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Global Benchmarking Practices and the Development of a Progressive Art of Government: the Case of Land Governance

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Global Benchmarking Practices and the Development of a Progressive Art of Government: the Case of Land Governance

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Abstract

Indicators, benchmarks and rankings are emerging as central technologies of contemporary global governance, which profoundly shape transnational processes by naturalizing normative criteria about appropriate conduct. Most of critical scholarship, however, cautiously approaches the (ab)use of these tools for global development or human rights promotion. Here, it is emphasized that “global benchmarking”, or “governance by indicators”, reproduces technocratic configuration and, far from being neutral, it often conceals the particular agendas of powerful actors behind a veil of technicality. Against this background, this paper sets up instead to explore a different issue - i.e. whether benchmarking practices can be repurposed towards social justice goals. Focusing especially on land governance indicators, I conclude that benchmarks are not necessarily depoliticizing or neoliberal. Instead, one might even characterize them as being inherently oriented towards greater openness and the public interest. Therefore, progressive forces should not limit themselves to a critique of “really existing” benchmarks, but rather experiment with ways of improving them. In light of their unique capacities for governing at distance, in fact, indicators can be part of a “progressive art of government” competing on an equal footing with neoliberal governmental devices.

Introduction

James Ferguson (2011; 2009) provocatively argues that much of contemporary “leftist” scholarship tends to result in rather sterile forms of political engagement. In particular, the author stresses, a “critique of power” should not be an end in itself. Just as critical theory seeks to understand the current organization of the global society in order to change it (Newell 2008), so also Foucault “repeatedly insisted that it made no sense (in his scheme of things) to wish for a world without power” (Ferguson 2011, 62). As such, rather than just exposing the interests underlying apparently technical and benevolent development interventions, progressive forces should experiment ways to use power for their own goals. In other words, they should aim at a *progressive art of government*. Indeed, such an endeavor is especially urgent endeavor in the present context, in which conservative actors invented new forms of governance for ruling in an evolving world, while alternative forces often remain faithful to traditional, and somewhat obsolete, leftist paradigms.

In this respect, Ferguson (2009) also calls for a clear distinction between neoliberalism as a conservative class project, and neoliberalism as a set of mechanisms of government. The latter, in fact, have no necessary loyalty to the political program within which they were developed. Accordingly, actors committed to the development of new progressive arts of government should not dogmatically reject these techniques on the basis of their association with conservative projects. On the contrary, exactly in light of their contribution to the successes of neoliberalism, the most salient question concerns the possibility of repurposing them towards alternative ends (see also Kloppenburg 2014; Death & Gabay 2015).

Focusing on land governance, this paper contextualizes Ferguson’s arguments with reference to the governmental devices falling under the label of “global benchmarking” - an umbrella term referring to the production and application of comparative measurements of performance for governing at a distance in contemporary world politics. Accordingly, *whereas most of critical scholarship denounces how these practices shield particular agendas and interests via appeals to technical neutrality, this paper sets up to explore a different issue - i.e. whether, and how can global benchmarking be repurposed towards a progressive land agenda based on principles of human rights and participation.*

In doing so, however, this work will not provide any definitive conclusion or solution. More modestly, it aims to highlight the potential for transformation held by global benchmarking, as well as to identify and engage with the strategic dilemmas faced by progressive land movements participating to relevant global processes. On the one hand, it will suggest that “governance by indicators” does not need to be necessarily depoliticizing or neoliberal. Just as benchmarks can be tools of neoliberal oppression, so they can be tools of liberation and progressive policymaking. On the other, this paper will contend that, in the field of land governance, the realization of progressive benchmarking systems is not only conceptually possible, but it might also be also pragmatically feasible. Indeed, “really existing” systems are generally guided by concerns of market and administrative efficiency. Yet, some developments seemingly prospect the possibility of campaigning for, and eventually realizing, benchmarks more attuned to democratic agendas prioritizing marginalized groups.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 shows why benchmarking practices are particularly fit for governing at a distance and, thus, for helping the transition from global commitments to rule-consistent behavior. Here, I focus on the essential functions fulfilled by numbers in global governance, and in the multiple ways through which global benchmarks shape political processes. Section 3 then moves on to review some of the main misgivings about governance by indicators. These do not concern only the risks of oversimplification and of mistaking means for ends, but also the “corporate form” of benchmarks and their depoliticizing implications – all issues facilitating the capture of relating processes by powerful actors. In contrast, Section 4 suggests that none of these critiques is conclusive. Indeed, benchmarking practices have their flaws, but they are not intrinsically associated with neoliberal projects of society. Instead, they might even have an inherent impetus towards openness and the public interest (Porter 2015). On these grounds, Section 5 discusses the ambivalent politics of benchmarks in the context of the emergent land governance and the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on Land Tenure (VGGT). In order to do so, I first introduce the profound critiques voiced by scholars and practitioners against the Land Governance Assessment Framework –

a prominent exercise that, whilst being increasingly hyped as a tool for the VGGT monitoring, reflects only marginally their attention to equity and human rights. Secondly, however, I show that neither the LGAF nor other ongoing global benchmarking practices should be dogmatically demonized. Multiple trends, in fact, suggest that opportunities for putting them into better uses. The concluding remarks, finally, briefly engage with the dilemma of progressive forces engaged in global land politics.

1 Numbers, Benchmarks, and Governing at a Distance

Even though the nature and the extent of the so-called globalization can and should be debated, we now live in a world that is increasingly interconnected in economic, social and cultural terms. It is here that benchmarks might be particularly valuable for a progressive art of government. Indeed, as illustrated by a growing and heterogeneous scholarship, their nature makes them particularly fit for governing at the distance and for translating global commitments into actual rule-consistent behavior. As to clarify this latter point, the paper first elaborates on how numbers address the particular exigencies of global governance. Then, it moves on to discuss the multiple ways through which benchmarks indirectly shape global policy-making.

The Fundamental Role of Numbers in Global Governance

“Global benchmarking”, or “governance by indicators” are umbrella terms referring to a distinct form of global governance, which involves the production and application of comparative metrics to assess and monitor performances of states or other actors in terms of the structures, processes, and outcomes of specific policies or behaviors¹. While these evaluations can be conducted through diverse specific methodologies, all nevertheless work on the basis of standardized measures. By simplifying and quantifying raw data about complex social phenomena, these indicators enable the comparison of particular units of analysis as well as the evaluation of their performance by reference to one or more standards (see Broome & Quirk 2015a, 2015b; Cooley & Snyder 2015; Engle-Merry et al. 2015; Davis et al. 2012).

As noted by a vast literature, these distinctive features of indicators, and more in general of numbers, have always granted them central functions in rule-based projects. Quantification can even be seen as “the hallmark of bureaucratic authority” (Espeland & Sauder 2009, 4). Yet, to many extents these have even more significance for contemporary global governance. Numbers and indicators, in fact, are “ideally positioned in...dealing with distance” (Krause Hansen & Porter 2012, 415).

