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Performance Management in Canadian Local Government:
A Journey in Progress or a Dead End?

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Abstract: For the past ten years, local governments across Canada have had to comply with provincial legislation requiring them to implement performance measurement systems. Provincial governments in Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia and British Columbia have launched requirements for specific measures, but in most cases, they did not include citizens nor address the role and function of citizens or elected officials in the design and implementation of these measures.

This paper argues that performance measurement rather than performance management systems have been implemented in Canadian local governments. But measurement alone cannot improve organizational results. Measures are most likely to be effective as elements of a holistic performance management system developed and used by front line staff. Little Canadian research is available on the involvement of citizens and elected officials in performance measurement or on the uses of measures in the context of comprehensive performance management systems. However, there is evidence that performance measurement initiatives have not been as useful or effective in improving transparency, accountability and performance as their proponents may have hoped.

This paper first outlines the Canadian experience with performance management and performance measurement. A review of the scholarly literature on this subject identifies three main themes: advocacy, critique and involvement of citizens and elected officials. The authors then review the successive waves of implementation of performance measures by provincial and local governments and, in the third section suggest that the organizational elements of a performance management system are capable of guiding improvements in local government operations.

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