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Measuring the World

Indicators, Human Rights, and Global Governance

by Sally Engle Merry

Indicators are rapidly multiplying as tools for assessing and promoting a variety of social justice and reform strategies around the world. There are indicators of rule of law, indicators of violence against women, and indicators of economic development, among many others. Indicators are widely used at the national level and are increasingly important in global governance. There are increasing demands for “evidence-based” funding for nongovernmental organizations and for the results of civil society organizations to be quantifiable and measurable. The reliance on simplified numerical representations of complex phenomena began in strategies of national governance and economic analysis and has recently migrated to the regulation of nongovernmental organizations and human rights. The turn to indicators in the field of global governance introduces a new form of knowledge production with implications for relations of power between rich and poor nations and between governments and civil society. The deployment of statistical measures tends to replace political debate with technical expertise. The growing reliance on indicators provides an example of the dissemination of the corporate form of thinking and governance into broader social spheres.

Indicators are rapidly multiplying as tools for assessing and promoting a variety of social justice and reform strategies around the world. There are indicators of rule of law, indicators of violence against women, and indicators of economic development, among many others. Indicators are widely used at the national level and are increasingly important in global governance. Although 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, their current use in global governance comes largely from economics and business management. Development agencies such as the World Bank have created a wide range of indicators, including indicators of global governance and rule of law, and gross domestic product is one of the most widely used and accepted indicators. Thus, the growing reliance on indicators is an instance of the dissemination of the corporate form of thinking and governance into broader social spheres. They are fundamental to modern forms of governmentality whether in the service of corporate, state, or reform modes of governance.

Although indicators are widely used in reform initiatives at the global level under the auspices of the United Nations and international NGOs, they are also increasingly important to corporate social responsibility initiatives. The UN Global

Compact (UNGC) and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) are two of the most significant entities promoting corporate social responsibility, and both rely increasingly on indicators. There are also NGOs developing tool kits to measure corporate compliance with human rights standards. However, in accordance with contemporary audit culture (see Power 1999), these efforts place responsibility for gathering information and assessing it on the organizations themselves. The GRI also provides for stakeholder discussions of the relevant indicators that they will use, and some of the human rights tool kits are flexible. Clearly, this approach to monitoring faces problems of verifying the information it uses, given its reliance on self-reporting and even on choice of measures. These systems are all voluntary, monitored only by a corporation's concern for its public respectability and reputation.

One of the fascinating revelations of the Corporate Lives seminar was recognizing how much corporations participate in the same forms of identity formation as individuals. Corporations work to construct desirable reputations and invest substantial resources in maintaining them through advertising and self-monitoring. Consumer movements have ratcheted up the financial consequences of corporate social irresponsibility by boycotting goods produced by irresponsible corporations and labeling or certifying responsible corporations. An irresponsible corporate performer tarnishes all the other corporations in the same field. It is ironic that the power of indicators and their monitoring and accountability mechanisms is primarily dependant on their impact on corporate reputations. However, as the other articles in this collection

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indicate, the corporate form shapes the way individuals are understood in the current period, so it is not surprising that corporations are reciprocally understood as social beings with identities and reputations.

The Expansion of Indicators for Global Governance

Technologies of audit and performance evaluation common in the corporate world now reach into many domains of global governance. Since the mid-1990s, technologies that were developed in the sphere of business regulation have jumped domains to human rights and corporate social responsibility. Interest in using indicators to monitor human rights compliance has grown significantly. 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 useful to assess compliance with human rights norms and progress in improving human rights conditions. The use of these statistics and indicators derived from them by the committees charged with monitoring compliance with the major human rights conventions has increased over the past two decades. Some committees, as well as the UN's Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, are developing more sophisticated indicators to facilitate the analysis of information and increase accountability. Indicators, particularly those that rely on ranks or numbers, convey an aura of objective truth and facilitate comparisons. However, indicators typically conceal their political and theoretical origins and underlying theories of social change and activism. 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 introduc-

tion of ranking systems based on these measures are transforming the way these organizations do their work.

This article considers 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 presented as objective and often as scientific. The interpretations lurk behind the numbers but are rarely presented explicitly. These numbers seem open to public scrutiny and readily accessible 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 good 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 are a special use of statistics to develop quantifiable ways of assessing and comparing characteristics among groups, organizations, or nations. They depend on the construction of categories of measurement such as ethnicity, gender, income, and more elaborated concepts such as national income. Indicators submerge local particularities and idiosyncrasies into universal categories, thus generating knowledge that is standardized and comparable across nations and regions.

One of the critical ways an indicator produces knowledge is by announcing what it measures, such as "rule of law" or "poverty." Neither of these categories is self-evident. When sponsoring organizations name their indicators, they interpret what the numbers mean. Labeling is essential to produce a measure that is readily understood by the public and simple in its conception. Labels do not necessarily accurately reflect the data that produce the indicators, however. How indicators are named and who decides what they represent are fundamental to the way an indicator produces knowledge.

