Van Dooren, Wouter and Van de Walle, Steven (ed)
Performance Information in the Public Sector. How it is Used

Palgrave MacMillan, 2008 (paperback 2011), 296 pages, ISBN: 0230309127, 246 SEK.

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Performance measurement has been part of public sector management for at least a century. Since the arrival of the New Public Management, performance measurement has not only been widely disseminated, it has also been integrated into core functions of the public sector. At the same time, many researchers have found that public managers and politicians make little use of the information which comes out of performance measurement. This apparent paradox is addressed in Van Dooren and Van de Walle's refereed book from 2008 on the use of performance information. Their mission is to look into the future of performance measurement by redefining what it means to use performance information. The book is a result of several meetings of the Study Group on Performance in the Public Sector of the European Group of Public Administration (EGPA).

The book is divided in two parts; Part I addresses the use of performance information within public organizations by their employees and managers, and Part II addresses the use of performance information by external stakeholders such as politicians and citizens. Both parts contain a mix of conceptual contributions, reviews and discussions of the existing literature and case studies of the use of performance information.

Some of the contributions give us an overview of an aspect of the use of performance measurement based on existing knowledge. For example, Van Dooren identifies eight different performance movements in the twentieth century. He argues that performance measurement over time has been characterized by conceptual stability, a coexistence of management and policy oriented movements, a political context and a similar set of promoters and exporters. However, performance measurement has also changed over time through the development of technologies and analysis techniques and especially through the institutionalization, professionalization and specialization of its use. Seen over a century, performance measurement has progressively permeated the fibers of government.

There are also a number of chapters which use conceptual analysis to contribute to the wanted redefinition of what it means to use performance information.

As an example of this, Donald Moynihan presents his interactive-dialogue model of performance information use. He argues that performance information is open to selective presentation and interpretation. As such, it is often used by agency staff for advocacy in external policy arenas. However, performance information may also be used for goal-based learning through dialogue. He draws on theories of organizational learning to analyze how one may construct and

manage so-called learning forums where actors 'collectively examine information, consider its significance and decide how it will affect future actions'.

Another example is Patria de Lancer Julnes chapter where she argues that the apparent lack of use of performance information may be due to a too narrow definition of use. She develops a typology of the purposes of performance measurement which can be either instrumental or non-instrumental and for internal or external audiences. This yields four purposes; improvement, understanding, accountability and mobilization. She then associates the purposes of performance measurement with different types of knowledge use such as reassurance, compliance, program learning, enlightenment and legitimation.

Zoe Radnor's chapter also presents a typology. She takes her departure in the literature on dysfunctional uses of performance information and organizational gaming. Her typology is based on distinctions between high and low levels of organizational gaming and internal and external impacts. Low levels of gaming occur when managers only manipulate performance data to achieve high levels of measured performance, and high levels occur when they also change activities in unintended ways to reach performance targets. According to Radnor, high levels of gaming with external impacts are more serious than low levels of gaming or gaming which mainly affects the organization itself.

Harry Hatry's epilogue also contains some conceptual analysis based on the preceding contributions. He extracts three dimensions of the usefulness of performance information; the technical adequacy of measurement, analysis and presentation of performance information; the information needs of different types of users; and the different uses of performance information such as accountability, budgeting and improvement. He also discusses the limitations of performance measurement and its future as a support for decision-making.

Despite their rather different topics, many of the conceptual contributions seem to have in common their ambition to correct and add to an instrumental understanding of information use based on rational decision theory. The implication to the book's mission is that we may find more evidence for the use of performance information if we do not only look for direct instrumental uses but also for political, self-interested and manipulative uses which do nonetheless bring some degree of knowledge based on quantitative data into the managerial or political process.

The book also contains a number of empirical studies of the use of performance information. Some of them confirm prior findings of rather modest use by public sector decision-makers, whereas others find more evidence of use by including other perspectives than the rational, instrumental perspective.

Among the chapters which find limited use are Lægreid, Roness and Rubecksen's contribution based on a survey of Norwegian state agencies which are exposed to the government's Management-By-Objectives-and-Results. They find that performance information is only loosely coupled to performance steering through incentives. Bouckaert and Halligan also find that significant questions remain about the quality and use of performance information, even in the four countries, which live up to an ideal-type of coherent and integrated Performance Management (UK, USA, Australia and Canada). Johnson and Talbot find

that the parliamentary scrutiny committees do not in a systematic way use so-called Public Service Agreements, which contain performance information, to hold the government ministers to account.

Other chapters find conditional evidence that performance information is used in the public sector. These chapter include the contribution by Jostein Askim, who argues that politicians may use performance information to set decision agendas, to map out consequences of alternative policies, to signal rationality and win debates. Based on a study of Norwegian local politicians, he finds that performance information use is positively related to personal characteristics such as inexperience and a 'frontbench' position, and to polity characteristics such as large size, regime stability, and high levels of political competition and conflict.

Dennis de Kool analyses the use of monitoring information regarding Dutch Urban Policy. He uses a rational, a political and a cultural perspective on information use. He finds that the information is not much used as expected by the rational approach, i.e. for goal-oriented improvement, but he finds more confirmation of political use; i.e. the information is used to support the position of different actors, and it is perceived as serving some interests more than others. Hence some actors prefer to rely on other information resources. The monitor also has a cultural function as a starting point for intergovernmental dialogue.

Åge Johnsen also points to the political significance of performance information in his analysis of Norwegian primary school educational policy. He shows how the OECD PISA investigations from 2000 underscored the basic skills focus of the centre-right government's education policy and set the agenda for a policy of measuring, ranking and publication of school performance which was resisted by the socialist parties, the teachers' unions and pupils' organizations and some academic circles. Performance management has continued to be controversial through the policy life cycle stages of design, implementation, use and impacts, not least because it entails a shift from a traditional corporatist model of educational policy-making to one where the objectives, methods and performance of primary education is subject to discussion in the public and political sphere.

The empirical chapters thus partly confirm the editors' expectation that the hitherto limited evidence for use of performance information is due to a too narrow understanding of use as rational, instrumental use. When public sector actors say that they don't use performance information, they may mean that they do not sit down with a performance report and a cup of coffee and analyze the consequences of different alternatives in order to reach the most optimal decision. However, they may use performance information in other ways; to claim their own success, to criticize the failure of other parties in government, to support requests for more resources, or to bring new issues on the agenda, just to mention a few.

The political use of performance information has retained a central position on the performance management research agenda since the publication of 'Performance Information in the Public Sector. How it is Used' in 2008, and it has been the topic of several more EGPA meetings in Study Group on Performance

in the Public Sector. However, how public sector actors use performance information to promote their interests is still a relatively underexplored subject, which deserves more systematic treatment, and more publications are to be expected in the area in the coming years.

In summary, *'Performance Information in the Public Sector. How it is Used'* is an interesting book which may be read for its clarifying historical overview, for its typologies of use or for its role in setting an interesting new research agenda regarding the political use of performance information.