Studies on indicators began to acquire a scientific shape in the mid 1960s, as a response to the emerging demand for the organization of monitoring instruments on the social transformations and different forms of impact of public policies. As their function was to give empirical meanings to complex concepts, or even to translate abstract or non-measurable concepts into operational terms, the indicators began to be an indispensable tool for conducting assessments of various kinds. Especially from the 1990s, a true emergence of their use was seen to have take place. Many papers were published with regard to what the indicators are, what their purpose is and how they are conceived.

Cecilia Wong’s book, since it deals with the indicators for urban and regional planning, deserves special attention by all those who directly tackle the planning and management of cities, for it discusses a topic of fundamental importance, but one that is still short on research studies.

According to Wong, the use of quantitative indicators to guide policy action was begun in the 1940s in the United States, with a view to measuring economic questions. Based on this very successful experiment, indicators began to be drawn up, in the mid 1960s, to measure social changes.

A movement of social indicators quickly spread, framed in a context of social reform. Wong deems this as the first large wave of how the use of indicators spread.

The second large wave, the origins of which had separate reasons, was begun in the 1990s. In a context of the emergence of environmental questions, the indicators would, therefore, be constructed in order to measure the sustainability and quality of life on its different scales. They should also be able to form a solid base for taking policy decisions. The emphasis of this new wave of indicators was much more pragmatic and with a greater policy angle than the previous moment.

The central discussion of the book focuses on this second moment of making use of the indicators. It turns on the inter-relationship between instrumental rationality in the process of constructing indicators and the prevailing policy and administrative context. By using this analysis, the objective was to offer forms of seeing how policy and

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institutional questions mould the scope, methods and interests in research studies on indicators, and vice-versa.

According to the author, drawing up indicators is, to a large extent, molded by the policy agenda and by the institutional-managerial culture of the moment. As a counterpoint to this reality, is the fact that drawing up quality indicators is highly conditioned by the rigor of the technical and methodological questions involved. It is this permanent tension between the demands imposed by policy action and methodological questions of order relating to the construction of indicators which permeates all discussion of this book.

The analysis constructed in the book was based on the author’s wide experience with research on indicators in various governmental organs and agencies in the United Kingdom, especially in England itself.

According to Wong, the changes in the British policy agenda reveal four main tendencies: i. the first is the spread of the use of indicators as an instrument to guide the definition for allocating resources by all governmental areas and activities; ii. The second is the concomitance between centralization in the conduct of monitoring and decentralization of responsibility by the collection of data; iii. The next is about the gradual change of monitoring policy which hitherto emphasized questions of productivity and level of implementation but is now focused on the wider kinds of impact and strategic results for developing more evident bases for policy action; iv. The final tendency observed is that the construction of indicators has been shifted from a simpler and more direct approach towards more complex methodological models, with the use of statistics and a larger number of indicators.

According to what Wong says, the book aims to construct a deeper discussion on these tendencies, structured on three central themes: the use, method and studies of cases. These were the themes that defined the structure of the book, which is divided into three parts called Indicator usage and policy-making, Conceptual, methodological and analytical issues and Case studies.

Part I is sub-divided into three chapters. It explores recent research on the use of indicators to underpin policy activity and discusses the role of the national services of statistics and that of central and local governments in producing data and information.

In the first chapter of Part I, there is discussion of the relationship between theory, measurement and policy action. It turns special attention to the main institutional and administrative questions involved in the use of indicators. The following chapter, for its part, examines how governmental changes and those in political ideology have molded the construction and use of indicators over the last twenty years. Its objective is to discuss the first three tendencies identified by Wong, and previously set out, by means of the construction of a historical panorama on how policy and the agenda of the moment shape the use of indicators. Chapter 4 examines the way in which national statistics are organized and managed and what the level of their suitability and openness is, while considering the demands imposed by the policy regime.

Part II, which also comprises three chapters, is focused on discussing the conceptual, analytical and methodological questions relating to the formulation of indicators.
In the first chapter of this part, Wong discusses the importance of the data in constructing indicators. According to her, the great challenge in drawing up indicators is how to collect, efficiently, valid and good quality data which are suitable for analyzing a given reality, in a satisfactory way. In trying to throw light on this subject, Wong analyzes questions involved in the validity and quality of information and identifies the problems inherent in the public undertaking of compiling data.

The following chapter is dedicated to the step of the analysis and interpretation of the indicators. In it, alternatives are discussed for enhancing the interpretation, analysis and presentation of indicators. For Wong, indicators taken in isolation are pieces of information of idle (ie no) value, which can scarcely offer any significant message for policy action. According to her, what is needed is an analysis of the indicators which aggregates value and transform information into intelligence.

The last chapter of Part II discusses the methodological process for developing indicators. The author adopts, discusses and reformulates, in the light of experience accumulated over the last ten years, a procedure developed by her and Coombes (1994) for constructing indicators based on four methodological steps: conceptual consolidation; analytical structuring; identification of the indicators; and synthesis of the values of the indicators. Wong justifies the choice of this approach by her understanding, despite there being a series of ways of classifying the process of constructing indicators, that all of them follow similar methodological procedures, even if they are denominated or grouped in distinct ways.

Part III of the book analyzes the theory discussed in the previous parts in the light of three case studies. To do so, three groups of indicators were selected: those of deprivation, of regional and urban development and of sustainability and planning.

In Chapter 8, Wong discusses questions related to the methodology and to the use of deprivation indicators. Her discussion is conducted based on examining indicators developed by the UK Central Government and other organs since the 1980s. It seeks to identify the central tendencies of development of this group of indicators, with special attention paid to questions related to conceptualization, methodology and use for policy ends.

The following chapter discusses the indicators of urban and regional development. To do so, it tackles the policy contexts in which recent examples of progress have been achieved in academic research on the theme and their application to the policies of urban and regional development. Chapter 10, for its part, explores the process of constructing indicators for sustainability and planning in England, and also in a wider context, including those developed by the United Nations and the European Union.

In Chapter 11, a synthesis is constructed of the central questions raised by the previous chapters and a reflection on the current advances in the development and use of indicators. For Wong, three central questions emerge from the inter-relationship between policy and method in the development of indicators: the cases studies demonstrate that there has been a great influence of the prevailing policy agenda and of the institutional-managerial culture in constructing indicators; the decentralization of political power is founded on a rigid centralized control, by means of monitoring and assessment actions; and the methodological and technical development of indicators is impregnated with policy forces, such that this fact may both facilitate and hamper their development.
The contributions which Cecilia Wong’s work brings are significant and interest both those who deal directly with formulating systems for indicators and those who have critiques to make on the subject. The author, in fact, offers a series of lenses which makes it possible to see the problem from the policy angle, from the methodological angle and from the intersection between the two. Her work leaves no doubts: indicators are not exact sciences and building them is a consensual process, in which questions and interests of different natures are involved.