Indeed, statistical measures create new categories. An indicator may even create the phenomenon it is measuring instead of the other way around. For example, IQ is whatever it is that the IQ test measures. Here, the process of measurement produces the phenomenon it claims to measure. As Porter (1995) points out, although the categories of enumeration may be highly contingent at first, once they are in place, they become extremely resilient and come to take on permanent existence as a form of knowledge. He uses the category of Hispanic in the U.S. census as an example of this phenomenon (Porter 1995:42). One of the most well-known examples of this process is the introduction of the census in India by the British colonial authorities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001; Randeria 2006).

To increase legibility, the population census classified individuals by caste, religion, gender, and other criteria. The British arranged the castes in an orderly hierarchy and sought to collect “objective” information about caste identities. However, the caste categories in existence at the time were relatively fluid, situational, segmented, and local. In place of a wide range of forms of ritual and social exclusion in practice, the British selected pollution by touch as the key marker of low-caste status. Thus, the category “Untouchability” emerged as a distinct, all-India category. By redefining castes in terms of categories that applied across the subcontinent, the British rendered caste into a far more fixed and intractable social entity but one that could be more readily counted and compared (Randeria 2006:19).

Indicators are a technology of not only knowledge production but also 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 that the state can better administer its population by knowing its birth and death rates and income levels, for example, and collecting 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 (1995) argues, in the premodern world, aristocratic elites relied on nonnumerical information circulated within small private circles. 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 midcentury, 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 1995:85–86). This, Porter claims, is the power of numbers.

However, statistical measures have embedded theories and values that shape apparently objective information and influence decisions. Despite the increase in democratic openness

produced by the use of statistics in decision making, this is a technology that tends to consolidate power in the hands of those with expert knowledge. 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, 80–81). 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.

This article advocates an ethnographic approach to understanding the role and impact of indicators. Doing an ethnography of indicators means examining the history of the creation of an indicator and its underlying theory, observing expert group meetings and international discussions where the terms of the indicator are debated and defined, interviewing expert statisticians and other experts about the meaning and process of producing indicators, observing data-collection processes, and examining the ways indicators affect decision making and public perceptions. I am in the early stages of an ethnographic study of three human rights indicators, tracing the social networks and systems of meaning through which they are produced and used. A critical dimension of the ethnography of global indicators is an analysis of the sources of information they use and of the forms of cooperation and resistance by countries and NGOs in the contest over who counts and what information counts.

Defining Indicators

Indicators are statistical measures that are used to consolidate complex data into a simple number or rank that is meaningful to policy makers and the public. They tend to ignore individual 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.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 the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (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 concerning equal inheritance rights, policies addressing quotas for girl children in educational institutions, and programs for 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, and so on, 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 that assess a country's rule of law on a scale of 1 to 5 (Davis 2004: 152). Many indicators are composites of other indicators, a blending and weighting of established indicators into a new bundle (see Kaufmann and Kraay 2007).

The importance of understanding indicators emerged during my conversations about human rights reform with several senior UN staff members. They argued that it was impossible to engage in reform projects without indicators and were working to develop indicators of early marriage. They confronted conceptual challenges in determining the age of marriage. Did marriage begin at the age of betrothal, the age at the wedding ceremony, the age of first sex, or the age of cohabitation? These events have different implications for human rights violations. Age of betrothal might flag forced marriage, because younger girls are less likely to exercise free choice. Not all societies have recognizable wedding ceremonies, nor do they necessarily lead to first sex or cohabitation.

1. "Indicators to Measure Violence against Women." Expert Group Meeting organized by UN Division for the Advancement of Women, UN Economic Commission for Europe, UN Statistical Division, Geneva, Switzerland, October 8–10, 2007. This document, reporting the discussion of an expert group meeting to develop an indicator for violence against women, 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" (4).

Age of first sex could indicate medical complications of early childbearing, such as fistula. Cohabitation might spell the end of a girl's schooling. One UN staffer sighed and noted that marriage is very complicated. Despite these complexities, they settled on cohabitation. I have since pondered this choice, thinking about the difference it would have made were another criterion chosen and wondering how the decision was made and by whom. What were the criteria? Was it the availability of data? To what extent was this decision based on a theory of early marriage and particular health or social problems? At the time, I did not trace the process of deliberation and expert group meetings that led to this discussion, but as I study indicators further, it is clearly important to do so.

Indicators typically do not come with a discussion of such decisions or an analysis of the implications of the choice. Clearly, the selection of any criterion depends on how marriage is defined. Depending on which criterion is chosen, the indicator could measure how much early marriage and childbearing damage health, diminish women's schooling, or prevent free choice of partners. The indicator submerges these issues and their surrounding theories. The essence of an indicator is that it is simple and easy to understand. Embedded theories, decisions about measures, and interpretations of the data are replaced by the certainty and lack of ambiguity of a number. Like money, it appears to allow abstraction and easy comparison among groups and countries by converting values into numbers. But what information is lost? Does the number bury the messiness of difference and allow equivalence?²