Firstly, just as national statistics were fundamental for the rise of the modern “biopolitical” state concerned with the wealth of the population rather than with its boundaries and territory (Desroisieres, 2014), so the availability of “global” numbers can be regarded as a precondition for the possibility of even thinking about global governance. Indeed, indicators make amenable to quantification and comparison social processes that are by their nature extremely multifaceted, context-specific and non-commensurable. In doing so, they make legible and, thus, subject to intervention issues and situations that would be otherwise chaotic and ungovernable. Furthermore, global numbers are fundamental for creating global categories, which in turn are essential for imagining universal problems and/or solutions (see Freistein 2015, 2; Vetterlein 2012).

Secondly, numbers and indicators are particularly fit for global governance purposes also due their status in contemporary thinking. Indeed, “throughout modernity, numbers and quantification have come to epitomize objectivity and true knowledge, reflecting distrust in knowledge generated from bonds of personal mutuality and qualitative accounts” (Krause Hansen & Porter 2012, 415). Therefore, compared to other global governance instruments, “quasi-numerical” measures – such as benchmarks, grades, and rankings - are more likely to succeed in forcing compliance by the targeted actors. In fact,

¹ Due to the specific scope of this paper and the LGAF’s focus on national/local policies, throughout this paper I will concentrate on measures of domestic governance, though references will be made also to benchmarks referring to other actors, such as corporations, IOs, and NGOs.

norms are supposed to inexorably require subjective, and hence contestable, interpretation. Numbers, instead, are perceived to convey unbiased and objective evidence. As such, indicator-based arguments cannot be easily resisted: they command “deference in a way narrative data rarely does” (Finnemore 2013, 3). This explains why international human rights norms have no bite, while (some) indicators increasingly do (Fioramonti 2014).

Power through Indicators: Knowledge, Governance and Organizational Effects

From a political angle, benchmarking can be understood as “an exercise of governing at a distance, wherein the power of benchmarks primarily stems from their capacity to indirectly shape procedural standards, issue expertise, institutional obligations, and political conversations” (Broome & Quirk 2015b, 820-1). As this definition implies, “power through indicators” (Davis et al. 2012) acts in many ways. Benchmarks, in fact, do not only have direct governance effects arising from their motivational, reputational and financial implications over the monitored subjects. Rather, they also have knowledge effects relating to their capacity to diffuse and fix particular framings and/or subjectivities, as well as organizational effects relating to their roles in communication and competition among international actors competing for cognitive authority.

Foucauldian-inspired and constructivist scholarship generally notes that the most pervasive power of indicators arises from their *knowledge effects*, or “anchoring functions”. Indicators, in fact, establish “referents that shape how different actors subsequently think about and see specific issues” (Broome & Quirk 2015a, 816-7; see also Clegg 2015, 951-2). Indeed, just as numbers do not simply represent reality, so indicators are not neutral technical exercises providing objective evidence. Rather, they are social constructions bearing specific values, interests and knowledge claims. In other words, performance metrics inescapably embody theories about “how society should be, how change should be achieved and how progresses can be measured” (Davis et al. 2012, 4). Furthermore, knowledge inexorably links to power. Benchmarks, then, represent “political interventions” (Clegg 2015, 950). As put by Broome & Quirk (2015b, 829), “while benchmarks purport to describe things as they are, this veneer of numerical representation and neutral comparison invariably conceals a range of political calculations, agendas, interests, and effects”.

In the short term these underlying dimensions can be easily enlightened and challenged. In the long term, however, benchmarks may have profound implications. Indeed, successful and well-established indicators socialize actors into particular webs of meanings that come to be perceived as objective and commonsensical (see Fougner 2008; Fukuda-Parr & Orr 2014). Furthermore, the knowledge effects of benchmarking manifest themselves also in the creation of identities and categories – determining, for instance, who is vulnerable and to what or who should provide solutions – as well as of normative criteria regarding the parameters of appropriate conduct and performance (Uribe 2012, 10; Homolar 2015, 846; Broome & Quirk 2015b, 825-6). Accordingly, the construction of these objective measures allows not only for the possibility of “being subject to regulation or control, but also for shaping one’s own identity...by self-knowledge and self-regulation” (Miller, 1994, quoted in Fioramonti 2014, 20; see also Krause Hansen 2015, 210).

The *governance effects* of indicators refer instead to the more direct and short-term ways in which these tools act as mechanisms for formal and informal global regulation (see Uribe 2012, 13-5). In other words, if indicators can be regarded as discourses embodying particular logics, their governance effects are the concrete ways in which providers of indicators seek to “give effect” to these logics (Freistein 2015, 5). These means can be grouped in two broad categories – namely the financial and the motivational/reputational effects of benchmarks, which often coexist but build on different logics.

In the field of global humanitarian policy-making, the *financial effects* of indicators relate to their growing role in the allocation of development funds (see Sending & Lie 2015; Fioramonti 2014, 104-43). Following concerns of ownership and democratization, in fact, the lending practices of donor institutions are increasingly shifting away from the overt “imposition” of particular measures towards the development of reward-for-result schemes. In this configuration, progresses over particular indicators often represent central criteria for the allocation of resources. Here, thus, benchmarks act as

tools of “ex-post” or “post-hoc” conditionality (respectively, Uribe 2012, 13; Sending & Lie 2015) While these financial mechanisms do not differ much from traditional regulatory practices that entail direct consequences on targeted actors, the distinctiveness of global benchmarking becomes evident if one considers their more subtle ways of exerting authority.

Indeed, initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) tend to affect policy-making “through shaming processes, unfavorable comparisons with peers, and other forms of reputational damage” (Broome & Quirk 2015b, 828; see also Seabrooke & Wigan 2015, 887-9). The *reputational/motivational effects* of indicators, therefore, relate to mechanisms of “symbolic judgment”, which explain how actors alter behaviors “in reaction to being evaluated, observed, or measured” (Espeland & Sauder 2007: 6). These social sanctions may have indirect, but profound, implications over global processes, and work even in areas where the capacity to materially sanction inappropriate behaviors is weak or absent.

Finally, the *organizational effects* of indicators refer to the great influence that their production has in relation to the identities of IOs and to the communication/competition among different actors.

Regarding the former aspect, the paper already mentioned that standardization and data construction are essential for the practices of national and global institutions. Indeed, the capacity to classify the world and fix meanings is the foundation of IO’s authority (Barnett & Finnemore 1999: 710). Furthermore, producing numbers confirms the relevance of IOs also when they lack the concrete means required to fulfill their mandate. Providing information, in fact, is often easier than to engaging in on the ground interventions and, by reducing the messiness of real world, it makes problems seem more manageable (Broome & Quirk 2015b, 824; Freistein 2015, 17).

As far as the “relational” aspect is concerned, on the one hand numbers affect the interactions among the IOs and their principals, i.e. domestic governments. For instance, the World Bank (WB) uses benchmarks “to govern and maintain its authority vis-à-vis both aid recipients and donors” (Sending & Lie 2015 995; see also Clegg 2010). On the other hand, in addition, the capacity to develop authoritative indicators is also an important weapon “in global battles over the right to govern” a particular issue area (Seabrooke & Wigan 2015, 891; see also Cooley 2015, 27-9). In this sense, “as symbolic weapons benchmarks are useful for both reformist and revolutionary agendas”. At times, for instance, counter-hegemonic forces invest in alternative indicators as “to provide a direct challenge to how we think about the world and how it should be” (Seabrooke & Wigan 2015, 887-8).

