Call for article proposals for a special number of the journal “Participations”

Deadline for extended abstracts: 15 December 2015

**Critical perspectives to indicators and participation : governance levels, power and democracy**

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# Introduction: participation and indicators

Public participation, in planning, decision-making and knowledge-production, has been at the very heart of the key transformations of public policy and governance of the past couple of decades. Ideally, participation helps advance noble objectives – it can illuminate techno-scientific controversies and thereby enrich democracy, for instance by reducing the gap between the decision-makers and the civil society (Callon et al. 2001). However, participatory experiences come with its own paradoxes and ambiguities. Participation can be motivated by the desire to rehabilitate collective action, but it can also put the individual at the centre of attention or bypass existing collective institutions of governance and decision-making. Instead of aiming to foster shared deliberation and decision-making between the governing and the governed, participation may seek to obtain public acceptance for projects and decisions already made in advance. Furthermore, participation may prioritise either the search for consensus or alternatively, open expression and elucidation of conflicts and pluralism of points of view. Such ambiguities have been at the heart of an ever-evolving scholarly literature in a number of disciplines since the 1960s and 1970s.

This special issue focuses on the role of participatory processes in the elaboration and utilisation of sustainable development indicators (SDIs) and new indicators of wealth and wellbeing (NIWW) – two types of emerging indicators that seek to address major challenges facing societies today and in the future.

Indicators have become an essential instrument of management and governance in practically all sectors and at all levels of public policy. The emergence of what some have called an “indicator industry” (e.g. Hezri and Hasan 2004) has been particularly visible in the areas of the environment, sustainable development and wellbeing. Ideally, indicators can operate as “boundary objects” (Turnhout 2009; Star 2010), helping to bridge gaps between science, politics and society, catering to both technocratic and deliberative ideals, combining statistical data, modelling and collective reasoning.

In practice, indicators rarely fully live up this expectation of mediator between different “social worlds”, not least because of the lack of use of SDIs and NIWWs by their intended users. This lack of use is indeed a persistent complaint raised by both the producers (national statistics offices, NGOs, think tanks, etc.) and potential users (decision-makers, public administration officials, etc.) of indicators.

The suggestions aimed at solving the problem derive from two contrasting approaches that are in constant tension: one that underlines the need to improve the scientific quality of indicators, through more intensive work amongst experts, and another that calls for greater collaboration between the producers and potential users of indicators, in order to ensure that the indicators respond to the “true” preoccupations of society (Batterbury and Forsyth 1997; Nygren 1999; Turcu 2013). According to this second approach, extended stakeholder participation in the elaboration of indicators – involving in particular the potential users of indicators – is generally viewed as an essential *precondition for enhanced use* (Innes and Booher 2000 173; Bell and Morse 2001; Rydin et al. 2003; Hezri 2006, 114; Mascarenhas et al. 2014), but also for *reducing the current excessive dominance of experts* in indicator development (Innes and Booher 2000, 173; Bell and Morse 2001; Rydin et al. 2003; Hezri 2006, 114; Turcu 2013); for greater *legitimacy and ownership of indicators* by their potential users; for generating *social learning* through collaborative processes of indicator design (e.g. Mickwitz and Melanen 2009; Lehtonen 2015); and in order to respect the *participatory ethos inherent to sustainable development* (Hezri 2006, 148-149; Bell and Morse 2008; Bell et al. 2011). Finally, by opening up the processes of indicator elaboration to diverse groups and types of knowledge inputs – including both expert and “lay” knowledge – participation would also serve to *broaden the underlying perspectives and framings*, thereby contributing to reflexive and adaptive governance.

The SDIs and NIWWs figure among the most prominent efforts that seek to bridge the gap between the managerial and emancipatory logics behind indicator work, through collaborative processes of indicator elaboration and use. Since the beginning of the 1990s, a wide variety of SDIs have been elaborated, notably driven by work at the UN, at various governance levels ranging from local to global. Heads of state will in March 2016 adopt a series of indicators designed to monitor progress of their countries towards the fulfilment of the UN sustainable development goals, adopted in September 2015. Great expectations are attached to the capacity of these indicators, developed through collective deliberation amongst a broad range of governmental and non-governmental actors, to steer policies towards a greater sustainability. The NIWWs constitute the most recent contribution to these efforts to measure progress through indicators developed through participatory processes (e.g. Stiglitz *et al*. 2010; Sébastien and Bauler 2013; Seaford 2013). Even more explicitly than the SDIs, and with the help of new information and communication technologies, the NIWWs are designed to engage citizens and potential users not only in the elaboration, but also in interactive processes of use and continuous improvement of the indicators.

# The themes of the special issue: problems, paradoxes, pitfalls and challenges in the development and use of participatory indicators

This special issue collects contributions of both theoretical and empirical nature concerning the ability of SDIs and/or NIWWs to achieve the multiple objectives – from greater utilisation to empowerment and mobilisation of diverse forms of expertise. The articles focus on the gaps in the literature concerning the so-called participatory indicators, critically examining the presumed virtues of participation. The following paradoxes and tensions inherent to work around participatory indicators serve as guidance for the contributions in this volume.