A comparison with money is instructive because it is the quintessential unit that flattens difference into commensurate values. The "cash nexus" famously pointed to money's capacity to make possible comparison and exchange of items and services such as potatoes and sex.³ But does money bury the messiness of difference and allow equivalence? As Bill Maurer (2005) notes, the apparent equivalence created by money is undermined by questions of morality and sociality. He examines alternative currencies, such as Islamic banking or community currency in upstate New York, grounded in critiques of capitalism. Although the money in each system is technically fungible with the others, translation is not simple. The currencies coexist as convertible but socially incommensurate in meaning and morality. Efforts to move between currencies or to do Islamic banking lead to awkward compromises. Maurer (2005:104–121) refers to the operation of the uncanny as a way to think about the tension of things that are the same but always different. Indicators rely on a similar alchemy: they create a commensurability that is widely

2. Kaufman and Kraay (2007) emphasize the importance of sharing information on measurement error and the constituent elements of the indicator, but in their review of governance indicators, they note that many indicators do not make this information available.

3. As Mary Poovey (1998) argues, the origins of the idea of the modern scientific fact and its representation by numbers, themselves subject to manipulation according to fixed rules, occurred along with the invention of double-entry bookkeeping as a mode of business management.

used to compare, to rank, and to make decisions even though the users recognize that these simplified numerical forms are superficial, often misleading, and very possibly wrong.

Human Rights and Audit Culture

The use of indicators to monitor compliance with human rights is a rapidly growing field. Until the late 1990s, many human rights activists resisted the use of indicators because of concerns about lack of data, oversimplification, and bias (see Alston 2005:22; Green 2001:1082–1084; Rosga and Satterthwaite 2008). For example, the Freedom House indicator, “Freedom in the World,” with its seven-point scale from “free” to “not free” based on annual surveys starting in 1972, was widely seen as ideologically biased (Alston 2005:23). Efforts to develop indicators for social and economic human rights have faced difficulties in making the measures concrete (Rosga and Satterthwaite 2008). Indicators measure aggregates, while human rights are held by individuals (see Green 2001:1085). Building a composite index of human rights performance promotes quick comparisons of countries along a scale but ignores the specificity of various human rights and conceals particular violations. Measurement errors are also a major concern. There are significant differences in the quality of data on human rights violations among countries. Those countries more concerned about human rights are likely to report a higher proportion of violations than those that resist human rights principles (Alston 2005:22–25).

Despite these concerns, the use of indicators is growing in the human rights field, migrating from economics through development to human rights compliance. UN agencies such as UNICEF, UNIFEM, the Commission on the Status of Women, the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), and the UN Statistical Commission are taking the lead. There are long-standing initiatives to develop statistical indicators among other UN agencies and programs, such as FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, and UNDP (Malhotra and Fasel 2005). A set of indicators has been developed for the Millennium Development Goals.⁴ Universities and NGOs are also active in collecting and systematizing data. For example, the University of Maryland has a research project on minorities at risk that examines the status and conflicts of politically active groups (Malhotra and Fasel 2005:21).⁵ Many economic and social indicators, such as the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators and the UNDP Human Development Index, are used to assess compliance with social and economic human rights (Filmer-Wilson 2005:28; Green 2001).

Development agencies have long used indicators. The recent shift to a rights-based approach to development (Sen 1999) has brought human rights and development closer together and encouraged the use of economically based indi-

cators for human rights compliance. The 2000 UNDP Human Development Report devoted a chapter to the value of indicators for human rights accountability (UNDP 2000). The World Bank has collected and disseminated a wide range of socioeconomic statistics derived largely from national statistical systems, as well as data on governance and the rule of law based on expert and household surveys (Malhotra and Fasel 2005:15). These are useful for monitoring compliance with social and economic rights in particular (Green 2001). Economists at the World Bank have also played a critical role in developing indicators for international investment, such as its Doing Business project to assess business conditions around the world (Davis and Kruse 2007:1097). The 2009 *Doing Business Report* ranked 181 countries on 10 criteria for doing business—such as starting a business or dealing with construction permits—producing an overall “Ease of Doing Business Index.”⁶ Singapore ranked first, the United States third, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo last. The Doing Business Web site offers a one-page explanation of the index and a caution about its limited scope. Despite these limitations, the index offers a readily understandable comparative exposition of business conditions around the world in one short table.

In his anthropological account of a European development project in Africa, Richard Rottenburg (2009) uses Latour’s concept of centers of calculation to describe the production of such comparative translocal knowledge. In order for a development bank to produce the knowledge necessary to monitor and control projects, it must know about projects around the world in comparable terms through their reports. Bank officials juxtapose these reports to create a common context that produces new knowledge. The process depends on producing representations of projects that travel (reports), that are immutable (certain in meaning, not shifting according to the teller), and that are combinable. Making reports combinable requires establishing in advance standardized procedures for measuring and aggregating the information in the report. By comparing the reports, the development bank produces translocal knowledge that allows it to monitor and control projects from a distance and to be accountable to the taxpayers (Latour 1987; Rottenburg 2009:181–182). This process, developed in the domain of economics and reliant on universalistic technical standards, provides a template for the production and use of indicators in other domains.

