Measuring the World:

Indicators, Human Rights, and Global Governance

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As indicators become more widely used in global governance, particularly in the areas of development planning and human rights compliance, it is increasingly important to understand how they are affecting processes of international legal regulation. Indicators are widely used to assess development and human well-being, rule of law, the status of minorities, and compliance with human rights principles. The origins of indicators as modes of knowledge and governance stretch back to the creation of modern nation states in the early nineteenth century and practices of business management a few centuries earlier. Technologies of audit developed in the sphere of business regulation have jumped domains to global governance.

Indicators introduce into the field of global human rights law a form of knowledge production in which numerical measures make visible forms of violation and inequality that are otherwise obscured. Statistics on income, health, education, and torture, for example, are used to assess compliance with human rights norms and progress in improving human rights conditions. The numbers convey an aura of objective truth and facilitate comparisons. However, indicators typically conceal their political and theoretical origins. They rely on practices of measurement and counting that are themselves opaque.

The world of civil society organizations has also been transformed by the increasing use of statistical measures. There are demands for quantifying the accomplishments of civil society organizations and for "evidence-based" funding. Donors to human rights organizations want indicators of success such as reductions in trafficking in persons or diminished rates of poverty and disease. As donors move closer to business, they have adopted business-based means of accounting for productivity and

accomplishments. The concept of "venture philanthropy" underscores this new perspective. Recipient organizations are tasked to develop measures of what they have accomplished within the period of funding. Given the difficulties of measuring accomplishments such as "increased awareness of human rights," NGOs tend to count proxies for these accomplishments, such as number of training sessions or number of people trained. Clearly, the use of quantitative measures of accomplishment and the introduction of ranking systems based on these measures is transforming the way these organizations do their work.

Indicators are statistical measures that are used to summarize complex data into a simple number or rank that is meaningful to policy makers and the public. They tend to ignore specificity and context in favor of superficial but standardized knowledge. An indicator presents clearly the most important features relevant to informed decision-making about one issue or question (UN Expert Group Meeting 2007: 4). [1] Although indicators are quantitative, expressed in rates, ratios, percentages, or numbers, some are based on qualitative information converted into numbers. A recent effort to develop indicators for CEDAW, for example, uses quantitative indicators such as literacy rates, maternal mortality rates, and labor force participation rates that are sex-disaggregated, along with qualitative indicators such as the existence of legislation such as equal inheritance rights, polices such as quotas for girl children in educational institutions, and

[1] This document, reporting the discussion of an expert group meeting to develop an indicator for violence against women, convened by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, and the United Nations Statistical Division, describes indicators as follows: "Indicators are part of the knowledge base needed to assist policy and decision-making. They help to raise awareness of an issue. Indicators, with their associated benchmarks, contribute to the monitoring of progress in achieving goals, and in policy evaluation. They enable an evidence-based comparison of trends over time, and within and between countries. Indicators on violence against women may also support the assessment of States' exercise of their due diligence obligation to prevent and address violence against women, and the effectiveness of related policies and other measures." (UN Expert Group Meeting Report, 8-10 October 2007, p. 4).

programs such as legal aid services and shelters for women victims of violence. These qualitative measures are quantified by counting the number of laws, the number of shelters, etc., to produce a number (Goonesekere 2004: 10-11). Some indicators use a variety of qualitative measures to construct an ordinal numerical ranking, as is the case with rule of law measures which assess a country's rule of law on a scale of 1 to 5 (Davis 2004: 152). Many indicators are composites of other indicators, produced by blending and weighting other indicators into a new bundle (see Kaufmann and Kraay c.2007).

There are two sociological aspects to the expansion of the use of indicators. The first is a knowledge effect. Numerical measures produce a world knowable without the detailed particulars of context and history. The constituent units can be compared and ranked according to some criteria. This knowledge is apparently objective, in that the interpretations lurk behind the numbers, and is in some ways open to public scrutiny in a way that private opinions are not. The second is a governance effect. Statistical measures of populations are clearly connected to eighteenth and early nineteenth century ideas that the people of a country represent its wealth, and that governance requires measuring and counting these people.

