

Building a Conceptual and Operational Framework for Assessing the Performance of Local Governments in Catalonia¹

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SUMMARY

The study of institutional capacities is closely linked to institutional performance. Various exogenous and internal factors explain the effectiveness, efficiency and quality of public policies and services; among these, the literature recurrently highlights institutional capacities as the main determinant. However, significant difficulties persist in obtaining comparable and reliable metrics of institutional performance that would allow an adequate analysis of their relationship with these capacities. This paper examines the ability to measure the performance of municipal governments in the province of Barcelona. First, it reviews the main conceptual approaches to institutional performance and justifies its own operational definition. Second, it analyzes the main data sources available for evaluating Catalan local governments. Finally, it operationalizes the different dimensions of performance using available indicators. The results show both the possibilities and the limitations of analyzing local institutional performance in the Catalan case.

1. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of systems to measure and evaluate the performance of local governments and public institutions has long been a recurring concern among public

¹Comunicación elaborada para el Congreso de la AECPA (Granada, 9-11 septiembre de 2026) en el marco del proyecto de investigación *Monitoring local government performance. A pragmatic, comparative and quantitative approach* financiado por el Instituto de Estudios del Autogobierno (IEA), convocatoria de *ayudas para la investigación sobre la organización territorial del poder IEA 2024 – Modalidad 4*, por una cuantía de 42.879,10€

managers (Boyne, 2003; Paz, 2014; Torres et al., 2015), to the extent that some scholars have claimed that “everybody is measuring performance” (Behn, 2003: 586).

Likewise, as Rainey (2014) points out, virtually all theories of management and organization are concerned with performance, at least implicitly. However, the lack of consensus regarding the definition of performance and the wide range of indicators employed have complicated both internal evaluation processes and comparisons across governments (Andrews et al., 2006; Rainey, 2014; Walker and Andrews, 2015). Indeed, the multidimensional nature of performance and the coexistence of competing theoretical perspectives have hindered the development of a clear conceptual and operational framework for assessing local government performance.

Nevertheless, numerous authors have emphasized the value and necessity of performance measurement and evaluation, as these practices make it possible to assess the status and progress of organizational goals, encourage and facilitate their achievement, promote learning and transparency, and strengthen accountability mechanisms (Diamond, 2005; Paz, 2014; Torres et al., 2015).

At the same time, comparative research has shown that performance assessment systems vary significantly across countries and institutional settings. As Teles (2026) points out, local government performance is normative, institutionally embedded and politically structured. Administrative traditions, local government models, public management reforms, and broader political cultures have shaped the objectives, design, and implementation of performance measurement systems (Brusca & Montesinos, 2016; Kuhlmann, 2010b; Van Dooren et al., 2012). As a result, the assessment of local government performance is neither uniform nor static but rather reflects evolving understandings of public administration (PA), governance, and public value.

While much of the literature has focused on cross-national comparisons and national performance frameworks, less attention has been paid to the coexistence of multiple performance measurement systems within a single territorial context. However, local governments frequently operate within complex information ecosystems in which different institutions generate indicators and assessment tools pursuing distinct objectives, employing diverse methodologies, and reflecting different conceptions of performance.

The aim of this article is to identify, map, and analyze the various information sources, indicator systems, and assessment tools currently available for evaluating local government performance in the province of Barcelona within the broader Catalan and Spanish institutional context. More specifically, the article examines their objectives, methodological characteristics, underlying conceptions of performance, and overall strengths and limitations. In doing so, it assesses the extent to which the existing performance measurement ecosystem provides a suitable basis for developing a comprehensive, albeit fragmented, framework for assessing local government performance, capable of supporting comparison, monitoring, accountability, learning, and future research on the determinants of local government performance.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE

2.1. The ambiguous and evolving concept of government performance

As Ballart (2010) notes, performance is an elusive concept. The difficulty of establishing a universal and substantive definition has represented one of the main challenges in the study and measurement of local government performance (Diamond, 2005; Van Dooren, 2011). Moreover, the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of performance has complicated the identification of homogeneous indicators (Van Dooren et al., 2012), resulting in a wide variety of definitions and measurement criteria across time and space (Boyne et al., 2006; Walker et al., 2010).

According to Behn (2003), much of the ambiguity surrounding public-sector performance measurement stems from the vagueness and multiplicity of the objectives pursued by performance measurement systems. Furthermore, the diversity of theoretical and normative perspectives on performance, together with the range of academic disciplines that have addressed the concept, has hindered the development of a clear and widely accepted definition (Johnsson et al., 2021).

