

Information use and prioritization of societal problems



Overview of the study

Political and administrative decision-makers in local government have much information at their disposal about the challenges that their municipality faces. How do decision-makers use this information to determine which challenges require their attention? And are there differences between politicians and managers?

In a large-scale study, researchers from Leiden University presented fictional scenarios to **2313 public officials (1292 politicians and 1021 public managers) in Belgian municipalities**. These scenarios presented performance information with varying characteristics about either road maintenance or primary school education. Public officials were asked to indicate which road or school they would prioritize for improvement.

Conclusions

1. Public officials are more likely to prioritize issues when a performance issue is expressed based on an **objective performance measure**, rather than subjective performance measure such as user satisfaction.
2. Failure to meet a **pre-determined target** that was set is a stronger reason to prioritize an issue than a lower service quality than before or lower service quality compared to neighboring municipalities.
3. Politicians and public managers make decisions in a very similar way, but **managers more strongly rely on objective information** to inform decisions than politicians.
4. Depending on the policy domain (roads versus schools), information is used differently. Public officials prefer to **rely on internal information from the municipality itself** to make decisions about roads, but more strongly rely on information generated by external organizations to make decisions about primary schools.



Implications for practice

Public officials are responsive to problems in their municipality, and performance information is widely used to inform which problems get priority. However, public officials do not prioritize all problems equally.

We distill two practical implications:

1. In order to stimulate use of information in decision-making, local governments should obtain, generate or present performance information according to the **information preferences of decision-makers**.
2. **Decision-makers should be aware of their tendency** to emphasize problems where objective information can be expressed against a formal target. Such information is not always available or appropriate.