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The Millennium Development Goals and Education: Accountability and Substitution in Global Assessment

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Abstract Precise international metrics and assessments may induce governments to alter policies in pursuit of more favorable assessments according to these metrics. In this paper, we explore a secondary effect of global performance indicators (GPIs). Insofar as governments have finite resources and make trade-offs in public goods investments, a GPI that precisely targets the provision of a particular public good may cause governments to substitute away from the provision of other, related, public goods. We argue that both the main effect of the GPI (on the measured public good) and this substitution effect vary systematically based on the domestic political institutions and informational environments of targeted states. Specifically, we contend that both the main and substitution effects of GPIs should be largest for governments that are least accountable (opaque and nondemocratic) and should be smallest for those that are most accountable. We illustrate the logic of these arguments using a formal model and test these claims using data on primary and secondary enrollment rates across 114 countries. We find that countries substitute toward primary education enrollment rates (which is targeted by the Millennium Development Goals) and away from secondary (which is not), and that these effects are mitigated as accountability rises.

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Quantifiable targets shape incentives. The idea that global performance indicators (GPIs) represent attempts to influence governments is a central tenet of this symposium. When economic development organizations and the foreign aid ministries of states deploy performance-assessment metrics, they stimulate the governments of...