arrive at the specificity of the numbers. Indicators categorize, measure, frame and explain complex data capable of altering perceptions and aiding in decision making processes. Because they act in all of these ways, it is imperative that there is transparency on the entire creation process and what categories it relies on. .

### **Assessing Limitations and Benefits of Measurement Indicators**

First, we begin with the problems posed by indicators. It is pertinent to establish that indicators are simplifications. Thus indicators purport to describe and measure complex activities through the selection of a variety of sources and information to frame the problem which it describes. The manner and methodology employed in the framing of this phenomenon exposes the entire production to inaccuracies, measurement errors and misleading data. As such, the general implication is that as indicators garner more influence, it succeeds in shaping the way its users frame a particular problem or understand a phenomenon. Again if states, individuals or organisations and businesses are prone to self-regulate based on the numbers these indicators provide, it also follows that participants may only make decisions that allow a rise in the ranks rather than a genuine interest to make an actual positive impact. For example, the World Bank's Doing Business (DB) reports have been characterized as highly critical by the financial press (Wall, 2008). However, it is argued that several other agencies and practitioners point out traits of ambiguity and lack of transparency about sources, changes in the data and that country rankings merely presume that less regulation was better, without assessing regulation quality (Arrunada, 2009). The "Starting a Business" index of Doing Business, DB project disregards all other costs associated with company formation and only considers only the costs incurred by entrepreneurs. Reformers in a bid to self-regulate thus focus on reducing the average time and cost of initial formation when in actual sense, the priority and focus in many developing countries should be to achieve functional business registers. This self-regulation exists in countries such as Georgia and Saudi Arabia that try to implement policies or change its laws to rise in ranking even though the vast rest of their legal systems remain unchanged.

To add, Arrunada (2009) revealed that realities showed that certain reforms declared by Doing Business, DB index as successful only exist on paper and are in fact failures. It is stressed that reforms in Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador and Spain as failures and states that the methodology involved in measurement distorts judgment and if properly applied, states that sit in high rankings such as USA, Denmark and Iceland could easily be downgraded. One of the fundamental ways in which an indicator produces its knowledge is by announcing what it intends to measure. An indicator's given label signifies that the phenomenon which it names exists and its quantification and measurement of the activities surrounding that phenomenon is a representation of it. For instance, the Corruption Perception Index, CPI measures levels of corruption across countries and ranks them accordingly. Corruption is a term which has no agreed definition partly because what amounts to an act of corruption varies from state to state. For instance, it is legal to finance political parties in the United States. This is a form of lobbying in which private firms pay huge amounts in campaign finance. This is considered illegal in some other countries.

Obviously, the relationship between lobbying and corruption can be unclear and its applicability cuts across activities which are both legal and illegal. In essence, Soreide (2006) posit that it would be difficult to tell whether a bad score on a corruption index refers to officially or unofficially permitted activities. For instance, unofficial fees paid to get things done, and smaller bribes demanded for services that a public official is expected to provide in any case, such as the issuing of licenses, customs clearance or facilitation of court processes. The ground upon which it is considered a violation of the law will depend on the judicial details in the country where the offence is committed.

Subsequently, Thomas (2010) argued that measuring perceptions as purported by the Corruption Perception Index, CPI and many other indicators like it provided interesting information about individual opinion. The CPI report is cited widely and frequently worldwide, and while Transparency International clearly asserts that the CPI is a ranking and cannot be used as a measure of national performance in the fight against corruption. It is often misinterpreted and sometimes misused by donors as precisely such a measure. The background documents and warnings about how to read the index are not, apparently, read by the public, and because people's perceptions vary according to their different perspectives, background, wealth and experience. Thus, incorrect interpretation may have damaging implications, and developing countries are the most vulnerable to this problem. The media shaming that comes along with a poor ranking on any of the indexes and headlines such as "the third most corrupt country in the world" and so on, undeniably sends a message to the world, which in turn could affect foreign investment, trade, allocation of funds, resources and aid.

In other words, the "what to measure" problem is one which exposes the fallacy in the interpretation of the indicators as true information. Laws, treaties and conventions are put in place to cover a plethora of cases and for terms such as "corruption" or "terrorism" which are not defined by these laws, it begs the question on what exactly the indicator measures without an adequate definition of the term with which to work with. Succinctly, Thomas (2010) established that these indicators may not be good data but policymakers and organizations often do not have the luxury of waiting for good data to make decisions. Governments and organizations responsible for the allocation of resources are likely to use governance indicators for comparative judgement or criteria of eligibility for benefits based on quality of governance. Data collected come from a range of sources such as expert assessments, polls of experts, and surveys of government officials, businesses and households.