Despite these conceptual difficulties, there is broad agreement that widespread adoption of performance measurement in the public sector is closely linked to the diffusion of New Public Management (NPM), particularly across European and other Western countries.

Although research on local government performance can be traced back to the first half of the twentieth century (Andersen et al., 2016; Hood, 1991; Kuhlmann, 2010b; Parrado Díez et al., 2013), it was during the 1980s and 1990s, alongside the expansion of NPM reforms, that performance measurement became a central concern of both scholars and practitioners (Kuhlmann, 2010b; Van Dooren et al., 2010; Walker & Andrews, 2015). Since then, empirical research on local government performance has expanded considerably, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Andersen et al., 2016).

Emerging in a context of fiscal pressures and growing criticism of traditional bureaucratic administration, NPM promoted the principles of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness through the introduction of competition mechanisms and managerial techniques inspired by the private sector (Paz, 2014). As a result, some of the most influential conceptualizations of performance originated in business and management studies (Walker et al., 2010). Among these, the "3Es" framework focuses on economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, while the Input–Output–Outcome (IOO) model examines the relationship between resources, service outputs, and policy outcomes, incorporating indicators related to costs, productivity, effectiveness, and impact.

Consequently, a substantial body of research has assessed local government performance through the analysis of outputs and outcomes generated by public service provision, adopting a predominantly managerial and efficiency-oriented perspective (Diamond,

2005; Hatry, 1980; Hood, 1991; Pina and Torres, 1995). From this perspective, performance is often understood as the capacity of public organizations to produce desired results while minimizing resource consumption.

However, the dominance of NPM-inspired conceptions of performance has not gone unchallenged. From the early 2000s onwards, a growing body of literature argued that managerial reforms had failed to resolve some of the fundamental problems facing public administrations and had often encouraged fragmentation, reduced coordination, and weakened collaboration among public organizations (Bouckaert and Peters, 2002). These criticisms contributed to the emergence of Public Governance theories, which emphasize the need for coordination and cooperation among public agencies, private actors, and civil society organizations in addressing increasingly complex public problems.

These debates also reflect broader tensions within local government studies, between economic theories of local government focused on the optimal scale of local jurisdictions and the role of economies of scale in achieving efficient service provision, and democratic and political perspectives emphasize representation, participation, and responsiveness.

A closely related strand of research examines the capacity of public organizations to deliver services effectively. This literature has frequently assessed the relationship between population size and service performance, evaluating whether larger jurisdictions benefit from economies of scale and lower costs (Bel, 2005; Bel & Warner, 2016; Ostrom et al., 1961; Tavares & Feiock, 2018). Nevertheless, empirical evidence regarding economies of scale is far from conclusive (Tavares, 2018; Pano & Magre, 2018).

Recent research has argued that evaluating public service performance requires moving beyond scale-related considerations to incorporate broader dimensions of institutional capacity. Factors such as technical specialization, professional expertise, service quality, organizational capabilities, and demographic characteristics have been shown to influence performance outcomes significantly (Aldag et al., 2020; Martí-Costa and Conde López, 2023).

More broadly, dissatisfaction with narrowly economic conceptions of performance has stimulated the development of alternative approaches to performance measurement. Drawing on Public Governance principles, these perspectives incorporate dimensions such as responsiveness, accountability, participation, and collaborative capacity (Walker et al., 2010). Accordingly, several scholars have challenged the tendency to equate public-sector performance with private-sector management criteria, arguing instead for broader definitions that incorporate democratic values, citizen satisfaction, service quality, participation, and accountability (Boyne, 2002; Van Dooren et al., 2012).

These emerging perspectives place participation, collaboration, and democratic governance at the center of performance assessment. Recognizing the multidimensional nature of performance, this research links evaluation processes to broader principles of governance and good government. Consequently, performance is no longer assessed solely in terms of cost-efficiency but also through political and social dimensions,

including transparency, accountability, citizen participation, quality of life, and social justice outcomes (Ballart, 2010).

Ultimately, the diversity of approaches reviewed above highlights the absence of a universally accepted definition of performance and confirms its inherently multidimensional character. Both the conceptualization and measurement of performance have evolved in response to changing public management paradigms and reform agendas. This evolution highlights the importance of institutional and contextual factors in shaping performance measurement systems. The next section explores another key source of variation in local government performance assessment: institutional context and administrative traditions.