While there is considerable discussion of how to develop good indicators and critiques of their errors of measurement, their quality of data, their embedded assumptions, and their 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 accounta-

4. <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Default.aspx>.

5. <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar>.

6. <http://www.doingbusiness.org/EconomyRankings>.

bility—what has been called “audit culture” (Power 1999; 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 (2000) edited collection focuses on new mechanisms for accountability established by the British government for evaluating and reimbursing university faculty. The contributors argue that the new system places responsibility for compliance on the performer, not the checker. Thus, there is a shift 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 country policies 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 is presented 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-on standards and means of measurement. Although the experts developing one set of indicators for monitoring compliance with human rights conventions argued that the numbers were to be used not to rank or shame countries but to assess a country’s progress over time, once an indicator has been created, such rankings are possible (Turku Report 2005:7).⁷ The reliance on numbers, with their apparently simple and straightforward meanings, produces an unambiguous and easily replicated field for judgment. Compliance becomes far more open to inspection and assessment.

Moreover, responsibility for compliance shifts to the monitored organization, corporation, or country itself, which must not only seek to comply but also 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 that can be assessed impartially by the treaty body (Rosga and Satterthwaite 2008:4). Corporations have clearly been active in defining the terms of the indicators by which their social responsibility will be judged.

In sum, the expansion of the use of indicators in global governance means that political struggles over what human rights or corporate social responsibility means and what constitutes compliance are submerged 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; from theory to fact; and from 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 by the diligent work of experts. 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.

The creation of indicators reveals a slippage between the political and the technical. The slippage occurs in the way issues and problems are defined, in the identity and role of experts, in the relative power of the people engaged in producing and using indicators, and in the power and clout of the sponsoring organization. Through the apparatus of science and measurement, the indicator displaces judgment from governing bodies onto the indicator itself, which establishes standards for judgment. Nevertheless, indicators are inevitably political, rooted in particular conceptions of problems and theories of responsibility. They represent the perspectives and frameworks of those who produce them, as well as their political and financial power. What gets counted depends on which groups and organizations can afford to count. However, indicators differ significantly between those produced by a powerful organization, such as the World Bank, which scores and ranks countries, and more participatory processes, such as OHCHR human rights indicators, in which the experts provide a framework—but to a somewhat greater extent, the choice of indicators, methods, and data collection lies with the countries being measured.

7. Turku Expert Meeting on human rights indicators, March 10–13, 2005. <http://www.abo.fi/institut/imr/indicators/index/htm>.

The Genealogy of Indicators

Where did indicators come from? What is their genealogy? Since their creation in practices of financial management and governance in Europe perhaps four centuries ago, they have migrated across sectors and nations. The use of numerical information to understand the world reflects the creation of what Mary Poovey (1998:xii) calls the “modern fact” as a form of knowledge. The modern fact is basic to the ways Westerners have come to know the world. It organizes most of the knowledge projects of the past four centuries (Poovey 1998:xiii). Numbers are the epitome of the modern fact because they seem to be simple descriptors of phenomena and to resist the biases of conjecture and theory because they are subject to the invariable rules of mathematics. Numbers have become the bedrock of systematic knowledge because they seem to be free of interpretation and to be neutral and descriptive. They are presented as objective, with an interpretive narrative attached to them by which they are given meaning. Numbers can be assigned to observed particulars in a way that makes them amenable to such manipulations and makes them amenable to a knowledge system that privileges quantity over quality and equivalence over difference (Poovey 1998: 4).

However, Poovey (1998:xii) shows that numbers are not noninterpretive but embody theoretical assumptions about what should be counted, how to understand material reality, and how quantification contributes to systematic knowledge about the world. Establishing the understanding of numbers as an objective description of reality outside interpretation was a project of modernity. Although some see facts as interpreted, the idea that numbers guarantee value-free description is still pervasive (Poovey 1998:xxv). Poovey argues that the early-nineteenth-century combination of numbers and analysis enabled professionals to develop systematic knowledge through noninterpretive descriptions. The nineteenth-century separation of numbers from interpretation made numbers different in kind from analytic accounts, locating them in a different stage in knowledge-producing projects. Because the numbers were different in kind from other knowledge, they could be developed by a special class of professionals who worked with them. Experts, professional knowledge producers, took responsibility for managing this different kind of knowledge, knowledge that existed before policy and could be used in neutral ways to inform it (Poovey 1998:xv).

Statistics became increasingly important as a technology of governance in nineteenth-century Europe. As scholars of the intellectual history of statistics indicate, numbers as an instrument of knowledge production were developed first for business transactions, exemplified in particular by the invention of double-entry bookkeeping, and subsequently as instruments of state governance (Poovey 1998). The use of numerical measures by states for administration and tax collection stretches back millennia, but it is only with the development of the modern state that statistics have been

used to describe the characteristics of populations themselves. Quantification, with its aura of objectivity, became increasingly important to a variety of government and business functions in the nineteenth century, from developing cost-benefit measures for locating railroad lines to the need to measure life spans by life insurance companies in the mid-nineteenth century (Porter 1995:106–121; Schweber 2006).

