

MANAGEMENT, GOAL ALIGNMENT, AND PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT LEGITIMACY: EVIDENCE FROM THE COLOMBIAN PUBLIC SECTOR¹

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Abstract

The performance assessment process of public servants, in countries with civil services still in development, usually appears as a formality, instead of a key input of the strategic management process. This situation reduces its legitimacy perception among key organizational actors, leading to a vicious circle in which performance is neither informative nor binding, nor generates positive incentives towards greater performance. This article quantitatively explores the determinants of legitimacy of the performance assessments among Colombian public officials at the subnational level, using data from a large survey of public servants. The authors find that, although transparency portrays a mixed relationship with legitimacy, the role that the managers play, and the level of individual/organizational assessment alignment, are positive determinants of the levels of legitimacy of the performance management system.

Keywords: performance management; performance assessment; legitimacy; civil service; Colombia; Latin America.

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Performance assessments are said to be potent tools for inducing desirable behaviors among employees (Ayers, 2013; Kim, 2010), although other studies explore the dysfunctional consequences of them (Siverbo et al, 2019; Dahler-Larsen, 2014; Van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002). According to the literature, the use of performance assessments has three main purposes at the organizational level: knowledge development/management and agency control (Daley, 2005); goal alignment; and behavioral change (Kim, 2010). Moreover, as a management tool, the assessment is expected to provide reliable information about staff performance and to enable the evaluator to optimize feedback and improve capacity (Kellough, 2012; Kim, 2011). The literature in public management has argued that it has the ability to elicit behaviors that increase (or decrease) employees' performance and to help employees to align with organizational goals (Kroll, 2015). Thus, performance assessment, being more than a tool to measure productivity, operates as an intervention that positively affects behaviors and subsequently key employee and organizational outcomes.

Moreover, its design and implementation are said to influence the perceptions of legitimacy that public servants may develop about the performance management system and about the organization at large (Deephouse et al., 2017). Understanding the legitimacy (or the lack of it) that performance management elicits among collaborators might help explain why there are so divergent results across different systems (Kroll, 2015). Understanding the role of legitimacy in the functioning of performance management systems may help understand why, in some particular contexts, they have been found to be a mere formality with low levels of adherence and credibility among evaluators and public officials (Sanabria, 2015).

Moreover, there is a perceived gap between the expected role of the assessments and the actual implementation of such procedures at the organizational level that affect public servants' perceptions of legitimacy. According to the literature, this gap can be driven by: structural problems in performance management systems and instruments of measurement (Kellough, 2012; Randell, 1994); the role and intensity of the participants in the evaluation process (Andrews et al., 2012; Kim, 2011); and the cultural and communication difficulties inherent to the process (Ayers, 2013; Kellough, 2012). Thus, not only do technical aspects of the evaluation work hinder its effective implementation but also other perceptual, cultural, and communicational factors among supervisors and employees.

Although those implementation gaffes are not rare, even to some developed countries with fully working performance management systems, countries with civil services still in development oftentimes completely lack appropriate performance measurement systems. Whereas some of them have *de jure* systems, they usually appear not to be operational. For instance, in Colombia a law was enacted in 2004 to develop a comprehensive and ambitious system of performance measurement in the public sector. More than 15 years later, the law is still in the process of being fully implemented. The situation seen in Colombia is not uncommon to most developing countries in similar stages of civil service development (Iacoviello & Strazza, 2014, p. 36; Longo & Echebarría, 2014, p. 64).

In such civil services the performance measurement is, even when implemented, usually perceived as a nonbinding process. Furthermore, the evaluation system receives little recognition as a managerial tool for organizational and individual improvement (Strazza, 2014, p. 29). Thus, not only is its implementation partial, but also the system casts doubts on its actual ability to measure and elicit higher performance.

Given this, this article attempts to explore the determinants of the perceptions of legitimacy of performance assessments among Colombian public officials². In this regard, this work offers three main contributions: First, it provides an empirical study of the legitimacy of performance assessment in the context of a country still striving with the professionalization of its civil service, bringing new insights about the limitations of strategic management in the public sector in developing countries. The Colombian case in itself epitomizes an interesting case of a developing civil service that blends different traits of political patronage, bureaucratic professionalization and new public management (Sanabria, Forthcoming) that can inform the effects of adopting a performance management system in a still-in-progress system. Second, according to the latter, the results can enlighten policy design and highlight the pitfalls of the implementation process in a context little studied. Third, the findings can help to better understand how public organizations can respond to positively affect legitimacy perceptions among public servants.

What drives the legitimacy of performance management systems among public servants?

