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Policy relevance of indicators for sustainable development

After a decade of frenzy into developing indicators for sustainable development (ISD) at different institutional levels, it could be time to start assessing what exactly ISD achieved in terms of their usefulness for policy-making. The paper proposes a contribution to identify the determinants for such an assessment of ISD.

Meant originally (Agenda21 - chapter 40) as a means to improve “*information for decision-making*”, assessing sustainable development (SD) with ISD proved a difficult task not the least because of the series of counter-productive principles attached to SD (multi-dimensionality, participation, temporal and geographical scales, uncertainties...). As a response, the many trade-offs inevitably operated during the construction of ISD participated to develop the many different types of applied statistics into tools for decision-making grouped as the generic category of ISD. Such diversity in the translation of goals, objectives, targets and opportunities of ISD are a further difficulty to develop relevant determinants for an assessment of the policy relevance of ISD. Among the proposed criteria for ‘institutional usability’, applying Clark’s (2002) approach based on the users’ perception of saliency, credibility and legitimacy to ISD, appears to be among the most promising ones. In order to account for the ‘open’ decision-making context implied by SD, modes of institutionalizing ISD could be seen as a further important determinant to assess, and eventually improve, policy relevance of ISD.