

Does Executive Governance Matter?

Executives and Policy Performance

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Introduction

As a measurement instrument, the Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI) rests upon a few implicit and explicit causal assumptions. One of the central causal assumptions of the SGI—and, indeed, of the disciplines of political science and public policy studies as a whole—is that quality of life in OECD member states (as measured using basic socioeconomic parameters and data from sectors such as employment, education, sustainability and security) depends to a substantial, though not exclusive, degree on systemic political and administrative structures and processes—or what might also be called “practices of governance” (Brusis 2008). Without this foundational belief in causality, there would be little reason to study governmental and administrative systems. The alternative would be to assume the epistemological position of radical systems theory, which asserts that politics (and political science) is essentially self-referential and unable to exert meaningful influence on socioeconomic processes and results.

A second foundational assumption of the SGI holds that states that possess greater executive innovation and strategic capacity are more capable of implementing reforms and, consequently, tend to be more successful. According to this assumption, these states do a better job of formulating and implementing coherent and proactive policies to achieve necessary reforms to the status quo. This strategic (or reform) capacity, in turn, is affected by specific aspects of state government and administration. Some of these include characteristics specific to the executive—for example, interministerial coordination, policy advice and consultation, communication, self-monitoring, the mobilization of public support and more formal and technocratic procedures, including regulatory impact assessment. Other aspects in-

clude those specific to the realm of social actors, which serve to empower such actors to monitor and hold the executive accountable for its activities.

The SGI provides a tool we can use to begin testing these causal assumptions in empirical terms. In this article, we will examine the existing data generated by the SGI to determine whether and how features of the central government—that is, the executive or even the core executive—affect system and policy performance.

The SGI is comprised of two comprehensive indices, which are themselves comprised of two key dimensions. The first comprehensive index is the Status Index, which assesses the quality of a state's democracy as well as its overall socioeconomic and policy performance, that is, its performance in various policy and social sectors. The second comprehensive index is the Management Index, which is designed to measure the “strategic capability,” that is, the governability and participatory capacity of political and administrative systems. As Martin Brusis has it summarized: “The Management Index assesses governance as the sum of the executive's strategic capability and the participatory capacity of extra-executive actors” (Brusis 2008: 103).

The concepts employed in the SGI are the same ones used in the Bertelsmann Transformation Index for developing and transformation countries (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2008).¹ Before embarking on our analysis, we will undertake a more precise delineation of the central dependent and independent variables as they will be defined and employed in this paper. Our definitions are based on the English terminology employed in the manual that was provided to the experts for use in writing their country assessments (available at www.sgi-network.org):²

One of our central concerns is executive structures and processes, which the SGI calls “executive capacity.” However, these practices of good governance are not empirically verified qualities. Rather, they also entail normative assumptions about executive structures and processes that are thought to enable strategic action and thereby ensure

1 Although the same terms are used, the measurement instruments are not identical.

2 The precise definition and description of the variables and indices is crucial since these definitions have shaped the expectations of the experts who conducted the assessments regarding what they would actually be measuring and judging. At a later point, they also shape readers' expectations of the study results.