

Using Performance Measurement to Strengthen Bureaucratic Accountability: Lessons from the People's Republic of China

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Presentation abstract:

This presentation shows how performance measurement is conducted in Chinese local governments to strengthen bureaucratic accountability over the past two decades. It then sorts out major differences between the performance measurement system conducted in a communist country and those being implemented in major OECD countries. At last, it examines governing problems caused by such a measurement system and lessons that can be learned.

Presentation overview:

Since the late 1980s, the Chinese local governments have adopted a target-based performance measurement system. Under the system, local officials sign performance contracts with the next higher-level authorities. The contract delineates clear targets and indicators for conducting annual performance review. Leadership officials of each organization are held accountable for the accomplishment of the established targets. At the year-end evaluation, all organizations that have signed performance contracts will be ranked by their actual performance achievements. Reward and penalty decisions are then made based on the ranking results.

In terms of accountability enhancement, the Chinese performance measurement system differs from the result-based, customer-oriented evaluation systems that are being implemented in major OECD countries mainly in three aspects: First, China's performance measurement system places more emphasis on the evaluation of nonmission-based targets than job-specific targets. Second, performance measurement in China concerns more on policy compliance than policy outcomes. Third, the implementation of the target-based performance measurement system mainly enhances lower-level officials' responsiveness and accountability to policy requirements of authorities at superior levels instead of citizen needs.

In practice, the implementation of the Chinese performance measurement system has given rise to unintended problems in local governance such as conflicting targets and output distortion. Nevertheless, it brings significant political benefits to Chinese reformers—it builds up comprehensive governance capacity of the party-state and ensures effective policy implementation

in local areas. The lessons can be learned from China's case is that performance measurement should be understood to operate within specific political and ideological contexts and to extend beyond various forms of evaluation and scrutiny. In a communist country such as the PRC, improving public services is at the current stage not the primary concern of conducting performance measurement in local governments. Instead, the main value of performance measurement is to ensure local officials' accountability to authorities at higher-levels so as to achieve the Chinese reformers' macroscopic transformation goals.