There is a growing recognition in public administration empirical scholarship about the value of the performance assessments as a tool for improving performance (Ayers, 2013; Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Delic & Cebic, 2011; Kellough, 2012; Kim, 2011; Kroll, 2015; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; Meyer et al, 2014; Nigro & Kellough, 2014; Prowse & Prowse, 2009). Performance assessments depict an important role in performance oriented management systems because of their ability to induce desirable behaviors among employees (Ayers, 2013; Kim & Holzer, 2016) and enhance employee motivation, and adjust the way they work in order to achieve organizational goals (Lin & Kellough, 2019). Similarly, they are instrumental in the design and structure of Human Capital Management (HCM) policies and other related outcomes such as employee wellbeing and career development (Daley, 2005; Kellough, 2002; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). Those characteristics, besides helping the execution of the HCM strategy, bring legitimacy to the management decisions and help improve organizational performance.

² The study focused on public officials at the subnational levels of government. Since 1991 Colombia is a decentralized unified State with autonomous territorial entities. The system aimed to vest the subnational governments with financial, administrative and political decentralization. The current arrangement brings to subnational governments (*Alcaldías y Gobernaciones*, in Spanish) the implementation responsibility of the key public policies such as health and education.

However, for an assessment system to work properly and contribute to the global organizational strategy, evaluations have to be perceived as legitimate by employees. As the empirical scholarship has shown, when an employee perceives performance-oriented rules in his organization as fair and trustful, his commitment and motivation with the organization's mission will increase (Kim, 2010). According to Kim and Holzer (2016), the path to improve effectiveness among performance appraisal systems relies on enhancing employees' perception about the importance of the assessments as a tool to develop their career capacities. Therefore, it is expected that a positive relationship is found between public officials' views regarding the performance systems and the actual performance (Ayers, 2013).

As Suchman (1995) explained, legitimacy is an anchor point of the normative and cognitive forces that constrain, construct and empower organizations. Prior scholarship has used multiple definitions of legitimacy (Box, 2002; Cruz-Suárez et al., 2014) and according to Deephouse et al. (2017), this concept has evolved considerably. In this work, legitimacy is defined as "the perceived appropriateness of an organization to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms and definitions" (Deephouse et al., 2017, p. 32).

This definition incorporates the strategic vision of the subject from the management perspective, emphasizing the role of the perception without neglecting its own cultural influence of the institutionalist approach. It also includes the Fambry and Harper (2005) view of organizational legitimacy as the process of stabilizing and establishing the organizations and activities that are often the foundations of the bureaucratic system.

Overall, organizational legitimacy is a notion with a multidimensional character that usually varies according to the context or according to particular actions (Cruz-Suárez et al., 2014; Suchman, 1995). In fact, organizational actions may have different levels of legitimacy among employees, even within the same organization. Compared to other managerial tools, performance management systems are usually subject to strong scrutiny and critical views by employees, but they need to be highly legitimate to work. According to Bouckaert (1993), and Streib and Poister (1999), in order to actually contribute to improve management, an effective performance measurement system must be legitimate, especially to lower level employees. Thus, legitimacy strengthens the measurement system but, beyond that, it provides it with the necessary resources to make it trustful and sustainable.

What drives perceptions of legitimacy of performance measurement among employees? Previous scholarship has attempted to identify the operational elements affecting the views of employees on performance management systems and its success. Accordingly, we identify three different types of drivers in the extant literature:

- Structural and design-oriented problems in performance management systems and instruments (Delic & Cebic, 2011; Kellough, 2002; Randell, 1994; Prowse & Prowse, 2009);
- Goal alignment and political economy of the process (Andrews et al., 2012; Ayers, 2013; Kellough, 2002; Meier & O'Toole, 2002, 2003, 2013; Kim, 2011);
- Organizational context and culture (Prowse & Prowse, 2009).

We explore the literature regarding those different types of drivers in the following subsection.

Structural and design-oriented problems in performance management systems and instruments

An appropriate performance management system requires objective and consistent instruments, designed to be instrumental to the organization's strategy. Moreover, in order to inform strategic processes, the organizational actors should perceive the performance assessments as valid, reliable, practical, and fair (Delic & Cebic, 2011). Additionally, to become part of the organizational day-to-day practice, and to generate spillovers to other organizational practices, Kellough, (2002) and Agbola (2011) argue that performance assessments have to become a continuous process, rather than a moment in time. The literature has shown how important it is to adequately implement performance measurement as a strategic task but, more importantly, to make it a continuous activity through constant tracking, feedback, and revision in every possible way (evaluator to employee, employee to evaluator, and the like).