2.2. A situated conceptualization of local government performance

As noted, the concept of local government performance remains contested in the PA literature. Existing approaches differ regarding both the goals and dimensions that should be included, as well as the indicators that should be used to operationalize them. Moreover, many conceptual frameworks are difficult to apply empirically because they rely on dimensions for which comparable municipal-level data are unavailable.

To address this challenge, this study adopts a situated approach to the conceptualization of local government performance, combining insights from the literature with the availability of observable indicators in the Catalan and Spanish local government context. Accordingly, local government performance is defined as:

The capacity of a public organization to transform resources into services and outcomes effectively, efficiently, and with quality, in accordance with established public objectives.

This definition seeks to bridge two often disconnected traditions in performance research. On the one hand, it incorporates the classic concern with the transformation of resources into outputs. On the other hand, it explicitly recognizes the importance of quality and outcomes. As such, performance is understood not only as the production of services but also as the achievement of socially and politically goals.

Based on this definition, local government performance is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising four dimensions: outputs (service provision), economy and efficiency, effectiveness, citizen satisfaction (Table 1). Together, these dimensions are intended to capture the diverse qualities of the results produced by local governments.

Table 1. Conceptual Framework for Local Performance Evaluation

Dimension	Conceptual Definition	What is Measured?
Output (Service Provision)	Extent to which local governments provide the services and exercise the competences assigned to them.	Coverage of municipal services and competences.
Economy/ Efficiency	Ability to deliver municipal services while minimizing resource consumption and production costs.	Costs associated with service provision and relative to outputs produced.

Effectiveness	Extent to which local policies and services achieve externally defined objectives, standards, or policy targets.	Compliance with externally defined policy objectives, regulatory requirements, and service standards across policy sectors.
Citizen Satisfaction of local services	Citizens' assessment of municipal services and policies.	Perceived quality, adequacy, and responsiveness of local services and policies.

Source: own elaboration.

3. A SYSTEMIC REVIEW OF EXISTING PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENTS IN BARCELONA PROVINCE

Building upon this framework, the study undertook a systematic review of existing performance measurement systems, indicator initiatives, research projects, and administrative databases that directly or indirectly assess one or more dimensions of local government performance. The objective was not only to identify available indicators but also to characterize the broader performance measurement ecosystem within which municipalities operate.

The analysis focused on an initial inventory of up to fifty performance measurement systems and datasets¹ that we identify as the core of the local performance information ecosystem in Catalonia and the province of Barcelona. These include benchmarking systems, citizen surveys, local government and policy panels, transparency evaluations, digitalization indices, financial monitoring tools, and municipal services databases. Although diverse in scope and methodology, all share the common objective of generating information that can be used to evaluate, compare, or improve local government performance. Collectively, these initiatives cover a wide range of policy domains and performance dimensions, including service provision, local government capacities and organization, transparency, financial management, digitalization, citizen satisfaction, or sustainable development.

To analyse and screen these systems, a multidimensional framework was developed. The framework considers institutional and contextual factors (initiative, legal basis, and territorial scope), analytical characteristics (purpose, policy focus, indicator typology, and performance dimensions), methodology (data sources, collection methods, indicator design), and aspects related to transparency and use (accessibility, reporting tools, effective consequences, and intended audiences). (Table 1)

Table 1 Main Data Sources for Local Performance Monitoring in the Province of Barcelona