2 Major Misgivings about Global Benchmarking

Whereas benchmarks have been traditionally employed in global economic governance, since the 90s the growing recognition of their powers spurred their translation across other domains, such as development or international human rights promotion. Yet, despite extensive methodological and conceptual work, multiple and profound reservations still dominate discussions about the (ab)use of numbers in these fields (see Harrison & Sekalala 2015; Fioramonti 2014; Rosga & Satterthwaite 2009). Summarizing much richer debates, major concerns about global benchmarking can be roughly categorized into three broad interrelated categories: their operative limitations, their depoliticizing nature, and their “corporate form”.

Progressive practitioners have widely noted the *operative challenges* of using indicators for the promotion of human rights and social justice agendas. Here, the existing literature particularly stresses the consequences of the oversimplification generated by benchmarks – a far-reaching criticism considering that indicators simplify “by design not by accident” (Morse 2005, XV). Concerns about over-simplification can develop in a twofold way.

On the one hand, scholars emphasize that these attempts to make commensurable abstract entities and distant realities unavoidably come to obscure potentially significant dimensions. This narrowing vision

(Scott 1999) limits the analytical value of indicators, and endangers failure of projects that impose their own categories over local contexts. Similarly, international human rights practitioners warn that indicators cannot capture the full complexity of human rights and states' performances, even in relation to a specific right (OHCHR 2012, 36). Conceptually, in fact, "indicators measure aggregates, while human rights are held by individuals" (Green 2001, 1085). Methodologically, furthermore, there is a risk of selecting indicators and target topics on the basis of simple data availability, rather than on substantive considerations about how to best assess rights (see Rosga & Satterthwaie 2009, 282-3).

On the other hand, it is argued that, like for all measurements tied to the goal of improvement, reliance on simplified measures risks to conform to the *Goodhart's law*, that is the tendency for measures to become targets (Strathern 1997). In other words, "the heavy emphasis on quantifying change risks making a fetish of development indicators; that is, of mistaking means (quantitative measures for tracking social change) for ends (qualitative transformation of these social opportunities)" (Sexsmith & McMichael 2015, 586). Similarly, in international human rights reporting, "to the extent governments do actively try to meet benchmarks....the incentive to demonstrate success....according to given indicators may become greater than any incentive to substantively ensure the fulfillment and/or enjoyment of human rights themselves" (Rosga & Satterthwaie 2009, 285-6).

A second category of risks associated with global benchmarking regards the depoliticizing nature of these practices and their tendency to reduce space for civil society as well as for transformative endeavors. Here what is questioned is exactly what makes numbers particularly valuable to close the compliance gap, i.e. their perceived extraneousness to political dynamics. From a progressive angle, indeed, there are multiple reasons for questioning this technicalization of human rights and development.

Firstly, "much scientization takes place in domains where there is little scientific consensus or the efficacy of science is questionable" (Rosga & Satterthwaie 2009, 283). This is problematic because, when significant paradigmatic divergences persist, like in the development field, non-scientific factors - such as economic and power relations - may significantly influence relevant processes.

Secondly, even more importantly, reliance on indicators is said to imply the disappearing of politics into the technical (Engle Merry 2011). Indeed, governance by indicators substitutes ethical and political discourse with technical knowledge, and therefore enhances the power of experts vis-à-vis traditional policy actors and the broad population (Davis et al. 2012). On the one hand, this further detaches the practices of global benchmarking from human rights thinking and its emphasis on participation and accountability. In fact, if benchmarking exercises "are not capable of calibration according to national priorities and deliberation, indicators could backfire as an accountability mechanism". States would indeed become subject to the imposition of (overly rigid) international rules, while rights-holders, i.e. citizens, would not have much space in the process (Rosga & Satterthwaie 2009, 309). On the other, these technocratic arrangements may also result in a further capturing of global policy processes by powerful actors capable of "steering" scientific debates, or at least in the closing of opportunities for transformative endeavors. In this latter regard, for instance, Seabrooke & Wigan (2015) show that reformist initiatives are much more likely to be considered credible than radical ones. The latter, in fact, should not only gain political traction and/or legitimacy. They should also respond to deep-seated technical methodologies - a "double" burden that further complicates opportunities for change.

Finally, a third set of skeptical remarks conceptualizes the proliferation of benchmarks as an illustration of the growing spread of *corporate thinking* into the social sphere. On the one hand, this argument hints at the origin of benchmarking practices in corporate environments and at the specific logic of the most prominent "really existing" benchmarks, which often aim to diffuse neoliberal ideologies of competitiveness. On the other, a even more pervasive critique frames global benchmarking practices as a transnational governmentality, which conducts the conduct of international actors - i.e. states - through self-disciplining techniques similar to those that have been so successfully deployed in disciplining individuals in Western (neo)liberal societies (see Fougner 2008;

Lowenheim 2008; Erkkila and Pilronen 2014; Engle Merry 2011). Here, governance by indicators is primarily approached as a technique of government. Its “corporate form” (Engle Merry 2011), thus, does not derive from the specific logic embedded in particular indicators. Rather, it emerges from the specific mechanisms through which benchmarks naturalize orderings of humans, objects or processes.

In progressive terms, these mechanisms are problematic particularly because of their obscuring of structural dimensions and conceptualizing of states as in perennial competition for resources and reputation. Firstly, in fact, exercises such as the MDGs “expose the examined actors as ethical subjects capable of free and responsible choice, but also often as responsible themselves for a bad indicator” (Hansen Krause 2015, 210). In other words, whereas global structural factors vastly influence any development process, this aspect disappears in performance measurements. Responsibility is placed on targeted actors, “irrespectively of who is actually responsible for the overall outcomes” (Broome & Quirk 2015a, 815). Secondly, competition, rather than cooperation, always plays out in benchmarking practices (Bruno 2008). Comparative assessments, in fact, significantly and distinctively draw on their reputational effects. Even though the issue is often left implicit, once an indicator has been created, it then becomes to create rankings (Turku Report 2005, 7).

3 Rescuing Global Benchmarking from Major Misgivings

The previous section argued that human rights and social justice practitioners met with suspicion, or at least great caution, the proliferation of global benchmarking exercises due to concerns about their operative challenges, their depoliticizing nature, and their “corporate form”. In contrast, the paper will now hopefully nuance these critiques. To be clear, such a “defense” of governance by indicators does not imply an uncritical acceptance of its centrality. Rather, it aims to show that global benchmarking practices need not to be necessarily inconsistent with progressive political projects.

The first set of concerns mentioned above stresses the *operational challenges* of adopting benchmarking practices in the fields of human rights or social justice. From this angle, it is stressed that simplified indicators and aggregate measure cannot capture the complex and individual essence of human rights, as well as that their use risks shifting attention from the real ends - i.e. “development” or human rights fulfillment - towards the means - i.e. the specific targets. Whereas these remarks raise important points, in my opinion these potential flaws are not a distinctive feature of “governance by indicators”.

