Some use—Little influence? On the roles of indicators in European sustainable transport policy - DTU Orbit (14/12/2018)

The paper focuses on the use and influence of indicators in European sustainable transport policy from a ‘knowledge utilization’ research point of view. The starting point is the contrast between the widely held idea that indicators are important tools for sustainable transport policy making, versus ‘knowledge utilization’ oriented research, which has often demonstrated that formal technical knowledge is used much less, or at least differently, than expected in policy and decision making. The paper looks at two cases of indicators applied for strategic policy making within the sustainable transport agenda. The first case concerns indicators tracking the fulfillment of national transport policy objectives in Sweden. The case explores the use and influence of an annual monitoring and evaluation report produced for this purpose, within a general ‘Management-by-Objectives’ regime. The second case deals with indicators applied for the Mid-Term Review of the European Commission’s transport policy White Paper ‘Time to Decide’ (issued in 2001). The focus in this case is on a particular indicator based study conducted in 2005 by a group of consultants in close collaboration with European Commission staff. It is found that several indicators in both cases are actually used in policy processes, with evidence of use found in documents as well as interviews. However, ‘use’ does not automatically mean ‘influence’ on policies or processes in more than a superficial manner. Indicators seem to play a very limited direct instrumental role, while some signs of symbolic, conceptual and process roles are found. In the EU case we identify what is called a rationalization role of indicators, meaning that indicators inform and help to rationalize a change in the position towards key objectives. Several factors that characterize the indicators, the users, and policy context are found to contribute to understand the type of use and influence observed in both cases.

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