

Rafael Ziegler:

The Indicator Syndrome – a methodological study of sustainability indicators, Agenda 21 and Agenda 20

The last decades have seen great efforts to develop sustainable indicator frameworks that in some way or other attempt to provide information for decision-making, improve communication and participation, allow the monitoring of progress and serve as a tool for the operationalisation of sustainable development. A recent survey registers more than 600 initiatives on all levels of governance.

It is time to take stock of these important initiatives in policy integration, and this paper is an attempt at a critical taking-stock exercise. First, I single out characteristics of the indicator syndrome, and thus the pattern that all the major initiatives share. But this exercise in identifying common features of this “tool” for achieving sustainable development also reveals some question about the usability and effectiveness of indicator frameworks. I suggest that this is, *in part*, due to a missing dimension. Indicators are not just new tools for achieving sustainable development and Agenda 21, but they are also something that political actors are already guided by. Therefore it matters to get the latter kind of indicator into view. Achieving agenda 21 requires some thoughts about “Agenda 20”. Methodological considerations and examples for adding a historical and hermeneutical dimension to indicator frameworks are offered, along with a discussion of the resulting changes in influence of indicator frameworks for the greening of policies, and the legitimacy of such attempts.