



Rating the sustainable city: ‘Measurementality’, transparency, and unexpected outcomes at the knowledge-policy interface



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ABSTRACT

Ratings are an increasingly popular part of urban sustainability governance and are widely understood as tools to guide policy and ensure transparency. This understanding is part of a more general shift in governance towards “New Public Management” that emphasizes public accountability and the accuracy of quantitative metrics and technical knowledge in policy evaluation. But critics have assessed ratings as broader mechanisms of governmentality, through which authorities shape, instrumentalize, and control conduct, and promote particular urban trajectories, in politicized ways. This paper examines STAR Communities, a recently developed urban sustainability rating system in the USA, to understand how such ratings behave at the interface of knowledge and policy, and how seeking transparency through ratings can produce unexpected outcomes that evade sustainability. This paper is not a critique of a specific rating system or set of indicators, but does yield a critique of the kinds of unexpected outcomes that are possible when we privilege quantitative measures of achievement. The study finds: 1) ratings are often used as labels rather than as policy inputs; 2) ratings can exacerbate existing inequalities and create new inequalities within and between municipalities because, while ratings can bring financial benefits, certification demands significant financial and political resources; and, 3) ratings can incentivize the realignment of governance priorities, as cities ‘grab’ points by pursuing quickly implemented, uncontroversial, and politically ‘safe’ policies and programs. The study also finds that sustainability managers continue to pursue quantitative sustainability measurement because of dominant assumptions that ‘counting is what counts’.

1. Sustainability ratings, urban governance and the knowledge-policy interface

Ratings are widely valued as objective, transparent ways of assessing progress towards sustainability and of driving policies, strategies, and outcomes in a sustainable direction. Indicator sets that are measured and aggregated to create ratings are attractive as policy tools because, at least superficially, they are easy to communicate to the public (Davis et al., 2012) and seem to streamline the policy process by illuminating the ‘state of things’ and simplifying complexity (McCool and Stankey, 2004) in apparently trustworthy ways. This understanding is clear in optimistic accounts of how ratings can be used to measure outcomes: “they provide clear signals on the success or failure of national policy initiatives and actions” (Dahl, 2012, 15); and to steer policy: “A good indicator alerts you to a problem before it gets too bad and helps you recognize what needs to be done to fix the problem” (Hart, 2015, no page). Sustainability rating systems are well established in the corporate world, where misdeeds, scandals and faltering public trust have been countered by trust in numbers that expose and compare

performance. As public appreciation has grown since the mid 1980s, of ‘running government like a business’ (Box, 1999), and as civic epistemology is increasingly oriented towards quantification and statistics, there has been pressure on the public sector to ‘prove its worth’ by transparently communicating progress in short-winded, digestible bits epitomized by ratings (Dixon et al., 2008). Consequently, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of sustainability indicators and ratings, and an increase in their use by public administrations to influence sustainability policy and strategy. In the context of the rise of this ‘measure-mania’ (Diefenbach, 2009), this paper examines how urban sustainability ratings influence policy making processes in unexpected ways, that often compromise sustainable trajectories, proposing new empirical considerations for thinking about the knowledge policy interface. It begins by critically examining the shifts in environmental governance that have fostered a preference for numbers-as-knowledge, and elaborates how ratings are a means of knowing, measuring, and governing sustainable cities.

The rising popularity of sustainability ratings in urban governance is driven by trends in governance more generally, that are oriented

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towards public accountability, and assumptions about the objectivity and transparency of numbers and statistics for measuring progress, effectiveness, and ‘good’ use of public resources. These priorities are buttressed by ‘data-driven’ and ‘evidence-based’ policy approaches, widely sanctioned ‘best practices’, and standardized comparisons. These are distinct elements of new public management (NPM) (Hood, 1995), a paradigm that, though it has not been implemented uniformly within or between governments (Hood, 1995), permeated public decision making in Margaret Thatcher’s UK, and subsequently, in the US, under the Clinton administration, where the ‘Government Performance and Results Act’ was signed into law in 1993. NPM has been promoted as a means of achieving accountability, embodying “a belief in the superior efficiency of private as compared to public organisations” (Hezri and Dovers, 2006, 88). Performance ratings sit comfortably within this NPM ‘doctrine’, that emphasizes ‘explicit, formal measurable standards’, ‘measures of success’, and ‘greater stress on results’ (rather than process) (Hood, 1995). These emphases are seen in contrast to politics and perspective, and have ushered in a growing institutionalized reliance on technical knowledge, a depoliticization of policy making, and a situation in which “(g)overnment performance is often quantitatively gauged in terms of managerial and economic efficiency and effectiveness for the purpose of reporting on accountability” (Smith, 1990, found in Hezri and Dovers, 2006, 89).