On the one hand, in fact, any mechanism of government has its own risks. From a Foucauldian perspective, more radically, any governing program or development intervention is bound to fail (Li 2007). Accordingly, rather than focusing on critique and denunciation of existing flaws, a less sterile form of political engagement might entail also the experimentation of pragmatic way forwards.

On the other hand, also simplification can, to many extents, be considered as an unavoidable element of knowledge and political processes. Cognitive frames, in fact, are required to make sense of real world’s complexity. While it may be true that quantitative methods, in their very abstraction and stripping away of contextualizing information, pose distinctive risks of over-simplification, also qualitative accounts inescapably build on particular framings of challenges and/or solutions. Obviously, these framings could be more or less matching with the existing reality, build on more or less “acceptable” values and/or serve particular agendas rather than the public interest. Yet, one should discuss these issues rather than attacking the process itself of simplification.

Furthermore, the paper already mentioned that, to many extents, simplification and standardization are necessary components for the development of any political project, be it progressive or conservative. For instance, works on food sovereignty indicators illustrate how constructing metrics can help to transform an essentially contested concept into a coherent framework to inform policy-making and stimulating self-reflexivity of the movement for the definition of future actions (see Binimelis et al. 2014).

A second concern voiced by the literature denounces the *depoliticizing nature* of indicators and the consequent political repercussions of this trend – such as the closing of space for ethical questions and civil society engagement, often resulting in the expansion of the (hidden) power of actors powerful enough to steer the evolution of scientific expertise. Yet, such an argument has been recently challenged, or at least nuanced, by conceptual and empirical analyses. According to these, benchmarking practices not only can, under certain conditions, contribute to democratic change. They even have an “inherent impetus” towards the realization of these conditions.

At a theoretical level, Porter (2015) suggests that most of the scholarship tends to interpret benchmarks as depoliticizing because it centers too narrowly on the processes for the production of these tools. If one, instead, focuses on the connections between these indicators and the contexts within which they operate, then she/he would see a different picture. Compared to traditional forms of government, “benchmarking is enhanced by comparisons across greater numbers of actors; by more flows of information among them; by more active engagement by them; and by a greater willingness to rework existing structures in pursuit of collective goals” - all practices that, by promoting participation, transparency, accountability, and democracy are likely to promote “outcomes that are in the public interest” (ibid, 873-4). Why is that so?

On the one hand, here Porter notes that indicators tend to be effective only when they are sustained by sufficiently dense contexts of actors. These do not only include the monitored subjects, but also include “third parties”. These actors are not the formal target of benchmarking exercises, but can incorporate benchmark scores produced by others into their decision-making processes, advocacy efforts, and lending schemes. When doing so, they greatly contribute to expanding the political traction of benchmarks. Indeed, broad adoption enhances the credibility of measures and rankings, thus intensifying the reputational and financial pressures for compliance (see also Broome & Quirk 2015b, 839-40).

On the other, however, the author also stresses that governance by indicators usually operates in areas in which no central authority exists. The adoption of indicators cannot therefore be unilaterally imposed, especially on third parties. As such, the enrolment of actors will depend significantly on their perceptions about the utility and/or legitimacy of benchmarks. In other words, while in the long-term successful indicators may become naturalized, in order to achieve this status benchmarks need in their early stages the voluntary buy-in of the widest number of actors as possible. Therefore, they should meet their preferences or interests. They cannot simply serve the goals of their providers. This suggests a rather different image of benchmarking than the most popular one that sees them as means of control at a distance by self-interested actors.

To be clear, Porter himself warns that these conclusions are provisional and to be verified on a case-by-case basis, especially in domains characterized by significant political and financial conflicts. However, to many extents some empirical studies on the evolution of indicators seemingly back his arguments. Here, Umbach & Malito’s (2015) analysis of global corruption metrics is particularly illustrative. The authors, in fact, identify a shift from first-generation technocratic models, developed by small groups of international experts, to second-generation citizen-centered systems, which address the democratic concerns about these measures and their application.

On the one hand, they note that attempts to deliver more politically acceptable, and hence more influential metrics refashion the relationships between global benchmarks and their target actors, i.e. national governments and administrations. Newer approaches, in fact, tend to entail a greater dialogue with local policy-makers. Expanding this argument beyond the domain of (anti)corruption measures, similar trends can be noted in the domain of humanitarian interventions. In lending schemes such as in human rights monitoring, for instance, domestic authorities are now increasingly empowered to discuss with donors and/or monitoring parties both the indicators and the specific targets upon which progresses are assessed. Even though these arrangements may leave too much space for the discretionary will of governments, they at least mitigate the risks of imposing overly rigid international standards (see also Harrison & Sekalala 2015, 935-6).

On the other hand, more significantly from a democratic perspective, the authors also suggest that “many...indices of governance have included citizen perspectives as a democratic innovation within their assessment of the quality of governance” (Malito & Umbach 2015, 13). Such an endeavor to include civil society manifests itself through three complementary shifts, all of which address important democratic concerns while also responding to demands for technical accuracy.

Firstly, an increasing number of benchmarking systems have some mechanisms for *multi-actor and multi-level public participation* throughout the full process of producing and applying indicators. Though to different degrees, in fact, it is now widely agreed that civil society should participate in the definition of the conceptual matrix, the collection of data and their analysis (Laksa & El-Mikawy 2009, 12). This signals a growing recognition that “the ‘objectivity’ of quantitative policy studies has more to do with their fairness and impartiality than with their truth” (Porter 1994, quoted in Rosga & Satterthwaite 2009, 259). It also resonates with human rights communities’ attention to the inclusion of those suffering from violation of rights in the entire cycle of evidence creation and evidence use (Laksa & El-Mikawy 2009, 11). Secondly, recent initiatives increasingly rely on *experience and perception-based measures* of “lay” citizens in order to capture elusive phenomena, such as food insecurity or poverty, which cannot be directly observed. Yet, whilst being motivated above all by this technical concern, this move also fulfills democratic concerns. In fact, it puts people at the heart of assessments, and corrects biases emerging from reliance on small and relatively homogeneous samples of often politically powerful “experts”. Thirdly, efforts to develop accurate citizen-centered measures also entail renewed attention to new thematic areas. Indeed, citizen-centered indicators not only focus on formal institutional, legal and procedural performance – or, in other words, to “structural” or “process” indicators. Rather, they also include, or even prioritize, “*outcome*” indicators addressing those socio-economic conditions that enable people to have a dignified life or practice democracy (Welzel & Alexander 2008). These often multi-dimensional measures aim at holistically reflecting livelihoods situations, and the data they produce can be of great value for human rights and human development benchmarking (Fukuda-Parr 2010).

Finally, a third set of critiques associates the growing centrality of numbers and indicators in global policy-making with the intrusion of corporate/neoliberal logics into the social sphere. Here, benchmarking techniques are characterized as having a **corporate form** both because of their contribution to the neoliberal class project and because of their resonance with the self-disciplining mechanisms of (neo)liberal governmentality. These arguments are clearly distinct, and so should be their respective responses.