Contemporary global indicators inevitably rely on local data-collection processes, although they may be created and managed at the international level. Local centers may understand the process differently, carry out the measurement tasks in different ways, or resist cooperating with national and international expectations. It is striking that all of the global governance indicator projects I have looked at are created in the global North—which sets the agenda, names the indicator, and assembles the criteria—while data collection typically takes place mostly in the global South. As the use of indicators enhances the exposure of nations to international scrutiny and potential control, there may be forms of local resistance to the process.

Using Indicators for Governance

As tools of governance, indicators are commonly developed by powerful bodies seeking to manage and control populations or allocate resources. They may also be used to rank countries or organizations or to determine eligibility for a benefit. Indicators are directed not only at helping decision makers decide where to build a railroad or in what country to invest but also at promoting self-governance among the governed. By establishing standards according to which individuals, organizations, or nations should behave, indicators should inspire those who are measured to perform better and improve their ranking. Students in the United States are very familiar with the role that grades play in their educational lives. One of the reasons for creating indicators for treaty compliance is to promote nations to take steps to improve their performance according to the numerical standards of human rights treaties. Countries sometimes respond by emphasizing their status on indicators where they rank highly. For example, when Lithuania reported to the committee that monitors compliance with CEDAW on July 2, 2008, which I observed, the government representative, the secretary of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, pointed out that according to the World Economic Forum’s Report Global Gender Gap Index 2007, Lithuania was among the countries that made the most significant progress among the top 20 countries and now occupies fourteenth place. The minister also noted that Lithuania was in second place in the employment rate of women raising children below 12 years according to the EU Report on Gender Equality in 2008. Clearly, the minister was using these rankings to point out how well her country was succeeding in diminishing gender discrimination (CEDAW/C/LTU/Q/4).

The governed often shift their behavior in ways designed to improve their score, although they may do so in ways not desired by the producer of the indicator. As Rosga and Satterthwaite (2008) note, indicators have a relatively short life before those who are governed by them begin to change their behavior in order to enhance their score. While this may be the desired outcome, it may also produce strategies to “game” the indicator. For example, some colleges downgraded by *US News and World Report* for low rates of alumni giving divide their gifts into three yearly payments. Although some highly ranked colleges have recently refused to participate at all, those ranked lower have relatively little power to challenge or change the system of ranking.

As indicators shift responsibility for governance from those in power to those who are governed, they may undermine autonomy, a sense of trust, and the willingness to cooperate among certain kinds of populations. Strathern (2000) and her colleagues criticize the Research Assessment Exercise program of the British government, which has introduced indicators of faculty productivity and activity as the basis for allocating revenues to academic departments. As Strathern argues, this mechanism creates the standards to which universities then seek to govern themselves, but for professionals who work long hours with low pay under conditions of autonomy, this regime suggests a lack of trust and leads to alienation and resistance, producing exhaustion and withdrawal.

The turn to indicators is part of a new form of governance, one that engages the person in governing himself or herself in terms of standards set by others. This new form of governance emphasizes “responsibilization,” in which individuals are induced to take responsibility for their actions (O’Malley 1999). In some of the most successful examples, such as grades in school, the indicator comes to shape subjectivity, defining for the individual his or her degree of merit. These indicators promote self-management, what Nikolas Rose (1989:226–227; 1996, 1999) calls “government at a distance.” He argues that new systems of governance have emerged in the postwar period that seek to control individual behavior through governance of the soul (Rose 1989, 1996, 1999). In the liberal democracies of the postwar period, citizens are to regulate themselves, to become active participants in the process rather than objects of domination. Rose (1989:226–227) dates the formation of this self-managing system of governance to the 1950s but sees a major expansion during the era of neoliberalism and the critique of the welfare state. However, Kipnis (2008) criticizes Rose’s emphasis on the connection of audit culture and neoliberalism, because similar practices of monitoring occur in China under a very different political regime.

Indicator Governance and the Corporate Form

Indicators are a basic technology of corporate management and control, but as they move into the previously distinct domain of human rights and humanitarianism, the bound-

aries between business, the state, and what is commonly referred to as “civil society” blur. In practice, the corporation is increasingly intertwined with these other domains of society in discourse and in management strategy. The spread of its techniques of auditing and counting to the state and civil society is an instance of this seepage of the corporate form. Here I will identify three forms of interchange.

The first is the donors’ demand for performance evaluations of civil society organizations by foundations and governments. Social justice and humanitarian organizations face an increasingly onerous burden of quantifying their accomplishments, even when they are difficult to measure and the data are expensive to produce, as discussed above. A further step in this direction is the U.S. government’s move to create indicator-based development funding. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), started in 2004, relies on competition among countries to allocate funding. Countries that perform better on the indicators established by the MCC are more likely to receive funding. This system replaces the earlier use of conditions that have to be met by countries receiving development aid. This approach emphasizes a country’s responsibility for its governance and embodies the argument that effective government is fundamental to development.

