

Beyond ‘Politics by Numbers’: Building Partnerships to Create and Use Global Indicators

Since the global food price crisis erupted in 2008, progress on reducing hunger and malnutrition has become increasingly viewed as a political issue, rather than a technical one. Political commitment is now considered an essential ingredient for elevating the issue onto policy agendas. Consequently, a range of metrics, indexes and scorecards have been developed to influence policy and to promote greater accountability for hunger and malnutrition. While the rapid global proliferation of these ‘indicators’ have raised important methodological and political critiques, new approaches that emphasise partnership between researchers and civil society users, such as pioneered in the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI), have much potential to overcome such criticisms.

The rapid growth of global food and nutrition security ‘indicators’

In the last ten years, there has been a rapid growth of indexes, scorecards and other tools and metrics, broadly termed as ‘indicators’. Indicators involve the selection, compilation, simplification, aggregation, filtering and naming of the resulting numeric product, for the purpose of evaluating the performance of states, private sector actors, or international bodies. Indicators typically comment on policies (e.g. governments having nutrition policies), social practices (e.g. the rates of six-month exclusive breastfeeding within a population) and private sector or government qualities (e.g. political commitment).

There is now broad agreement that indicators are valuable to policymakers, private sector actors, researchers and civil society groups. They are used to draw attention to social problems, to analyse causes or consequences of policy interventions, and as inputs to decision-making processes.

Recent indicators include:

- Global Hunger Index (WJH, IFPRI, Concern, 2006)
- Access to Nutrition Index (GAIN, 2012)
- *The Economist’s* Global Food Security Index (2012)
- HungerFree scorecard (ActionAid, 2009)
- Nutrition Landscape Analyses (WHO, 2009)
- Hunger Reduction Commitment Index (IDS, 2011)
- Hunger And Nutrition Commitment Index (IDS, 2013)
- Global Nutrition Report’s review of Nutrition 4 Growth Summit commitments (IFPRI, 2014)
- Donor country scorecards (ACTION, 2015; IDS, 2013).

What is the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index?

HANCI systematically compares and ranks 45 developing countries along a set of 22 policy, legal and financial variables expressing

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political commitment to address hunger and undernutrition. Uniquely, identification of HANCI variables and deployment of research findings in policy advocacy were facilitated by partnerships between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) (HANCI producer) and civil society groups (HANCI users).

HANCI shines a spotlight on how governments prioritise action on hunger and undernutrition, often differently. By showing what governments do, or fail to do, HANCI evidence empowers citizens to hold their politicians to account. More so, by highlighting the important steps they can take to address these challenges, HANCI provides positive stimulus to reinforce such critical efforts on nutrition and hunger.

Understanding and addressing technical and political critiques on indicators

As the popularity of indicators has soared, a growing body of critique has emerged, to emphasise technical and political aspects. Criticisms raise questions about the validity and reliability of indicator design; of whether indicators help us to understand the phenomena they seek to measure; and whether findings are interpreted correctly. More importantly however, indicators are considered to assert power. They involve a ‘politics by numbers’ by establishing standards against which comparisons are made among units (e.g. countries) and over time. Peer-shaming mechanisms pressurise those (e.g. governments) who are revealed to ‘underperform’, to encourage self-monitoring and self-regulation.

Indicators are by no means simply a neutral tool of measurement providing sources of knowledge about societies, states and actors, but also a means of governing them. Yet, while essentially political, indicators often depoliticise. Because they are intended to be easy to understand and ready to be consumed by policymakers, indicators involve a trade-off between usage and oversimplification of complex issues, to underplay local context.

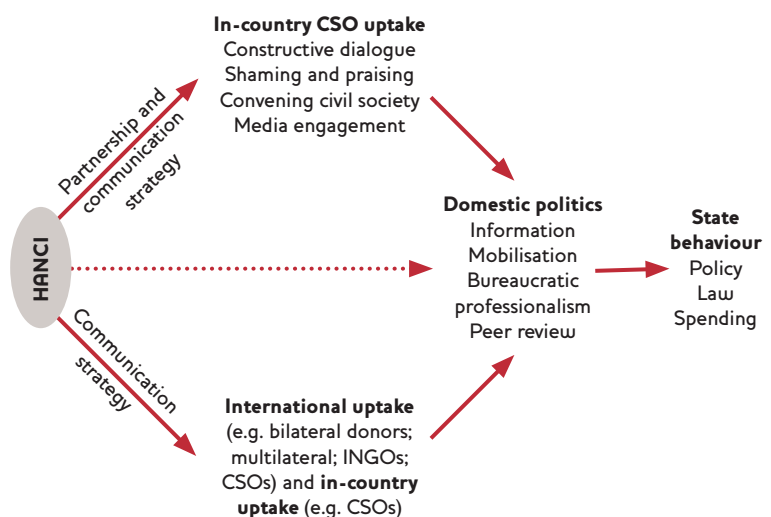
Critics also argue that indicators conceal their political origins and underlying theories of social change, and obscure how they are constructed and calculated. As relatively few people have the technical expertise and resources to understand how indicator scores are

determined, they concentrate power among technocrats, ‘expert’ producers and sponsoring organisations, often in the global North.

HANCI offers an alternative model for indicators

Many of these critiques reference a common model for achieving policy impact, built on the assumption that soundly constructed evidence combined with effective communications will positively affect attitudes, behaviour and actions of governments. However, an alternative model underlines the role of partnerships between indicator producers and users. HANCI combined both models.

Figure 1 Pathways for how indicators can influence state behaviour



Source: Adapted from Kelley and Simmons (2015).

In Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Bangladesh and Nepal, IDS and local civil society organisations (CSOs) federations or national chapters of INGOs collaborated through a range of joint activities, including the commissioning of expert perception surveys and community perception analyses of political commitment. In-country workshops interrogated the validity and usefulness of the emerging evidence on political commitment for policy advocacy purposes. Exercises were devised to break down the indicators into understandable elements, to discuss data and data sources, and to debate strengths and limitations of the evidence. This informed discussions about whether or not, and in what ways, any particular evidence would be used in civil society policy advocacy. Subsequently, IDS (as the producer) and the Zambia CSO-SUN

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Alliance; Civil Society Alliance on Nutrition in Nepal; ActionAid Bangladesh; Partnership for Nutrition in Tanzania and CISANET Malawi (as the users) conducted joint presentations of findings and advocacy claims to governments and parliamentarians.

Producer-user partnership models can overcome key critiques on indicators

Reflections on working with HANCI partners in five countries suggest that producer-user partnership has significant potential to overcome critiques on indicators.

Demystifying indicators

Partnership activities such as workshops with CSO partners and federated members can effectively demystify the indices, and question the content and meaning of scorecard data, to break down barriers between academics and civil society, and to advance co-construction of knowledge. Accordingly, partnership activities can help overcome the critique that relatively few people have technical expertise and resources to understand how scores on indicators are determined. Moreover, HANCI workshop discussions connected people across disciplines and sectors to overcome singular mentalities that often inhibit coordinated action on nutrition.

Improving transparency to foster effective indicator usage in policy advocacy

Partnership activities in HANCI revealed that a sound understanding of strengths and limitations of indicator evidence is essential for CSO use in policy advocacy. Government actors are often highly critical of the evidence that CSOs bring to the fore, and are sometimes intent on delegitimising CSOs by showing their lack of a factual grasp concerning an issue. Transparency regarding measurement techniques and data use is particularly important because indicator design and interpretation can be done in valid and invalid ways, as there is no singularly 'scientific' and established way of producing an indicator.

Producers of indicators should declare their intention, the impact they envision, and the process through which this is to be achieved. Moreover, they should give full details of variables and operationalisations, data and sources, reference years, but it is also helpful to outline limitations and built-in assumptions.

For instance, the HANCI website offers visitors an interactive feature demonstrating how different choices regarding the relative weighting of components that make up the index may affect country scores and rankings. Similarly, analyses can demonstrate the statistical robustness of rankings to alternative methodological choices.

Understanding the context to effectively use the indicators

CSO networks involved in policy advocacy often have extensive knowledge of the domestic political economy, enabling strategic use of indicators at opportune moments and attuned to the priorities of local leadership. Whereas the value of indicators is often seen in terms of holding leaders accountable to international standards, CSO partners using HANCI highlighted the importance of domestic standards, such as nutrition outcome targets identified in national policies. Context-sensitive deployment of indicators is growing in importance against a backdrop of shrinking political space for CSOs in many countries.

Appreciating the value of rankings

Rankings, a common and powerful tool in indicators, are accused of oversimplification, to homogenise and depoliticise complex, context-specific phenomena. Although a reasonable observation, this recognition is neither beyond CSO users nor policy elites. Policy and media actors were known to be more sensitive to rankings and numbers than to texts and words, and political commitment rankings were recognised as valuable, but not necessarily conclusive.

Recognising that country-specific diagnostics can exert greater influence in shaping policy reform than cross-country benchmarking efforts, CSO partners considered rankings as a means to an end. That is: to start conversations on underlying factors, on complementary evidence, and to steer discussion towards topics that they felt required attention. As such, debates about the accuracy of rankings must be counterpoised with a consideration that purpose may rather lie in their instrumental value.

Rankings are *'a useful tool to provoke government, and to create an appetite to talk about issues of hunger and nutrition in the country'* (William Chilufya, Zambia CSO-SUN Alliance, September 2015).

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Politicising debates, on the terms of users

Indicators are often seen to be primarily used for shaming, or overtly singling out governments for public reproach. HANCI users however employed shaming sparingly, and always in combination with praising tactics, because an emphasis on shaming risked burning carefully constructed bridges with governments. The process of cross-checking data between producers and local users was also useful to weed out

problematic data, avoiding government backlash.

Partners' credibility engaging policymakers also often rested on showing that HANCI rankings were significantly rooted in up-to-date government published data, which established common ground. As such, the partnership approach ensured that political commitment evidence was used to stir up policy debate about hunger and undernutrition, however on the terms of users, not producers.

Recommendations

Producer-user partnerships:

- Are unusual in global indicators, but can support processes of co-constructing knowledge, strengthen relevance and quality of data used, and enhance policy influence.
- Can overcome important critiques on mainstream approaches to indicators. They open the indicator black box; enhance transparency; strengthen context-sensitive indicator deployment; and politicise debates, but on the terms of its users.
- Can break down barriers between academic producers and practitioner users; enhance mutual learning, demystify research evidence, mobilise and empower users' critical capacity to use indicators, and democratise the interpretation of indicator evidence.

Accordingly, donors could encourage the producer-user partnerships approach to indicators in order to:

- Advance the effective and enduring use of indicator evidence in policy advocacy by civil society groups in order to promote stronger policies and greater accountability for food and nutrition security.
- Build civil society's critical capacity to understand the strengths and weaknesses of indicators, and advance adoption on their own terms.
- Strengthen producer and user understandings of suitable strategic and tactical employment of indicator evidence, within its political economic context.

Further reading

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te Lintelo, D.J.H.; Munslow, T.; Lakshman, R. and Pittore, K. (2016) *Assessing the Policy Impact of 'Indicators': A Process-Tracing Study of the Hunger And Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI)*, IDS Evidence Report 185, Brighton: IDS

Credits

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