Data Source	Performance Dimension(s)	Geographic Coverage	Owner / Responsible Institution	Data Collection Method	Periodicity / Temporal Coverage	Accessibility & Reusability
Effective Cost of Services Provided by Local Authorities	Outputs, Economy, Efficiency	All Spanish municipalities	Ministry of Finance (Spain)	Self-reported municipal data	Annual; multi-year series available	Open data
<i>Dibaròmetre</i>	Citizen Satisfaction	Municipalities >10,000 inhabitants in the Province of Barcelona	Provincial Government of Barcelona	Survey	Periodic survey waves; longitudinal series available	Open access
Water Consumption by Municipality	Policy Effectiveness - Drinking Water Service	All Catalan municipalities	Catalan Water Agency (ACA)	Administrative records	Annual; multi-year series available	Open data
Municipal Waste Statistics	Policy Effectiveness - Waste Management	All Catalan municipalities	Department of Territory, Housing and Ecological Transition (Government of Catalonia)	Administrative records	Annual; multi-year series available	Open data
Territorial Information System for Climate Action (SITAC)	Policy Effectiveness - Urban Environment	Municipalities in the Province of Barcelona	Provincial Government of Barcelona	Composite indicator system	Annual; multi-year series available	Open access
Cultural Facilities of Catalonia Database	Policy Effectiveness - Cultural Facilities	All Catalan municipalities	Department of Culture (Government of Catalonia)	Administrative records	Periodically updated; historical records available	Open data
Catalan Sports Facilities Census (CEEC)	Policy Effectiveness - Sports Facilities	All Catalan municipalities	Department of Sports (Government of Catalonia)	Administrative records	Periodically updated; historical records available	Open data
Municipal Civil Protection Plans Registry	Policy Effectiveness - Civil Protection	All Catalan municipalities	Department of Interior (Government of Catalonia)	Administrative registry	Continuously updated; current and historical records available	Open data
Catalan Urban Planning Registry (RPUC)	Policy Effectiveness - Urban Planning	All Catalan municipalities	Department of Territory, Housing and Ecological Transition (Government of Catalonia)	Administrative registry	Continuously updated; historical records available	Public registry

Municipal Housing Indicators (Province of Barcelona)	Policy Effectiveness - Housing	Municipalities in the Province of Barcelona	Provincial Government of Barcelona	Composite indicator system	Annual; multi-year series available	Open access
Education Statistics	Policy Effectiveness - Early Childhood Education	All Catalan municipalities	Department of Education and Vocational Training (Government of Catalonia)	Administrative records	Annual; long-term series available	Open data
Average Payment Period to Suppliers	Internal Management Capacity	All Spanish municipalities	Ministry of Finance (Spain)	Self-reported municipal data	Monthly reporting; multi-year series available	Open data
Compliance with Budget Stability Objectives	Internal Management Capacity	All Spanish municipalities	Ministry of Finance (Spain)	Self-reported municipal data	Annual; series available since at least 2013	Open data
Digital Maturity Index (IMD)	Internal Management Capacity	All Catalan municipalities	Open Administration Consortium of Catalonia (AOC)	Composite indicator system	Annual; multi-year series available	Open data

Source: own elaboration.

This initial review of existing performance measurement systems revealed a rich but highly fragmented performance measurement ecosystem in Catalonia and the province of Barcelona, characterized by substantial variation in territorial coverage, policy sectors, methodologies, accessibility, and performance dimensions. While this diversity provides valuable information on specific aspects of local government activity, it limits the possibility of obtaining a coherent and comprehensive assessment of local government performance.

A first source of fragmentation concerns territorial coverage and types of municipalities included. Several initiatives focus exclusively on municipalities within the Province of Barcelona, while others limit participation to municipalities above certain population thresholds. As a result, the available evidence is considerably richer for medium-sized and large municipalities than for smaller local governments, constraining the comparability and representativeness of performance analyses.

Second, the analysis highlights the strong influence of broader institutional and policy agendas on the development of performance measurement systems. Many of the most recent initiatives have emerged in response to transformations in public management, including fiscal sustainability policies, digital government, transparency, open

government, and data governance. Consequently, a substantial share of existing systems is designed not only, or even primarily, to improve efficiency and effectiveness, but also to support accountability, transparency, and organizational modernization.

Third, existing systems present a predominance of primary performance indicators, particularly process, input, and output measures. In contrast, indicators that capture more complex dimensions of performance, such as efficiency, effectiveness, or broader outcomes, remain comparatively rare. This finding is consistent with previous research on comparative performance measurement systems and suggests that significant challenges remain in the operationalization of multidimensional performance concepts.

Finally, although data accessibility has improved substantially in recent years, important differences remain between systems. Initiatives oriented towards accountability and external evaluation tend to provide open access to indicators and results, whereas systems designed to support learning and internal improvement often restrict access based on confidentiality and trust among participating municipalities. These differences further contribute to the fragmentation of the performance measurement ecosystem and affect the potential reuse of data for comparative research.

Taken together, these findings suggest that no single performance measurement system currently provides a sufficiently comprehensive, comparable, and accessible basis for evaluating local government performance in Catalonia. From these, this study adopts a selective approach, prioritizing data sources that combine broad municipal coverage, regular updating, accessibility, and direct correspondence with the dimensions of the proposed conceptual framework.