The key concern of the MCC program is controlling corruption through promoting “good governance.” Countries are measured by 17 indicators grouped into three broad categories: ruling justly, investing in people, and encouraging economic freedom. The indicators are all developed by other organizations. Five of the six governance indicators were developed by the World Bank, while two are from Freedom House. Health and education indicators come from UNESCO and WHO, and economic freedom indicators come from the World Bank and the Heritage Foundation’s trade policy indicator. The MCC also uses the Corruption Perceptions Index of Transparency International and the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report.⁸ The process of selection involves four steps. The MCC Board identifies eligible countries from the low- and middle-income range, publishes the selection criteria, and develops scorecards for each country, and on the basis of these scorecards, it selects some for assistance. Countries selected by the board as eligible are invited to submit proposals for a MCC Compact. A few countries with a low score on one of the policy indicators are selected each year to participate in the Millennium Corporation Threshold Program to help raise their score and become eligible for a Millennium Challenge Grant. The Threshold Program is run by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).⁹

In a discussion of the Threshold Program in January 2008 at the American Enterprise Institute (“Can Indicator-Based Competition Make Foreign Aid Work?”), speakers emphasized that the turn to indicators is a result of the emphasis on accountability. The overarching idea is to replace condi-

8. <http://www.mcc.gov/pages/selection> (accessed January 13, 2011).

9. <http://www.mcc.gov/pages/selection> (accessed January 13, 2011).

tionalities with competition. Under this indicator approach, countries know what is expected of them and can compete for funds according to these standards. However, at this event, the representative from the UNDP said that he thought the mechanism was too complex and that conditions should be loosened.¹⁰ These examples suggest that work associated with the promotion of development, human rights, and good governance is increasingly being channeled by reliance on indicators.

The corporate form is also moving into domains of state and civil society governance with its engagement in processes of indicator development and data collection. Corporations are increasingly involved in the expensive and highly technical process of collecting and analyzing data and writing reports for NGOs, governments, and UN agencies. For example, a recent initiative of USAID East Africa and the USAID Inter-agency Gender Working Group to create a compendium of monitoring and evaluation indicators of violence against women and girls was developed by MEASURE Evaluation in collaboration with a technical advisory group of experts. The advisory group consisted of experts from UNHCR, USAID, CDC, UNFPA, WHO, academics, independent consultants, and several people from MEASURE Evaluation, one of whom authored the report (Bloom 2008). MEASURE Evaluation describes itself as providing technical leadership

through collaboration at local, national, and global levels to build the sustainable capacity of individuals and organizations to identify data needs, collect and analyze technically sound data, and use that data for health decision-making. We develop, implement and facilitate state of the art methods for and approaches to improving health information systems, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and data use; and we collect, share, and disseminate information, knowledge, and best practices in order to increase the use of data and advance the field of M&E in many countries.¹¹

The organization is funded by USAID and works in partnership with the University of North Carolina, Tulane University, and ICF Macro, among others, revealing the collaboration of academic, government, and corporate actors.

ICF Macro is a large corporation that includes a program, MEASURE DHS, that since 1984 has provided technical assistance for 240 demographic and health surveys in 75 countries around the world. ICF Macro is based in the Washington, DC, area and maintains offices across the United States. It conducts projects for private- and public-sector clients in more than 125 countries. ICF Macro has annual revenues of approximately \$150 million and more than 1,100 employees, and in 2009 it joined with ICF International.¹² Similarly, an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development educational testing program, Programme for International

Student Assessment (PISA), hired an international contractor, an Australian company, to work with each participating state to carry out the assessment. Student questionnaires and tests were developed by the international contractors, the PISA governing board, and functional expert groups (von Bogdandy and Goldman 2009:13). The development of data and analysis, and sometimes even the indicators themselves, is clearly a blend of public and private activity that brings together corporations, academics, NGOs, governments, and UN bodies, as well as local, national, and international organizations. Data collection and analysis companies typically come from developed countries and often work in developing countries.

Not only are corporations increasingly involved in producing the data and measures that make up indicators used in the public domain, but efforts to persuade corporations to be more socially responsible have also adopted this technology. As social movement activists, NGOs, the UN, and other NGOs seek to control the human rights, environmental, labor, and corruption practices of corporations, they have turned to the same strategies of governance that corporations exported to the social reformers. The emerging field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) relies on indicators of corporate performance to assess companies (see Welker and Wood 2011). The UNGC and the GRI, two of the most widely used global CSR systems, both rely on indicators to assess compliance with their general principles, and both are voluntary. The UNGC Web site claims that it is the largest corporate citizenship initiative in the world. It says it launched the program in 2000 and as of May 2007 had more than 3,000 companies from 100 countries, as well as more than 700 civil society and international labor organizations, participating in the initiative. The GRI is an international network of business, civil society, labor, and professional institutions. This group has created a reporting framework through a consensus-seeking process. By 2006, more than 1,000 organizations from nearly 60 countries had formally declared their use of the GRI guidelines according to a UNGC report (UNGC 2006:3). GRI developed a set of detailed indicators that the UNGC adopted to implement its general principles.