With regard to the first dimension, acknowledging the critical role of benchmarking exercises in the diffusion of neoliberal logics/projects should not obscure the fact that numbers have traditionally fulfilled also different functions. Indeed, social critique often resorts to statistical arguments in order to express and make visible exigencies of equality and justice (Desroisieres 2014, 348; see also Finnemore 2013). On the one hand, in fact, due to the particular credibility attaché to numbers, these always have had a central space in the political campaigning of progressive forces and NGOs. On the other, the development of alternative measures constitutes a key resource for counter-framing political conversations. For instance, the Human Development Index (HDI) was devised to shift the focus of development economics from national income accounting to people-centred policies (Fukuda-Parr 2003). Since 2010, furthermore, it is available in an adjusted form that accounts for inequalities in the distribution of capabilities, thus clearly making the argument that the actual level of human development could not be assessed without considering distributional patterns (Alkire & Foster 2010)². In light of all these consideration, one can argue just as they can be tools of (neoliberal) power, so indicators can be tools of liberation, or “weapons of the weak” (Finnemore 2013, 17; see also Krause Hansen 2015; Desroisieres 2014; Porter 1995).

² For more examples and theorizations of grassroots “statactivism”, see Desroisieres (2014) and the other papers collected in Bruno et al. (2014).

Regarding the second dimension – i.e. the governmentality effects of indicators – it is here where Ferguson’s (2009, 2011) call for a progressive Foucauldian politics has more to say. Indeed, some scholars of governmentality stress that this particular techniques not only can be translated from the national to the transnational, but could also be re-purposed towards different ends. As such, awareness about the unique capacity of global benchmarking for governing at a distance should not (only) result in a denunciation of how power plays out in these processes. Rather, the most salient question concerns the possibility of “doing biopolitics differently” (Death & Gabay 2015). Here, one could note how several initiatives, particularly within the human rights and the human development field, have already attempted to address the tendency for benchmarking exercises to obscure structural issues and to stimulate competition rather than cooperation. For instance, in relation to the MDGs/SDGs processes, Fukuda-Parr et al. (2009, 2014) propose a methodology for moving from “one size fits all” targets towards nationally specific benchmarks. On the one hand, by acknowledging the resource and other capacity constraints faced by countries, this approach takes into account the structural unbalances of the world economy. On the other, it reduces the competition stimulus. Countries, in fact, are no longer engaged in a race towards the same targets.

4 Case Study: Global Benchmarking and Global Land Governance

The paper so far argued that global benchmarking practices are powerful political interventions that, however, do not need to be necessarily depoliticizing or neoliberal. This section will now contextualize these discussions in the specific field of global land governance, which eloquently illustrates the politics of benchmarks.

Global Land Governance, Competing Agendas, and the Politics of Numbers

The nascent global land governance can be defined as the array of normative soft-law instruments and institutional arrangements that have recently emerged in response to the growing awareness about the global nature of land issues. Indeed, whereas transnational processes have always influenced relevant dynamics, the contentiousness and contextuality of land politics have excluded it as an international governance issue. It is only recently that, following the “revalorization” of land and the growing awareness about its significance for broader development goals, land issues came to be perceived as a global concern requiring coordinated and global responses (Margulis 2014; Sikor et al. 2013).

Yet, this embryonic global regime is nevertheless characterized by competition among very different rule-making projects. On the one hand, “conservative” perspectives backed by powerful actors – such as the WB - frame land primarily as an economic and marketable asset. Here, “*good*”/“*pro-poor*” *land governance* emerges as a technical exercise to be based on principles of financial and administrative efficiency, with the underlying assumption being that poverty reduction is likely to occur as a result of (capitalist) growth. On the other, “progressive” views conceptualize land as a right or a means to achieve other rights, as well as a territory loaded with values and personal/community stories. From this angle, thus, “*democratic*” *land governance* constitutes an inherently political and normative process, to be categorically biased towards the facilitation of access to land and natural resources for marginalized groups (Borras & Franco 2010; see also Borras et al. 2013; Holt Gimenez & Shattuck 2011; Assies 2009).

It is within this struggle among different paradigms for global land governance that land statistics becomes a salient topic for critical land governance studies as well as for practitioners.

On the one hand, in fact, the emergence of a global land regime is accompanied by the parallel emergence of global land numbers. Just as the (ac)counting techniques of the FAO posed the foundations for the global commodification of food (Ilcan & Phillips 2003), so several global actors now engage in the development of statistics on the economic, environmental, and social aspects of land. These actors include a vast range of IOs, wealthy financial organizations like the World Bank, technical communities like the International Federation of Surveyors, and a vast range of local and

global CSOs. Whilst having different purposes and acting at different scales, they often form networks and share standards, with the underlying goal of developing universal measures to feed into global policy-making and/or transnational campaigning. Yet, numbers not only (help to) construct land as a global problem requiring global solutions. They also constitute one central aspect of the ideational contests among different rule-making projects. The politics of numbers and measurements, for instance, are characterized as a distinctive illustration of the ideational contests at play in the global governance of land grabbing (Margulis & Porter 2013, 81; Margulis et al. 2013, 13-7).

On the other hand, against this background a specific kind of (quasi)numerical information – i.e. benchmarks – is likely to achieve greater significance due to its capacity to define the parameters of appropriate conduct. Indeed, whereas various normative documents now exist to collect universally recognized principles and best practices, these remain non-binding soft-law instruments. As such, they are subject to very diverging interpretations, and no authority exists to settle these disputes and sanction inconsistent behaviors. For instance, the most comprehensive among these instruments - the Voluntary Guidelines on Land Tenure (VGGT) - does foresee the setting up of a global monitoring system within the World Committee on Food Security (CFS). To date, however, few progresses have been made in this direction. At the moment, therefore, these global monitoring functions have been taken up by various competing actors – such as global/local CSOs, the World Bank, other IOs, and a broad array of regional/national organizations. To many extents, the “real” meaning of the Guidelines, and more broadly of “good land governance”, will be determined by this competition among conflicting indicators³. In other words, the politics of benchmarks may come to represent a major battlefield in the evolution of the emergent global land regime.

In the next section, the paper will show why this centrality of benchmarking practices can be seen, and has been seen, as a discouraging development for progressive forces. The specific features of these processes, in fact, apparently lend themselves to capture by powerful actors and their particular normative and political agendas.

Global Land Statistics and Benchmarks: Towards Conservative Agendas?

The Organizational Effects of Benchmarks: Land Governance from the CFS to the World Bank

In Section 2, this paper suggested that the capacity to produce authoritative information and benchmarks is a key weapon in the struggle for the right to govern global concerns (Seabrooke & Wigan 2015, 891). From this angle, the picture emerging from recent developments is clearly not reassuring for progressive forces. Indeed, while the delivery of global land data was generally tasked to UN agencies, often having “good” relationships with social movements and CSOs, a prominent role is now played by the World Bank (WB).

