

Transformative Indicators for Urban Transitions: Measuring the Regime while supporting niche movements?

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Abstract

There is a huge variety of indicators that attempt, in one form or the other, to better capture if a country, a region or (the focus of this paper) a city as a whole is moving in the right direction. Recently, those in the broad category of “Well-Being Indicators” born out of a critique of GDP have been popular, but there has also been considerable attention to sustainable development indicators in the process leading towards the adoption of the sustainable development goals. Those indicators also have a long history, including as part of (local) Agenda 21 processes. Some of the well-established measures such as the HDI are also in the process of being updated. These different indicator systems and different fields of scientific debate and study all have their own conceptual foundations (of varying quality) and are often used by different disciplines or communities. Yet especially when applying them to practice it becomes clear that they are hard to separate cleanly, with the components of indicator systems showing considerable overlap and many attempts just using different terminology to measure almost the same thing. While different conceptual foundations or slight variations might be of great relevance to science, they can become a source of confusion when talking to practitioners such as policy makers, administrators or companies.

Drawing from preliminary results as well as planned steps in a unique research project, this paper will therefore start with a systematic comparison of existing indicators available for an old industrial city currently undergoing a transition process. It will then describe a participation process that, based on the options found, takes into account the specific requirements of the city. Such a participation process is especially challenging, as two important quality criteria for an indicator system - local uptake and regional comparability - will inevitably clash. Navigating between those sets of indicators requires a new role of scientists, being both actor and observer in the logic of transdisciplinary and transformative science.

Based on this foundation, the paper will then evaluate to potential of the multi-level transition perspective for considering the various roles of indicators of urban well-being. It is to be assumed that many relevant urban transitions are coming and will come out of social niches, and that they are supported by landscape changes regarding concepts of well-being (“beyond GDP”). Yet urban indicators of well-being, while suitable for capturing transitions once they pick up a certain momentum, have trouble quantitatively evaluating movements inside niches. At the same time they can benefit niches simply by putting certain topics on the agenda more prominently. While it may not be possible to quantify the direct impact of niches on well-being, there may be ways to find certain chains of causality and construct models that show the potential of certain niches moving into the mainstream. In using the multi-level perspective, we aim to gain a better understanding of the transformative role new indicator systems can play, especially when one of their strengths might be capturing developments that are yet to happen. We will also consider the inherent issues in using indicators in a transition context, as they are always at risk of being tethered to the status quo by data availability, current political preferences and dominant (old) frameworks.

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