



How much should food sustainability rely on indicators?



- ✓ Urban food policies should look beyond indicators: they cannot tell the whole story
- ✓ Indicators should be elaborated through a multi-stakeholder process to avoid imposing one's view on others.
- ✓ Evaluation should aim at making values explicit, and at capturing the meaning of action as much as its results.

Over the last few years, a wide array of food sustainability assessment methodologies have emerged, raising concern amongst scholars about the discrepancy between assessments and practice. Are sustainability assessment useful? Do their results lead to actual changes in actors' practices? In a recent article in *Sustainability*, a group of researchers from New Zealand, Denmark and France discusses the advantages and limits of two main categories of assessments: indicators-based and value-based. They provide valuable insights for any city willing to track progress of its food policy.

The limits of indicators-based assessments

When thinking about monitoring sustainability, the first tool that comes to mind is indicators. Indeed, this approach is the more widely used. It consists in **selecting key performance indicators, setting up standards and analysing on a regular basis if progress has been made.**

This approach is very effective to track progress on a small number of well-defined indicators. Some actors in the food system are very eager to adopt them as they are a good way to differentiate themselves from competitors.

This method is easy to use, but not that easy to build. The difficulty lies in two key stages:

- First, selecting indicators. They capture what the tool developer's think is relevant and is good. Ideally, indicators should be built through a multi-stakeholder process. But it is not always easy to make very different stakeholders agree on a set of indicators, as these reveal that different actors place emphasis on different values.

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- Second, defining which level of indicator is “good”. Should actors be compared to the average of other actors? To their situation in the previous year?

Such an approach also has other sizeable limits:

- First, **the main pitfall is focusing on indicators and losing sight of the bigger picture**. For example, this leads to some organic agriculture labels not taking into account where the product comes from, or if farmers have made an effort to close the nutrient loop on the farm.
- Second, **it only captures what is measurable**. For instance, animal well-being can be approached through indicators, but these will never capture the care that is given to animals. Same for workers’ well-being, that can only be fully understood when taking the time to talk to people and get a sense of how they feel in their job. Some issues are still undocumented in scientific literature or uncertain, yet they are considered important by actors. How can indicators account for them?

Should we focus on values rather than indicators?

Fortunately, indicators are not the only way to measure sustainability. Researchers have identified a second set of assessments that have very different logics. **Instead of focusing only on results, they analyse the process through which food is produced and the values that drive food actors**. In other words, assessments are not so much about “What have you achieved?”, but about **“Why do you do it this way?” and “Does it fit into the set of values that we consider important?”**

Such assessments are more widely used in alternative food movements. This is the spirit of the Organic Charter that defines core principles all organic farmers should follow. In France, the *Nature et Progrès* Label is a good example of this. The audit process to obtain the label is not based on a set of intangible indicators. Instead, it aims at understanding what farmers have achieved given their specific context. Here, values that drive action are as important as results. **Such tools are usually richer than indicator sets, because they can capture a lot of information that would be lost otherwise.**

These methods are also developed as a means to communicate to consumers about food sustainability aspects that are important to them, for instance, animal well-being. They require a high level of trust between actors of the food chains, though, as when no indicator is available, the consumer should trust that assessors are carrying out a valuable assessment.

According to [Marion Sautier](#), researcher at École Nationale Supérieure Agronomique in Toulouse, who co-authored the article, **the development of such assessments usually has a political dimension**. They are put forward by pioneering groups who want to include new values in existing food sustainability assessments.

Urban food policies should look beyond indicators

Such an analysis is very relevant for the evaluation of urban food policies. Indeed, food policy assessment frameworks have blossomed over the last few years (see our previous articles: [The A to Z of urban food analysis](#) and [Quick Scanning your food policy](#)) and it is important to understand the benefits and limits of all methodologies.

A few lessons can be drawn from this article:

- Indicators are useful. One could even say that in the global competition between cities, indicators are also a great way to put forward one’s achievements. **But indicators alone cannot tell the whole story.**
- **Indicators should be elaborated through a multi-stakeholders process** to avoid imposing one’s view on others. They should be reviewed on a regular basis, as when values get translated into indicators, they tend to disappear behind them and be forgotten.



- Evaluation should aim at making values explicit, and at **capturing the meaning of action as much as its results.**

Such results cast a new look on indicators: finally, the focus should not be so much on elaborating very complex indicators that take up a lot of resources. **Stakeholders' dialogue, an analysis of their values and the meaning they give to what they do could also be an excellent investment of time and resources.** This way, assessments would give valuable insights to help improving action.



March 2019

Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Marion Sautier](#) for her inputs and comments.

Source : [Alrøe, H.F.; Sautier, M.; Legun, K.; Whitehead, J.; Noe, E.; Møller, H.; Manhire, J. Performance versus Values in Sustainability Transformation of Food Systems. Sustainability 2017, 9, 332.](#)

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