The principle assumptions of NPM, and ratings and indicators as straightforward policy tools, are that quantitative measures give the public trustworthy information about public sector performance, and that, incentivized by demands for accountability, measures will provide public managers with cues to produce better outcomes. Contemporary research, however, has advanced our thinking about ratings far beyond their role as representations of the natural world, their role in ‘speaking truth to power’, their contributions to information deficits in policy making (Bell and Morse, 2008; Turnhout, 2010; Davis et al., 2012), and policy learning through standardizing and disseminating ‘best practices’ (Bulkeley, 2006). These developments have inspired insights into what is increasingly referred to as the knowledge-policy interface: the relationship between knowledge and policy. Conventional accounts of this relationship have depended too highly on linearity, whereby objective knowledge is fed into policy streams to improve outcomes. The linear model of the knowledge policy interface suggests that better, objective knowledge, often code for quantification, leads straightforwardly to better policy and better policy outcomes; “it is assumed that SI’s (sustainability indicators) can thereby help to make policy and indeed management more transparently evidence-based” (Bell and Morse, 2010, no page). Empirically, the linear model has been found to profoundly underestimate the impact of politics, judgment, and impromptu strategy-building in both policy making and knowledge creation (Wesselink et al., 2013).

2. ‘Measurementality’: sustainability governance through ratings

Governance approaches to policy studies draw attention to shifting sites of politics (Bulkeley, 2005), from centralized governments, to an emphasis on the vast range of social, political and economic institutions at various scales (Bäckstrand et al., 2010), involving diverse networks, that ‘steer’ (rather than direct) (Rydin, 2007; Shore and Wright, 2015) society in different directions. This includes the networks and less formalized, yet important arenas of influence over policy and decision making, such as voluntary standards setting, public interest groups and social movements. Yet despite these advances in the understanding of public policy, analysts continue to critique governance approaches as maintaining allegiance to the linear model of the knowledge-policy interface, thereby avoiding sufficient engagement with subtle forms of power and politics that influence how policy takes shape (Sokhi-Bulley, 2011). By uncovering the relationships between power and knowledge that are often concealed through processes of ‘policy naturalization’, governmentality approaches (re-)politicize governance processes.

Governmentality approaches seek to understand how authorities in both the public and private spheres exercise control over citizens by shaping and controlling human conduct. Such control, or governmentality, operates from a distance, in coercive yet often invisible ways (Li, 2007a,b).

Subtle forms of power that are the focus of governmentality studies are often embedded in ‘technological knowledges’ that measure, quantify, and standardize eco-social and political phenomena such as urban sustainability. These knowledges are valued for their assumed technical neutrality, but involve specific and directed ‘calculative practices’ that are political and powerful because “numbers are intrinsic to the forms of justification that give legitimacy to political power in democracies” (Rose, 1991, 675). The term ‘measurementality’ was recently proposed by Turnhout et al. (2014) to cleverly bring together the concept of governmentality and sociopolitical studies of such technological knowledges, to “signify the governance logic that emerges... from privileging scientific techniques for assessing and measuring the environment as a set of standardized units which are further expressed, reified, and sedimented in policy and discourse...” (Turnhout et al., 2014, 583). Such logic has emerged as dominant in many areas of environmental governance, including urban sustainability, where data collection and aggregation of indicators and ratings are understood to lead to trustworthy numerical representations of sustainability (as opposed to particular interpretations that inspire particular modes of governance) that are expected to neutrally feed the development of emergent ‘best practices’ and desirable policy innovations. I propose that the role of ratings in creating urban sustainability is more complex than this, and through a lens of ‘measurementality’, animates three socio-technical processes: ratings render the sustainable city knowable, technical, and governable. The remainder of this section discusses each of these processes in turn.

First, ratings render the sustainable city ‘knowable’. Ratings effectively create the sustainable city imaginary, by establishing the categories and practices through which this imaginary takes shape: “An object needs to be defined and rendered knowable before it can be recognized and acted on” (Rydin, 2007, 611). Indeed, there is more than one way to imagine, understand, or construe the ‘sustainable city’, given that sustainability is laden with trade-offs, is fundamentally political, and impossible for everyone to agree on (Elgert, 2009; Garnåsjordet et al., 2012). Disparate interpretations are contested – depending on who speaks for the sustainable city – and different imaginaries are constructed by the ways in which different rating systems highlight distinct urban characteristics. While some ratings focus on eco-environmental dimensions of sustainability, others focus on the built environment (Sarkis et al., 2012), and other still include justice and equity issues as fundamental (Harner et al., 2002). Decision-making around what is included and what is not, inevitably involves some degree of simplification, illuminating some features of the ‘sustainable city’ while masking others. Rating systems are ‘devices’ that embody this decision-making (though often not explicitly) thereby creating social phenomena rather than simply describing it. Ratings and rankings also create social phenomena in less advertent ways, by incentivizing actors to ‘play to the test’, thereby fundamentally influencing the missions and practices of institutions (Espeland and Sauder, 2016). Ratings, by various means, “do not merely inscribe a pre-existing reality. They constitute it” (Rose, 1991, 676).

Secondly, ratings render the sustainable city technical, by quantifying and standardizing urban sustainability. The process of creating a technical problem (and corresponding solutions), often entails removing it from the sphere of human judgement and values, and placing it in a sphere of the ‘expert’ with predetermined sets of practices and knowledge. Quantification sits well within this sphere, as numbers seem to speak for themselves, and to exist outside of human, therefore political, influence: “questions that are rendered technical are simultaneously rendered nonpolitical” (Li, 2007b, 7). Such *objectivity* is often understood to be embodied by numbers; and objectivity is “evidently

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