As forms of knowledge, indicators rely on the magic of numbers and the appearance of certainty and objectivity that they convey. A key dimension of the power of indicators is their capacity to convert complicated, contextually variable phenomena into unambiguous, clear, and impersonal measures. They represent a technology of producing readily accessible and standardized forms of knowledge. Indicators submerge local particularities and idiosyncrasies into universal categories, generating knowledge that is standardized and comparable across nations and regions. Indicators are a special

use of statistics to develop quantifiable ways of assessing and comparing characteristics among groups, organizations, or nations.

Indicators are not only a technology of knowledge production but also of governance. They are widely used for decisions such as where to send foreign aid, where to focus on human rights violators, and which countries offer the best conditions for business development. Modern states use statistical information, some of which is bundled into indicators, to decide where to locate highways and railroads, where to build schools and hospitals, how to allocate taxes, and how to deploy police forces to control crime, to give only a few examples. As the modern state came to see its wealth as its population, it put greater emphasis on counting and assessing the nature of the population. Standardized measures mean the state can better administer its population and collect taxes (Porter 1995: 25).

The use of statistical information in general, and indicators in particular, shifts the power dynamics of decision-making. Indicators replace judgments on the basis of values or politics with apparently more rational decision-making on the basis of statistical information. In theory, the process is more open, allowing the public access to the basis for decisions. As Porter argues, in the pre-modern world aristocratic elites relied on non-numerical information circulated within small, private circles (1995). Statistical knowledge grew in importance with the birth of the modern state. The first great enthusiasm for statistics in Europe came in the 1820s and 1830s, and by the mid-nineteenth century in France, statistics were thought to produce the broad public knowledge necessary for a democracy. Quantification provided an openness to public scrutiny. For French bridge and canal engineers at mid-century, for example, calculating

public utility by numbers offered a defense against parochialism and local interests in the locations of railroads and canals (Porter 1995: 121). The massive expansion of quantification in recent times comes from a political culture that demands more openness and seeks to drive out corruption, prejudice, and the arbitrary power of elites even at the cost of subtlety and depth (Porter 1995: 85-6). This, Porter claims, is the power of numbers.

Despite the increase in democratic openness produced by the use of statistics in decision-making, however, this is a technology that tends to consolidate power in the hands of those with a particular kind of expert knowledge: that of the production of statistical measures. In many situations the turn to indicators as modes of governance does not eliminate the role of private knowledge and elite power in decision-making, but replaces it with technical, statistical expertise. Decisions that were carried out by political or judicial leaders are made by technical experts who construct the measures and develop the processes of classification and counting that produce the numbers. In nineteenth-century France, for example, despite claims to rigorous definition and lack of ambiguity, statistical measures were often arcane and hard to understand, requiring careful interpretation by experts (Porter 1995: 74, 80-1). In the area of contemporary global governance, an increasing reliance on indicators tends to locate decision-making in the global North, where indicators are typically designed and labeled.

Indicators provide a technology for reform as well as control. Indicators can effectively highlight deficits, areas of inequality, spheres of human rights violations, and other problem areas. Reform movements depend on producing statistical measures of the wrongs they hope to redress, such as human rights violations, refugee populations,

disease rates, and the incidence of poverty and inequality. They are a valuable reform tool in their ability to show areas of state failure.

As indicators become increasingly central to global reform and global governance, it is critical to examine how they are produced and how the forms of knowledge they create affect global power relationships. They influence the allocation of resources, the nature of political decisions, and the assessment of which countries have bad human rights conditions. They facilitate governance by self-management rather than command. Individuals and countries are made responsible for their own behavior as they seek to comply with the measures of performance articulated in an indicator.