The Global Compact Annual Review 2007 describes its monitoring process as a system of periodic reports by every signatory company every 2 years, detailing its compliance with the UNGC 10 principles, articulated as indicators, plus its support for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The 10 principles cover human rights, labor, environmental issues, and corruption. The reports are called “communications on progress.” They should include a statement of continued support for the UNGC by the chief executive officer or other senior executives, a description of practical actions of a company’s efforts to implement the UNGC principles and undertake partnership projects in support of broad UN goals such as MDGs, and measurements of expected outcomes using as much as possible indicators or metrics such as the GRI guidelines. If a company fails to file a report within 3 years

10. <http://www.aei.org/event/1627> (accessed July 20, 2009).

11. <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/measure> (accessed August 23, 2009).

12. <http://www.macrointernational.com/aboutus.aspx> (accessed August 23, 2009).

of signing on or 2 years from its previous communication on progress, it will be defined as inactive and dropped from the UNGC group.¹³

The 2008 guidelines for communications on progress advocate presenting information about commitment, systems in place to insure compliance (such as policies, programs, and management systems), activities, and measures of outcomes. It recommends that reports should “use performance indicators appropriate for your company’s size, sector and unique operating environment, and also allow for benchmarking and comparability” (UNGC 2008:15). In other words, companies are invited to develop their own metrics. “Companies should develop systems and evaluation programmes to assure that the information they are recording, collecting, analysing and disclosing is accurate and reliable. Importantly, this need not be a highly complex and expensive process, but could be as simple as a local Global Compact network peer review programme” (UNGC 2008:15). The guidelines to reporting stress that it is important to produce reliable and specific measures in order to assess progress rather than to focus only on policies or activities. “Specific measurements that track actual performance are essential for ensuring continuous improvement” (UNGC 2008:17). Some of the internal benefits claimed for the process are discussion and awareness of these issues in the company, while external benefits are enhancing the corporation’s reputation (UNGC 2008:18). Thus, the CG represents another example of the mobilization of the argument that social responsibility is good for business, not just morality (Welker and Wood 2011).

The guidelines use more than 30 indicators developed by GRI. Some focus on behavior while others ask for numbers of training sessions or policies and management programs. The following list of illustrative indicators is characteristic of the UNGC approach of enumerating trainings or policies more than actual behavior: HR 1, percentage and total number of significant investment agreements that include human rights clauses or that underwent human rights screening; HR 3, total hours of employee training on policies and procedures concerning aspects of human rights that are relevant to operations, including the percentage of employees trained; HR 4, total number of incidents of discrimination and actions taken; HR 5, operations identified where the right to exercise freedom of association and collective bargaining may be at significant risk and actions to support these rights; HR 6, operations identified as having significant risk for incidents of child labor and measures to contribute to eliminate child labor; SO 5, public policy positions and participation in public policy development and lobbying; SO 2, percentage and total number of business units analyzed for risks related to corruption; SO 3, percentage of employees trained in organization’s anticorruption policies and procedures (UNGC 2008: 21, 33, 39). The guidelines suggest that companies check with

their human resources, employee relations, supply management, legal, media and public relations, public affairs, or corporate relations offices for this information.

The GRI focuses on sustainability reporting guidelines. In 2006, the organization published its third generation of guidelines, performance indicators, and indicator protocols called GRI G3 (UNGC 2006:5). The indicators developed for the GRI can be used to address the 10 principles of the UNGC. Although there are some differences, overall, the two voluntary reporting mechanisms cover roughly the same issues.

Thus, the monitoring system for UNGC and GRI is quite similar to that of UN treaty bodies, in which a governing organization confronts the dilemma of judging compliance based on information provided by the organization being judged. Like treaty body reports, the information requested focuses more on the existence of policies and training programs than on actual changes in behavior. Treaty bodies typically cope with this situation by politely asking for more information and focusing on information about laws and policies more than on data on performance. Nevertheless, treaty bodies constantly request more statistical data on outcomes and performance and are currently seeking to develop indicators for human rights. In both of these monitoring systems, indicators seem to offer a solution to the lack of independent information available to those who seek to govern.

Conclusions

Indicators are a political technology that can be used for many different purposes, including advocacy, reform, control, and management. In some ways, indicators are like witchcraft. Witchcraft is the power to guide the flow of supernatural forces for good or harm. It is pervasive in societies that see supernatural forces as powerful actors in the world. Misfortunes and disease are the result of hostile supernatural forces, but healing and recovery from psychic and physical illness also rely on the mobilization of supernatural powers. Sometimes the same person is both a witch and a healer, because both depend on the ability to control these forces. Like witchcraft, indicators are a technology that exercises power but in a variety of ways, depending on who is using it for what purposes. And like witchcraft, indicators presume a system of knowledge and a theory of how things happen that are hegemonic and rarely subjected to scrutiny, despite their critical role in the allocation of power.