3.1. Measuring effectiveness through external objectives

One key dimension of our conceptual framework remained only partially represented in the existing measurement systems: effectiveness. In this study, effectiveness is defined as the extent to which local policies and services achieve externally defined objectives, standards, or policy targets, and is operationalized as compliance with policy objectives, regulatory requirements, and service standards established by higher levels of government.

Unlike inputs, outputs, capacity or citizen satisfaction, indicators of effectiveness are rarely available through dedicated local government performance measurement systems. Existing initiatives tend to focus on service provision, organizational characteristics, management practices, or citizen perceptions, while paying comparatively little attention to whether municipalities achieve the substantive objectives associated with their policies and services. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that local

performance measurement frameworks have scarcely looked at outcome-oriented measures.

To address this limitation, we developed a complementary strategy for identifying effectiveness indicators. First, we compiled the full set of municipal services and competences established by the Spanish Local Government Act (*Ley Reguladora de las Bases del Régimen Local*, LBRL). We then conducted a structured review with policy specialists from different sectoral domains to identify: (a) policy objectives, targets, or performance standards that municipalities are expected to achieve, preferably expressed in quantitative terms; (b) available indicators and data sources that allow the assessment of target achievement; and (c) the main characteristics of the available data, including frequency, territorial coverage, municipal coverage, and accessibility.

A key criterion in the selection process was that objectives should be established externally by a governmental authority above the municipal level, such as the European Union, the Spanish central government, the Government of Catalonia, or the provincial administration. This criterion was adopted to ensure comparability among municipalities by evaluating performance against common standards rather than locally defined priorities. As a result, effectiveness is conceptualized not as the achievement of self-defined municipal goals, but as the degree of compliance with shared policy commitments and regulatory expectations.

The resulting inventory of effectiveness indicators covers approximately one third of the services and competences formally assigned to local governments under the LBRL. Effectiveness indicators were identified in a diverse range of policy sectors, including drinking water management, waste collection and recycling, climate action, cultural and sports facilities, civil protection, urban planning, housing, and early childhood education.

Most of these indicators are derived from administrative records and open-data platforms maintained by sectoral authorities. They generally provide annual observations and longitudinal data series, making them suitable for benchmarking and comparative analyses across municipalities. At the same time, the uneven availability of effectiveness indicators across policy sectors highlights an important limitation of the current local performance measurement ecosystem: while extensive information exists on service provision and costs, evidence on policy outcomes remains fragmented and incomplete.

This finding has important implications for local performance evaluation. Although numerous datasets are available, only a limited subset of municipal services can currently be monitored throughout the entire performance chain, from service provision and resource use to citizen satisfaction and policy effectiveness. Therefore, the main challenge facing local performance assessment is not necessarily the absence of information, but rather the fragmentation of available data across institutions, policy areas, and performance dimensions.

In table 2 we present a selection of data sources and a situated proposal of indicators to assess local government performance in the province of Barcelona.

Table 2. Conceptual Framework for Local Performance Evaluation and Set of Indicators.

Dimension	Conceptual Definition	What is Measured?	Set of Indicators	Data Sources
Output (Service Provision)	Extent to which local governments provide the services and exercise the competences assigned to them.	Coverage of municipal services and competences.	Mandatory services coverage ratio; competences coverage ratio.	<i>Effective Cost of Services Provided by Local Authorities</i> , Ministry of Finance (Spain)
Economy/ Efficiency	Ability to deliver municipal services while minimizing resource consumption and production costs.	Costs associated with service provision and relative to outputs produced.	Effective cost of services; cost per service unit; comparative service costs.	<i>Effective Cost of Services Provided by Local Authorities</i> , Ministry of Finance (Spain)
Effectiveness	Extent to which local policies and services achieve externally defined objectives, standards, or policy targets.	Compliance with externally defined policy objectives, regulatory requirements, and service standards across policy sectors.	Compliance with policy goals: drinking water consumption; selective waste collection; public lighting energy-savings; public libraries; cultural and sports facilities; civil protection planning obligations; greenhouse-gas reduction; urban planning validity; social housing; early childhood enrolment.	Various administrative records and registries (see table 1)
Citizen Satisfaction	Citizens' assessment of municipal services and policies.	Perceived quality, adequacy, and responsiveness of local services and policies.	Satisfaction with municipal services and local policies.	<i>Dibaròmetre</i> , Provincial Government of Barcelona

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