Among several governance indicators, the WGI is mostly used. It covers areas which are identified as fundamental governance concepts. It measures sets of phenomena including, *rule of law*, (which captures perceptions of the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, the courts and the likelihood of crime and violence) *voice and accountability* (which measures perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association and a free media), *political stability and absence of violence* (which measures likelihood of a government being overthrown or destabilized by unconstitutional or violent actions including terrorism) and *government effectiveness* (which measures the quality of public and civil services and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of implementation policies and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies). Certain questions arise from the reliance placed on the WGI (Thomas 2010, Wollock, 2013).

In addition, scholars have referred to these questions as the construct validity of the WGI. For example, what does it mean to measure an abstract concept like *'government effectiveness'* or *'rule of law'*? Do these indicators measure what they claim to measure, or do they measure anything at all? What evidence would we need and how would we know? Besides the problems the construct validity concept poses. In this vein, social anthropologists such as have argued that indicators tend to lose their efficacy as accurate and adequate measures over time. In the context of human rights, this is referred to as the "expectations gap" in which a nation's reporting of successful fulfillment of treaty obligations has a more or less distant relationship to the actual enjoyment of rights by its citizens. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, where the concept of rule of law is recognized but gender equality is still lacking because substantive laws in the country marginalized women from certain civil privileges (Strathern, 2012). Again, Pistor (2010) illustrated that in India there is high confidence in the independence of the judiciary but there is a wide "expectations gap" between what the court reports indicate and what the realities actually present.

Again, indicators fail to assess fully the impact of societal norms and economic dependence showing that laws on paper give little protection, if they are not enforced effectively. For example, "The Indian Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005" provides immediate protection from gender-based violence through temporary protection orders and domestic violence shelters. By this act, it is a requirement for the victims to be informed by the police of the "protection" available to them. However, the police are largely unaware of these provisions and instead render unsolicited advice and ask the victims to simply reconcile with their abusers. This fact obviously underlined the gap which is due partly to the fact that domestic violence is not perceived as a crime. In this regard, the WGI for instance, only captures the subjective perceptions of rule of law where objective and factual indicators of legal fundamentals such as actual crime rates, judicial processes and actual laws are not captured but rather skew the index in two ways. Firstly, the reported crime rates are lower than they actually are because gender-based violence is not incorporated in the index. Secondly, even if gender-based crimes are captured, they are subsumed in the larger crime rate data and do not reflect the impact of rule of law on specific gender-based crimes (Wong, 2011). From this illustrative instance, it implied that there is lower crime rate because domestic violence is not a crime from their perspective. Women will likely come to a similar conclusion because they have been brought up thinking that domestic violence is not a crime. So subjectively, the crime rate will be seen as lower in the eyes of the people. However, objectively, domestic violence is a crime according to Indian law. So the actual crime rate is a lot higher than what the general population reports.

Acknowledging this unpleasant scenario for World Bank's governance indicators, Kaufmann (2009) and other scholars explicitly caution against using their indicators for ranking purposes owing to measurement errors. An example of this error can be seen in the comparison of states which have similar scores on all six World Bank governance indicators. Yet it is possible that state A could score remarkably well on "Government Effectiveness" for instance and low on "Voice & Accountability," whereas state B rakes in average scores. The aggregate hides potentially important differences between the two countries in their scores. Users who rely on an aggregate of the six World Bank indicators would be easily induced to believe that the quality of governance is high in both countries without realizing a serious problem exists with the "Voice & Accountability" in state A.

As regards the usefulness of indicators, although as noted earlier, the practice and reliance on indicator-related information can be problematic. Whilst recognizing these discrepancies, reliance on the information indicators provide have some fruitful developments that extend beyond data simplification. Indicators act as tools of monitoring and evaluation. By serving as instruments of knowledge production, they develop information infrastructure which corresponds with the responsibilities and the scope of the decision making and planning processes at management levels within institutions (Sizer *et al*, 2012). From this observation, for instance measuring a state's progress or decline through public ratings of democracy over a period of time becomes possible with indicators as they gather information on states from the year the indicators are created. Thus, reference can be made to the information gathered and reported in the past years and compared with present day ratings. In contrast, the normative practice prior to this current trend of indicator-reliance is uncertain. There is a possibility that prior information systems were filled with more biases and greater ineptness than present day indicators.