As the world becomes ever more measured and tracked through indicators, it becomes increasingly important to sort out the technical and political dimensions of this new technology. Indicators produce readily understandable and convenient forms of knowledge about the world that shape the way policy makers and the general public understand the world. Those with long use have become naturalized, as well as hegemonic, as in the case of grades for school performance. This is a form of knowledge production and governance that

13. Annual Review 2007. <http://www.globalcompact.org> (accessed August 21, 2009).

has expanded from its economic corporate origins to a wide array of uses in national and global governance. Indicators contribute to the calcification of categories—such as caste, race, or gender—that are subjected to categorical definition and measurement. The use of these statistical techniques, with their aura of certainty, is producing new knowledge of the social world and new opportunities for governance through self-governance. The expansion of indicator technology into new domains and spaces of governance is another way the corporate form is reshaping contemporary social life.

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Comment

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I endorse Sally Engle Merry’s call for an ethnography of indicators. As I do so, I am overwhelmed by the multilayered irony of the situation. As Merry notes, many indicators emerged as tools of “progress” and “reform.” They replaced softer, more interpretive means of evaluation, offering the promise of rigor, openness, objectivity, and, consequently, fairness—numbers don’t lie. (Think of the early, post-World War II days of the SATs, when the tests were promoted as a “fair” way for elite colleges to find promising students outside of the usual family and prep school channels.) But now we suspect that those same indicators are tools of repressive categorization, discipline, and control (think SATs again), and we turn for help to the avowedly interpretive methods of anthropology.

In a further irony, anthropology itself was once a leading producer of indicators. One of the first recognizably anthropological field projects, the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits, was a festival of measurement (Stocking 1984). Later, even as “Boas’s anthropology under-

mined extant scientific justifications for racist hierarchies,” the discipline continued to pursue “typological arguments,” falling into what Robert Oppenheim (2010:92–93) has recently called “asymmetries of race and anti-imperialism.” So we should be prepared for some skepticism as we offer thick description as an antidote to the tyranny of measurement.

Merry’s article provokes many thoughts about the role of measurement in the production and exercise of power. At one level, this phenomenon is linguistic. As Merry notes, “an indicator produces knowledge . . . by announcing what it measures”—an exercise in the power of naming. To name a category, to define it, to decide the criteria for inclusion and exclusion, to lay down the rules for its measurement, is simultaneously to produce knowledge and power. That power tends to reproduce itself, because the same knowledge elite that designed and promulgated the indicator will likely retain the role of policing it.

As Merry observes, the production and management of indicators have historically been the province of government, a critical element in the emergence of the modern state. Now, however, in the postregulatory era, other private participants in “new governance” networks (Slaughter 2003)—including corporations, self-regulatory industry associations, and NGOs—have seen the potential of measurement and have become enthusiastic producers and consumers of indicators. Merry mentions CSR and the GRI. I might add, from my own work with Cynthia Williams, the Equator Principles, whereby global banks have voluntarily—and unenforceably—agreed to adopt World Bank social and environmental indicators when financing large infrastructure projects in the developing world (Conley and Williams 2008). The banks can tout “hard data” showing that they are acting responsibly and can thereby head off demands for enhanced state regulation in their countries of charter. Mimicking the measurement practices of states seems to be yet another way in which “global capitalism just does what the modernizing development state once did—only to a larger degree” (Ferguson 2005: 377).

This mimicry may help to explain the power of indicators: people are used to being measured and categorized by the state and are accustomed to treat it as a hegemonic activity, even when the measuring agent happens no longer to be the state. But there is more to it than that. As Merry chronicles, the apparent precision that emanates from measurement is a defining artifact of modernity. “Evidence-based medicine” is a mantra for doctors, health policy makers, and even insurance companies. In my own law school world, the power of neoliberal law and economics is barely diminished by its recent collision with reality. “Empirical,” ripped from its Enlightenment roots, means “quantitative”; the availability of “data”—countable things—drives research questions rather than the other way around; and qualitative disciplines such as anthropology are junior partners at best, yielding only engaging and occasionally instructive “anecdotes.” We should

not be surprised that indicators rule across the political-economic spectrum, from banks to NGOs.

One thing that Merry does not point out explicitly is that the corporation itself is a form of knowledge production. Although the corporation has always enjoyed a kind of incomplete legal personhood, there is still no agreement among corporate scholars in this country about just what sort of thing it is (Schrane 1987)—is it the manifestation of an agreement among contracting private parties, a creature resulting from a concession by the state, or something else? But however one resolves this theoretical dispute, there is no doubt that the legal existence of a corporation is predicated on the production of knowledge in the form of specified indicators. Initially, it must produce the knowledge required for a charter by a state; when it wants to sell stock and raise money, it must collect and report the information demanded by the Securities and Exchange Commission in the precise categories that the SEC specifies; and thereafter, to maintain its fragile personhood, it must continue to measure and report on its behavior to these same state and federal authorities. So the retreating nation-state is devolving the duty of creating and applying indicators onto an entity, the corporation, to which that is second nature.

In the March 2010 issue, *American Anthropologist* announced the creation of a “public anthropology” section (Checker et al. 2010). Nowhere does the public need anthropology more than as it confronts the power of indicators, now increasingly in the hands of private for-profit corporations. I hope that Merry’s ethnography of indicators will become a reality and that it will be done and reported with sufficient clarity that the public will pay attention.

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