1. ***Types of expertise and rationalities: tensions between the expert and the citizen***

Experts developing indicators are often reluctant to accept greater participation of citizens and potential users in the elaboration of indicators, warning against the risks of “politisation” and suggesting that these groups lack the requisite scientific knowledge and competence. On the other hand, even in participatory processes, “alternative” rationalities are often marginalised, the citizens being forced to adopt argumentation drawing on vocabulary and ideals of “sound science”. What is the potential of participatory SDIs and/or NIWWs to overcome such tensions and dilemmas, and bridge the gap between the expert and the citizen?

1. ***Participation – a means of strengthening the use and influence of indicators?***

Participatory approaches and practices are often implicitly assume the existence of a linear causal chain of the following type: more participation – more democracy – less expert dominance – greater use of indicators – better decisions – less harmful impacts generated by the policies in question. Empirical evidence invites scepticism concerning the existence of such an automatic virtuous circle. Participatory processes are embedded in broader contexts that may either facilitate or compromise efforts to democratise indicators and increase their use. Use does not necessarily enhance influence generated by the indicators, and the impacts from indicators are not always positive. Furthermore, indicators can engender diverse types of impacts, ranging from their direct use in order to steer policymaking (in practice, this type of use rarely takes place), to social learning, shaping of prevailing mental models and cognitive frameworks, and impacts of the legitimacy of policies and policy actors. Articles in this special issue can explore the ways in which participation conditions these multiple types of impacts, and examine the causal relationships involved.

1. ***The systemic impacts of participatory indicators***

The tensions between the objectives of empowerment on one hand and control and management on the other are well known in the literature on participation, yet they are seldom addressed by the experts in the area of indicator use and development (for exceptions, see e.g. Lascoumes and Le Galès 2005; Hood 2007; Rydin 2007; Jackson 2011; Ogien 2013). Such systemic and diverse impacts entail complex and sometimes intractable causal relationships, whereby indicators affect the system within which they operate. Furthermore, the ways in which powerful actors manage to “instrumentalise” and appropriate participatory processes in their effort to advance their own interests are poorly explored in indicator literature. The contributions in this issue can pursue the analysis of systemic impacts of indicators, along the lines developed by scholars who have conceptualised indicators as instruments of governmentality (e.g. Russell and Thomson 2009) and control from distance, in the spirit of “governance by numbers” (e.g. Lascoumes and Le Galès 2005; Hood 2007; Rydin 2007; Jackson 2011, 23).

1. ***Tensions between scales: from the local to the global***

Participatory indicators evoke the question of scales – between the bottom-up and top-down processes of indicator development, and, ultimately, between the varying governance levels, ranging from the local to the global. The top-down indicators, developed by international organisms or national-level authorities, often lack relevance at the local level, while bottom-up indicators, developed through participatory processes at the local level, struggle to position themselves in the broader context of sustainable development and well-being. The contributions in this volume could analyse the role of participation in helping to solve or in aggravating this scalar dilemma, generally considered as an obstacle to the institutionalisation and wider adoption of the SDIs and NIWWs.

1. ***Consensus versus controversy: indicators for opening up or closing down?***

Scholarship and practice in the area of indicator use and development generally relies on two hypotheses concerning the notion of consensus (e.g. Parris and Kates 2003, 569): 1) in order to influence decision-making, the relevant actors must agree on the form of the indicators, as well as on the normative and epistemic assumptions underpinning the indicators (e.g. Godin 2002; McCool and Stankey 2004, 296-297); 2) a key function of indicators is to generate policy consensus (on the means as well as on the ends of policy). However, this vision neglects the potential virtues associated with conflicts and controversies, highlighted, for instance, in literature concerning the “agonistic democracy” (Mouffe 1999). From this perspective, indicators could help illustrate the foundations underlying the existing conflicts, foster learning by stimulating critical re-examination of dominant frameworks of thought and received wisdoms, as well as help to “open up” perspectives (e.g. Stirling 2008). Contributions in this special issue could analyse the ability of the participatory processes of indicator use and elaboration to resist the temptation to seek premature consensus, and instead to foster “constructive conflicts” as well as opening up of framings and decisions (Rafols et al. 2012).

# Submission procedure

The papers can address the above questions from different perspectives – articles of essentially theoretical nature are welcome as well as contributions based on various types of empirical case studies.

Article proposals (two pages plus a list of literature references) should be sent to the editors not later than **15 December 2015** (lehtonen@essec.edu; lsebasti@univ-tlse2.fr; tbauler@ulb.ac.be). Authors whose proposals are accepted will be asked to submit the articles (maximum 60 000 characters) written according to the standards of the journal “Participations” (http://www.revue-participations.fr/soumettre-un-article/) not later than 15 March 2016.

The proposals (as well as the accepted articles) can be written either in English of in French.

For further information on the journal “Participations”, see <http://www.revue-participations.fr/la-revue/>

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