Exploiting its resources and its (informal) authority over developing countries, in the last decades the Bank significantly invested in the provision of land indicators. Through its Land Governance Assessment Framework (LGAF), it has recently entered also the field of land governance benchmarking (Deininger et al. 2012). Comprised by a large set of detailed indicators that diagnose existing situations and assess reforms in terms of legal and administrative structures and processes as well as of actual outcomes, the LGAF is particularly important for its controversial relationship with the VGGT. The WB, in fact, is stressing that that this exercise covers most of the areas addressed by the Guidelines and respects their essential principles (Hilhorst & Tonchovska 2015). As such, the argument goes on, it can contribute to their implementation – a position strongly opposed by civil society (Monsalve & Brent 2014), but apparently backed by FAO staff (Tonchovska & Egiashvili 2014) as well as by the vast array of CSOs participating to its local assessments.

³ An examination of all relevant proposals would exceed the scope of this paper. However, for a comprehensive review of land monitoring initiatives, and of their relationship with the monitoring of the VGGT as well as with different rule-making projects, see Seufert & Monsalve (2012).

Even though the LGAF should not be demonized, it is quite clear why the repositioning of the VGGT monitoring from the CFS to the WB is in itself a major cause of concern for progressive practitioners. The CFS, in fact, not only explicitly adheres to human rights approaches. Rather, it is also regarded as a best practice in global democracy, endowed with a high degree of legitimacy due to its inclusive negotiation process enabling civil society actors – including “radical” ones – to participate on an almost equal footing with other players (Seufert 2013; De Schutter 2014). The WB, in contrast, is prevented by its own mandate to engage in human rights issues, and is often characterized as an institution dominated by a handful of countries and strongly colonized by private sector organizations (Horta 2002)⁴. Therefore, the transition from the normative to the benchmarking phase of the VGGT process shifted power from institutions contributing to democratic land governance towards others associated with more conservative “good” governance agendas.⁵

The “Knowledge Effects” of the LGAF: Ontological, Normative and Procedural Biases

Progressive actors have not limited themselves to vaguely highlighting their distrust towards the growing authority of the WB. Rather, they have analyzed more concretely how the LGAF fails to capture the spirit of the VGGT, or at least how it largely draws on specific market-based interpretations of this document (Monsalve & Brent 2014). From this angle, the LGAF - such as other processes for the statistical picturing of land (Li, 2014) - has indeed clear ontological, normative, and procedural biases, denoting a “project of society..which is guided by industrial and market orders of worth” (Silva-Castañeda 2015: 14).

In *ontological terms*, most of these exercises suppress the inherent multidimensionality of land and transform it in a productive and (globally) investible resource (see Silva-Castañeda 2015: 7-11; see also Li 2014). This involves, among other things, the creation of categories such as “frontier” or “underutilised” land, the visual and textual recording the boundaries of parcels and of related property rights, the clarification of different forms of tenure rights relevant for particular contexts, the setting up of accessible land information systems, and the establishment of adequate mechanisms for dispute resolution.

Apparently, all these are benevolent interventions, which at times also break with World Bank conservative approaches – for instance by recognizing that a plurality of tenure rights can contribute to sustainable rural development, and that non-formal titles can be worthy as mechanisms of property rights recognition (see also Borrás & Franco 2010). Yet, in this effort to make legible on-the-ground situations, they only highlight those issues that make sense from an economic perspective. Even the existence of dispute resolution mechanisms is primarily advocated on the ground of its contribution to efficiency, asking whether “the level of unresolved conflict/disputes is low enough to not affect the productivity of land use” (LGAF Indicator 21)⁶. Similarly, in the negotiation of the SDGs, the consideration of land as an environmental concern is not resulting in a re-imagining of wealth from the perspective of social and ecological reproduction. It only furthers market calculi that commoditize both land and nature (Sexsmith & McMichael 2015, 588).

From a progressive perspective, this is problematic because land is much more than an economic asset. It is a socially constructed “territory”, loaded with values, personal stories and labor. Obviously,

⁴ The LGAF, indeed, was developed by WB staff in cooperation with experts from other IOs and *private consultancy firms*, such as Land Equity International (see Deininger et al. 2012: xi)

⁵ Another illustration of the decreasing authority of the CFS can be found in the fact that the only assessment so far conducted by this body targeted exactly the CFS itself. Whereas the goal of measuring its actual contribution is fully understandable, such a process can also be seen as an attempt of the principals (member states) to control their agents (CFS). No external evaluations, so far, have targeted the LGAF.

⁶ Such an indicator strikingly differ from the metrics proposed by civil society (Monsalve & Ratjen 2006), which “quantify the number of rural people benefitting from such mechanisms, the concrete number of complaints received, investigated and adjudicated, as well as the actual number of court sentences protecting communities’ rights to natural and productive resources effectively implemented in a given time frame” (Seufert & Monsalve 2012, 34).

the particular cognitive approach of the WB might explain this economistic focus, but such a trend might be inherently linked to the simplifying nature of benchmarking practices. Indeed, alternative understandings of land refer to social interactions that are place-specific and that do not easily lend themselves to objectification (McMichael 2014, quoted in Silva-Castañeda 2015, 09-10).

The market orientation of WB's numbers is evident also in *normative terms*. Indeed, conceptualizing land as an economic asset and aiming at efficient land markets, the LGAF implicitly poses a “normative statement...according to which land should be accessed and/or controlled by efficient users” (Monsalve & Brent 2014, 51). The underlying assumption is that, if rural constituencies are granted with secure tenure rights to prevent illegal expropriation as well as to obtain financial capitals, dynamic land markets will then almost automatically improve rural livelihoods. Illustrations of this claim can be found in the key topics covered in the LGAF, all of which are seemingly chosen in light of to their contribution to efficient markets and administrative systems⁷. Furthermore, the biases of this assessment are evident also in how the pre-coded answers are framed. For instance, while emphasizing the existence of a continuum of rights, individualization is promoted, at least when other forms of tenure do not meet the standards that could make them administratively and economically efficient.

From the perspective of a democratic land agenda, this emphasis is particularly problematic since it entails a profound rupture with the spirit of the VGGT. Objective 1.1 of the Guidelines, in fact, calls for “an emphasis on vulnerable and marginalized people”. In other words, their primary goal is not (only) to secure land rights or spur rural development, but to improve conditions for poorest rural households. Therefore, consistent indicators should not focus on formal provisions or aggregate efficiency measures. On the contrary, they should focus more on the actual outcomes than on formal provisions, and on outcomes reflecting the effectiveness of land governance and land markets for the livelihoods of vulnerable groups. Unfortunately, instead, nor the LGAF nor other relevant initiatives – e.g. the MDGs and the SDGs - frame equity as an over-reaching principle to be substantially monitored (Monsalve & Brent 2014; Sexsmith & McMichael 2015). Accordingly, while there is increasing information on land administration and land markets, data on land distribution and similar dimensions is still lacking (see Mauro et al. 2009, 3).

Finally, also in *procedural terms* the LGAF reveals a clear dissonance with the practices promoted by the VGGT and by progressive actors. Here, the key point is not the shift in authority from the CFS to the WB, though the undemocratic practices of the latter explain why the LGAF is “extremely weak in terms of legitimacy and normative status” (Monsalve & Brent 2014, 52). Rather, it concerns the deep divergence between the ways in which the notion of multi-actor participation (ibid, 51-2).