While there is considerable discussion of how to develop good indicators and critiques of their errors of measurement, quality of data, embedded assumptions, and simplification (see Davis 2004), there is far less attention to the implications of the use of indicators for practices of global governance itself (but see Rosga and Satterthwaite 2008.) Within social science, however, there has been considerable attention to the impact on practices of governance of these new political technologies based on statistics and accountability, what has been called "audit culture" (Strathern 2000). Audit technologies are theorized as instruments for new forms of governance and power, "agents for the creation of new forms of subjectivity: self-managing individuals who render themselves auditable" (Shore and Wright 2000: 57). These technologies allow people to check their behavior for themselves so that governments can withdraw from checking behavior and simply check indicators of performance (Strathern 2000: 4). The self-checking practices become evidence of accountability from the perspective of the state. Marilyn Strathern's edited collection focuses on new mechanisms for

accountability established by the British government for evaluating and reimbursing university faculty (2000). The contributors argue that the new system places responsibility for compliance on the performer, not the checker. Thus, there is a shifting of responsibility that masks the underlying power dynamics: the indicator itself does the work of critique and the governed person seeks to conform to the terms of the government. Similar benefits devolve to treaty bodies that develop indicators: if the treaty body can persuade the country being governed to develop its own indicators, the committee can replace its practices of checking of country polices and actions with countries' self-checking (Rosga and Satterthwaite 2008). The turn to indicator creation marks a shift in the way the administration of human rights law takes place. Instead of pressuring countries to conform to human rights laws on the basis of ambiguous and contextualized accounts in country reports or case studies, reports in which each country presents itself as shaped by its history, social structure, wealth, and political agendas, indicators provide comparable information in numerical terms. The burden of assessment rests on the indicator itself, with its agreed-upon standards and means of measurement.

Although the experts developing indicators for monitoring compliance with human rights conventions explicitly reject using these numbers to rank or shame countries and intend only to assess each country's progress over time, once an indicator has been created, others can use them to generate such rankings (Turku report 2005: 7). The reliance on numbers, with their apparently simple and straightforward meanings, produces an unambiguous and easily replicated field for judgment.

Moreover, responsibility for compliance shifts to the monitored organization or country itself, which must not only seek to comply but monitor and report the success of its efforts. The enforcement body moves away from the role of an authority imposing criticisms to a body that registers performance in terms of already-established indicators. In other words, the process of assessing compliance shifts from the encounter between statements and rules in a quasi-judicial forum such as a treaty body hearing to the creation of the measure itself. Once the indicator has been established, compliance is simply a matter of recording performance according to the indicator. Treaty bodies are moving from asking countries to come up with their own indicators toward a universal set of indicators for all countries which can be assessed impartially by the treaty body (Rosga and Satterthwaite 2008: 4).

In sum, the expansion of the use of indicators in global governance means that political struggles over what human rights mean and what constitutes compliance are reframed by technical questions of measurement, criteria, and data accessibility. Political debates about compliance shift to arguments about how to form an indicator, what should be measured, and what each measurement should represent. These debates typically rely on experts in the field of measurement and statistics, usually in consultation with experts in the substantive topic and in the national and international terrain. They build on previous research studies and knowledge generated by scholars. The outcomes appear as forms of knowledge, rather than as particular representations of a methodology and particular political decisions about what to measure and what to call it. An indicator provides a transition from ambiguity to certainty, theory to fact, complex variation and context to truthful, comparable numbers. In other words, the political process of judging

and evaluating is transformed into a technical issue of measurement and counting. Practices of measuring phenomena that are relatively easily counted, such as money or inventories of goods, are transplanted into domains far less amenable to quantification, such as frequency of torture or prevalence of ill health. Technologies of knowledge developed in the economic domain move uneasily into these newer fields, promising greater specificity of human rights and definitions of compliance yet importing new ambiguities in the definition of indicators and the kinds of data they use.

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