The designation of certain states as a 'failed state' is not necessarily one that fosters imaginative leadership or outflow of private foreign investment or aid. However, in this context the indicators draw attention to emergency states that are more or less edging toward failure. As such the indicators provide information that is symptomatic at best. This is indeed the purpose for which indicators has been set up. Indicators show patterns that would otherwise go unperceived, they could be highly useful when applied to target states that have reached the extreme. Even though promulgators discourage users from relying on their indicators as basis for the allocation of aid, countries that are perceived as corrupt need help to emerge from the corruption-poverty spiral. Thus if a country is perceived to be corrupt, but is willing to reform, this should serve as a signal to donors that investment is needed in systemic approaches to fight corruption. And if donors intend to support major development projects in corrupt countries, they should pay particular attention to corruption 'red flags' and make sure appropriate control processes are set up to limit graft. (Anderson and Heywood, 2009). Again, the argument that indicators skew development priorities as discussed above though valid, does not necessarily connote that correlation signifies causation. But because users of this index are prone to jump to causal conclusions owing to states' poor numbers, there is the possibility that in allocating resources, states that are typically worse off could receive more resources than were originally intended.

Also the absence of other sources of information can lead to indicators being used for purposes quite different from the ones originally intended by their promulgators. As a result, existing indicators draw attention to the lack of specific indicators to define certain kinds of activities and in turn, may lead to the creation of new and adequate indicators. For instance, the WHO/UNICEF immunization coverage indicators are sometimes used as measures of the overall quality of national health care systems. This was partly because no other single indicator of national health system performance suitable for making cross-country comparisons was in existence. The political uproar that followed caused WHO to stop any subsequent explicit ranking of health systems. Immunization coverage indicators have now filled this gap. Notably, the Human Development Index (HDI) created by Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq is widely accepted as an indicator that assesses human development, partly because its creators deviated from the norm by identifying with, and focusing on both social and economic factors, not just income growth. The HDI was intended to challenge the narrow focus on increasing Gross Domestic Product per capita

that had come to dominate much development discourse. Furthermore, Uruena (2012) consider indicators as a platform for the way international law is applied in domestic courts. Domestic courts act as enforcers and interpreters of international rules in this regard and quantitative mechanisms of monitoring are being adopted by the courts to aid in domestic adjudication. Thus indicators become a form of dialogue or interaction between international and domestic regimes.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper has attempted to explain indicator related practices by critically assessing the risks and benefits associated with increased reliance on indicators. Current available data is insufficient to conclude whether these indicators are being used in a manner that is inappropriate. It should be noted however, that indicators merely “indicate” and like any other tool, are at risk of being misused by users or by those with the power to mobilize them. Measuring institutions in countries with different legal traditions and societal norms requires an appreciation of the different legal structures present in the judicial make-up of a system. The key perhaps lies in knowing where and how human judgment and political contestation should take place. For instance, some years back, Embassy spokesmen from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, Yemen, and Somalia wrote and campaigned to protest their rankings on the failed state index and argued that “the true measure of a nation is not the number and magnitude of challenges it faces, but how it rises to meet them.

Given these limits as noted above, it is clear that indicator-related practices though challenging, serve very important purposes. While there may never be one perfect legal indicator, the production and use of more transparent indicators will better serve the needs of both external users and developing countries seeking to improve the quality of local governance (Rosga and Satterthwaie 2009). In calling for more transparency and full disclosure, producers should additionally explain in clear terms not just its methods but any other underlying assumptions that give *de facto* “meaning” to specific indicators. Most phenomena are simply impossible to measure, thus it may be impossible to provide accurate rankings. Because there is bound to be a misrepresentation of information, an intuitive solution would be to create a new model of ranking, in which countries that fall within the same margins are categorized and grouped under an overall score or rank and listed in alphabetical order. This would do away with the ‘shock value’ factor. More so, newspapers referring to the index would be able to publish the whole table of countries rather than focus on which countries are marginally better or worse, which is a common way of presenting the index today. With regard to the World Bank (Doing Business) Report, Arruñada (2009) suggests that because many measuring institutions is a nascent adventure, the DB should set modest goals that divert focus from short-term effects on policy until a truer picture of the institutions can be drawn. It also suggests that DB should stop being marketed as performance indicators but merely as preliminary and partial snapshots of institutional structures. This could be applied to a variety of indexes.

Another solution would be increased contestation which takes the form of debates on the weighting criteria for the indicators, or about its embedded social and political theory. These strategies may result in the creation of new indicators or increased resistance to and discrediting or modification of potential and existing indicators. This in turn may lead to a call to regulate indicator-related processes and activities. Regulatory mechanisms such as competition law, transnational tort claims, self-regulation and procedural obligations and rules could be adopted. Producers would thus be subjected to these rules and public scrutiny which will allow for transparency, accountability and competition among



participants. Adopting alternative paradigms would also ease the weight of credibility given to indicators. As Davis *et al* (2010) suggested an alternative whereby regulatory interventions target the users of indicators instead. The focus would be to educate the public on these practices. Hence, such advocacy is crucial for acceptance of result or outcome projected by these indicators.

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