Within “democratic” thinking, in fact, any legitimate assessment of a human rights-based text such as the VGGT, which explicitly aims to improve governance for the benefit of vulnerable groups, should include these constituencies in all its phases⁸. Here, participation is a right and it is inherently political. When included, indeed, these actors will inescapably bring into these technical processes their values and interests. Much differently, in the LGAF multi-actor participation is instead framed in technical terms. Whilst placing much attention on local ownership and establishing mechanisms to foster participation in local assessments, the providers of this exercise continuously insist in fact that credible assessments require objective information rather than value judgments. In other words, in

⁷ The five key areas covered by the LGAF are: a) rights recognition and enforcement; b) land use planning, land management, and taxation; c) management of public land; d) public provision of land information; and e) dispute resolution and conflict management. However, optional modules have already been developed or may be possible in the future, covering topics like large-scale land investments, forestry, financial sector management, municipal finance, natural resource management, land markets, or gender and access to land (Deininger et al. 2012).

⁸ This principle, such as most of other civil society “demands”, is fully recognized by the CFS (2015: 62), which explicitly states a monitoring system consistent with its multi-actor and rights-based nature “should be participatory and include assessments that involve all stakeholders and beneficiaries, including the most vulnerable”.

order to fulfil its functions of neutrality, the LGAF needs to be “technical rather than political”. Accordingly, key actors within the LGAF are academics, administrative staff, and technical experts. Unlike the CFS, no provisions are in place for fostering a meaningful participation of all diverse social constituencies. Even when contributing, these should avoid bringing in political arguments and simply discuss technical issues. Therefore, local ownership emerges not as matter of rights, but largely as a means to deliver more actionable and context-sensitive policy solutions. Again, efficiency considerations prevail over democratic and social empowering concerns.

In sum, the current data revolution and, in particular, recent benchmarking initiatives in the land domain have been questioned as depoliticizing developments that reinforce conservative market-based political projects. Even though these trends clearly link to broader power unbalances among the various competing players, they are also seemingly facilitated by the peculiarities of indicators-based processes. Indeed, benchmarking exercises might lend themselves well to the technicalization of inherently political issues and, hence, to the silencing of transformative demands. The next section, in contrast, argues that such a critique captures only a portion of the whole picture.

Global Land Statistics and Benchmarks: Towards Progressive Agendas?

Ferguson (2009, 2011) suggests that, in approaching particular techniques of government, progressive actors should not only focus on their eventual relations with neoliberal projects, discourses or rationalities. On the contrary, they should non-dogmatically reflect on whether they might bring advantages when compared to traditional leftist governmental devices. If this is the case, then conceptual and pragmatic possibilities of re-purposing “neoliberal” techniques towards different ends should be evaluated and experimented with. The potential value of indicators for progressive land governance can be “defended” in both senses.

Regarding the former aspect, the paper thoroughly insisted that statistical practices are particularly fit for governing at a distance, and that benchmarks can be extremely powerful tools for the transition from global commitments to rule-consistent behavior. Though no evidences of this argument can be found yet in the land governance domain, actors’ behaviors may to some extents confirm it. Indeed, WB’s engagement in benchmarking practices as well as member states’ opposition towards the setting up of an indicator-based monitoring scheme within the CFS might be symptomatic of the awareness that indicators have more bite than international humanitarian laws themselves (Fioramonti, 2014). Furthermore, also civil society significantly invested in the production of metrics and benchmarks, though this commitment lost salience with the growing recognition of CFS’s incapacity to fulfill its monitoring functions.⁹

Yet, this latter consideration brings us to another question of the utmost importance for progressive policymaking – i.e. can benchmarking practices be repurposed towards different ends? This calls for considering both the conceptual and the pragmatic feasibility of producing and applying benchmarks consistent with a progressive land governance agenda.

The Conceptual Feasibility of Progressive Land Governance Benchmarks

On a conceptual level, one can find multiple indications that indicators and related practices do not necessarily need to adhere to a conservative, neoliberal project of society.

In ontological terms, indeed, the last decades witnessed the proliferation of re-imaginative exercises quantifying apparently incalculable phenomena – such as, for instance, indigenous understandings of territory (Woodley et al. 2009), food sovereignty paradigms (Actuar 2012; Binimelis 2014), and agro-ecological practices (Reardon & Aleman 2010). Whereas these re-imaginative endeavours have their own methodological and conceptual flaws, they hint at the possibility of quantifying contextual, complex and value-loaded phenomena without reducing them to the commodity form. In other words, focusing on outcomes with calculable properties does not automatically entail a contradiction with

⁹ Interview with member of the CFS Civil Society Mechanism, Rome, October 2015

rights-based and holistic approaches to development, as seemingly contended by Sexsmith & McMichael (2015, 592). Also these qualities might be creatively translated in metrics, it being understood that reliance on numbers for purposes of global comparisons and/or global campaigning does not preclude the opportunity of parallel and more fine-grained qualitative assessments.

In normative terms, similarly, the vast number of indicators proposed by civil society to monitor the VGGT and the ICARRDA declaration shows the possibility of placing equity considerations at the heart of benchmarking initiatives (see Actuar 2012; Seufert & Monsalve 2012; Bending 2010, 26-9; Mauro et al 2009). Moving beyond issues of overall efficiency and formal provisions, these initiatives (aim to) provide disaggregated data on issues of actual relevance for local populations and marginalized groups. Among other things, these projects observe the distribution or concentration of land ownership; the actual capacity of marginalized groups to engage and win legal cases; the perceived tenure security of rural populations; and the frequency of evictions and the affordability of arable land and of housing. They have struggled to gain political traction and suffer from data availability concerns, but none of these flaws is inherent to benchmarking practices. More often than not, in fact, “lack of data is a reflection of lack of will to collect certain types of data” (Laksa & El-Mikawy 2009, 8).

Finally, also in procedural terms these exercises indicate the possibility of combining technical accuracy with the participation of marginalized groups and the consideration of their demands. Most of the initiatives mentioned above, indeed, not only build on a conceptual framework putting the interests of poorest rural households at the centre of assessments. Rather, they often directly draw on “lay” citizens’ views, thus enhancing their power vis-à-vis those of experts. Furthermore, they also build on participation and deliberation throughout all their phases. In doing so, they enhance the democratic and empowering component of benchmarking practices as well as internal self-reflexivity among movements (Umbach & Malito 2015; Binimelis et al. 2014).

The “Pragmatic” Feasibility of Progressive Land Governance Benchmarks

Quite obviously, one thing is to say that progressive benchmarks are conceptually feasible; another is to say that these progressive benchmarks can gain traction or “contaminate” prominent initiatives such as the LGAF. Indeed, scholarship often notes that appeals to technical assessments endanger the capture of policy processes by self-interested actors. However, also in this dimension one could equally hint at some issues apparently confirming the competing argument, according to which benchmarking practices inherently oriented towards openness and the public interest (Porter 2015). These trends could be identified both within the LGAF and within other initiatives promoted by powerful actors.

On the one hand, indeed, the LGAF itself should be critically scrutinized but probably not thoroughly demonized. It also has its merits and offers some opportunities for improvement.

Firstly, if compared to other similar land governance benchmarks such as IFAD’s land tenure indicators, the LGAF is more comprehensive in terms of covered topics, allows for greater local ownership as well as for participation of non-experts, and is more flexible. Additional modules, in fact, can be integrated if local teams deem necessary to cover topics unaddressed in its core structure. Furthermore, the LGAF also reveals a growing spread of (neo)institutionalist thinking within the WB’s cognitive framework – an advancement with respect to the traditional neo-classical faith in unregulated markets. While these developments can be seen as an instance of neoliberal governmentality in which states are to produce an appropriate environment for market-based competition (Silva-Castañeda 2015, 14), they still hold some potential for improving land governance. Indeed, also from a progressive angle efficient administrative and technical processes have their importance, though they should be complemented by questions “of land-based wealth and power (re)distribution” (Borras & Franco 2010, 23).

Secondly, the LGAF produces, puts together and disseminates a set of information that can be helpful for autonomous civil society’s monitoring. For instance, the digitalization of cadastres, the mapping of

parcels, and the formalization/recompilation of existing property rights do not only create the conditions for dynamic land markets. Instead, they also offer the possibility of investigating phenomena, such as land concentration, that were traditionally invisible due to the absence of relevant data. This is particularly true because, moving beyond classical WB's approaches, the LGAF covers also informal arrangements. As such, it may also cast light on the realities of the groups that do not access land through formal property systems – an issue often identified as a major limitation to meaningful monitoring (see Mauro et al. 2009: 3). Furthermore, local civil societies play a part in the collection of information. Whilst endangering co-option, this collaboration with the WB might thus also provide much needed resources for upgrading civil society's capacity to construct and disseminate data¹⁰.

Thirdly, in the future the increasing association of this exercise with the implementation of the VGGT is likely to result in increased attempts to fill the most evident gaps between them. On the one hand, the LGAF is already attempting to provide some data disaggregation, at least for what concerns the gender dimension. On the other, other IOs beyond the WB are engaged in the development of this exercise, and bring into it their own practices and understandings. For instance, whilst supporting LGAF's capacity to monitor the VGGT, FAO staff also suggest adding new topics, like land restitution and redistributive land reforms (Tonchovska & Egiashvili 2014, 23). This would enable to at least consider the equity concerns lying at the heart of democratic land governance agendas. Similarly, the crucial role played by UN-Habitat in urban land assessments enhances the legitimacy of and the support for the LGAF within urban constituencies.¹¹

On the other hand, "positive" insights can be developed also by looking at broader trends in both statistics and benchmarking practices related to land.

Regarding the former aspect, encouraging conclusions can be derived by the successes of alternative, decentralized and autonomous land monitoring initiatives like the Land Matrix. Despite the concerns about their methodology, these projects not only enhance the transparency of global data production. They have also already served progressive political goals. To many extents, in fact, by ringing the alarm bell about land grabbing, the numbers reported by scholars and practitioners between 2008 and 2010 have been a key trigger of the VGGT process (Borras et al. 2013; see also Scoones et al. 2013). This confirms Finnemore's (2013, 17) argument according to which "in an age where technology potentially make statistics creation and dissemination easier than ever, statistics production has new potential as a weapon of the weak".

Regarding benchmarking practices, particularly significant might be the growing awareness of expert communities and politically powerful actors about the fundamental role of perception- and experience-based measures for capturing elusive phenomena such as land or food security. Indeed, the FAO increasingly relies on similar measures (Ballard et al. 2014), and the WB will include a land tenure module in its Living Standard Measurement Surveys (Holden et al. 2015). Furthermore, these perception-based measures might gain further saliency should the final version of the SDGs conform to the Global Land Tool Network's proposal to include a target on the "percentage of women and percentage of men who perceive their tenure is secure" (Global Donor Working Group on Land 2015)¹². Whilst falling short to address equity considerations beyond the gender gap, such a shift may be nevertheless valuable from a progressive angle. As already suggested, in fact, perception-based measures move beyond over-emphasis on formal provisions and/or outputs with easily calculable

¹⁰ Interview with African civil society's practitioner, Utrecht, July 2015.

¹¹ Interview with member of the CFS Civil Society Mechanism, Rome, October 2015.

¹² The Global Land Tool Network is an alliance of states institutions, IOs, technical organizations, philanthropic foundations, and "reformist" CSOs that aim to contribute to poverty alleviation through land reform, improved land management, and security of tenure, particularly through the development and dissemination of pro-poor and gender-sensitive land tools. Most of these organizations participates and/or plays prominent roles also in the LGAF processes.

properties, while also holding the potential to correct biases emerging from exclusive reliance on small groups of technical, and often politically powerful, experts.

5 Concluding Remarks

While it may be true that quantification poses risks of oversimplification and elite capture, this paper suggests that benchmarks could still fulfil important tactical functions within a “progressive art of government” (Ferguson 2009, 2011). Indeed, for better or for worse, indicators are especially well equipped for governing at a distance in a world without central authority. In particular, their aura of neutrality makes them fit for facilitating the transition from social justice (non-binding) commitments to concrete rule-consistent behavior. Furthermore, despite the legitimate suspects of scholars and practitioners, benchmarks are not necessarily depoliticizing or tied to neoliberal class projects. On the contrary, they can be designed consistently with empowering rights-based understandings of development. To some extents, they may even have an inherent impetus towards openness and the public interest (Porter 2015).

In terms of the strategic dilemmas facing progressive forces, therefore, this paper fully backs the multiple contemporary attempts of civil society and academics to develop “alternative” metrics reflecting the ontological, normative and procedural foundations of a democratic land agenda. These endeavors might greatly contribute to diffuse a progressive interpretation of the VGGT, counter-frame conservative understandings, stimulate internal dialogue among land movements, and clarify the meaning of essentially contested concepts like food sovereignty. Yet, at the same time this paper may also suggest a less sharp rejection of the ongoing benchmarking initiatives promoted by the World Bank and its partners, such as the LGAF and the SDGs. Just as (critical) engagement with trade-based institutions like the WTO could enhance opportunities for food sovereignty (Burnett & Murphy 2014), so (critical) involvement with prominent benchmarking initiatives might well end up serving democratic land agendas.

Indeed, following Ferguson (2011, 666), a dogmatic opposition is not a very critical attitude, at least if critical studies are seen as means of understanding the world in order to change it. The development of a progressive art of government, in other words, requires attention to the ever-evolving landscape of political possibilities and constraints, as well as continuous experimentation. Accordingly, actors committed to change should not only denounce the biases and the disregard for equity underlying the LGAF and the SDGs exercises. Rather, the most urgent mission is to attempt improving these initiatives along more democratic lines. Despite the evident challenges, this paper suggests that prospects for progressive change do exist, and that overlooking them would be a wasted opportunity. If benchmarks have often more bite than humanitarian law itself (Fioramonti 2014), then efforts to make them better might well be worth the candle.

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