Some authors have found systematic weaknesses in performance assessment methods and instruments (Delic & Cebic, 2011; Kim, 2011; Kellough, 2002; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995) that affect their legitimacy. An important source of bias and deficiency in performance assessments is the rater error. These errors, inherent to human subjectivity, introduce perceptions of unfairness and injustice among employees, enhancing their dissatisfaction (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). Such sentiments can be intensified if the organizations do not have an appropriate, clear, rating scale (Kellough, 2002; Kim, 2011). Not all organizations can be measured in the same way, but more importantly, not all employees can be assessed following the same rating criteria. In this regard, the rating scales need to be adjusted to the particular employee functions and to their outcomes, but also they have to be able to reduce the rater biases at the same time (Kellough, 2002; Kim, 2011). The systematic weaknesses in performance assessment introduce noise and doubts to the performance management process, reducing its reliability among the organization community.

This is why the method of assessment, and the key processes attached to it (for instance how the information is recollected and conveyed), are essential to building legitimacy throughout the entire performance process. Any lack of clarity or misperception is a real threat to the reliability of the system but, more importantly, to the legitimacy of the organization's entire strategy.

Goal alignment and key stakeholders' role in the process

One of the main purposes of a performance management system is the alignment between the organizational goals and the employee's individual objectives. A proper alignment would be ultimately reflected in both group and employee behaviors, which eventually influence organizational outcomes. In fact, such alignment is usually a necessary condition to improving the organizational performance (Andrews et al., 2012; Kim, 2010) through work motivation and strategic communication. Moreover, the assessment process should help employees comprehend and accept the firm rules (Lin & Kellough, 2019). Thus, another characteristic of a suitable performance management system is to establish a set of active strategies, rules and incentives, which can lead to better alignment between the employee and the organization.

Conversely, when goals and incentives are misaligned, organizations could face a classic agency dilemma which is very costly. For it induces significant distortions in the organization's strategy and in the operation itself. An evaluation system that misaligns the incentives and goals between the organization (the principal), and the employee (the agent), introduces significant distortions that make the achievement of key organizational outcomes more difficult. Thus, an ill-designed evaluation system can increase transaction costs and weaken the psychological contract between the employee and the organization, increasing legitimacy. Thus, according to the two reviewed aspects, the first hypothesis of this study is:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the level of individual/organizational assessment alignment and the perceived legitimacy of performance assessment among employees.

There is one key actor within such a process, the manager/supervisor. Their role is primarily to ensure the assessments' contribution to the competitive advantage of the firm (Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Meier & O'Toole, 2002). Besides, managers are highly influential as to how goals and incentives can be more easily aligned between the employee and the organization. In this vein, Meier and O'Toole (2002) found a positive relationship between the managers' quality and the organizational and individual performance. When top management commits to the performance management process, they introduce legitimacy to the entire management (Kim, 2011) and the relationship between raters and ratees is important for perceptions of the assessments process (Rubin & Edwards, 2018). When managers internalize and communicate the benefits of adhering to a performance management framework, they present a clear message to all the employees as to how important individual performance is for the organization (Delic & Ćebić, 2011; Kellough, 2002). Furthermore, Kim and Holzer (2016) found that lack of employee trust in her rater/supervisor would negatively affect her perceptions of performance appraisal and its fairness.

Thus, our second research hypothesis is:

H2: There is a positive relationship between managerial quality and the level of legitimacy of performance assessments perceived among public servants.

Organizational context and culture

Providing feedback is one of the key rituals within the whole performance management process (Kellough, 2002). According to Delic and Ćebić (2011), and Kim (2011), its potential relies not only on its potential to improve employee performance but also on its socialization ability to convey values, practices and goals from the organization to the employee. It is a unique moment to manage and motivate low performers (Hollenbeck et al., 2012). Moreover, the feedback rituals and the organizational protocols around them are crucial to improving legitimacy.

Recent scholarship has attempted to explore the social context that surrounds performance management processes, aiming to disentangle its effects on organizational adherence and legitimacy of the evaluation process (O'Toole & Meier, 2014). For instance, Levy and Williams (2004, p. 883) stated that in or-

der to understand and develop effective performance appraisal, it is necessary to previously identify, measure and define the organizational context. This affirmation is consistent with the Murphy and Cleveland model (1995) whereby the context can affect both the rater error and the employee performance orientation. Thus, the organizational context and culture variables, such as transparency practices, have to be considered when attempting to explain the role of legitimacy within the performance management system and its effects on organizational performance.

The level of transparency with which public servants perceive the organizational process and rituals affects the effectiveness of performance evaluations. Hence, when the procedures have systematic weaknesses in their protocols, and they are not strongly rooted in the organization's rituals, they induce distortions and noise among stakeholders, reducing their reliability among the organization community and, more importantly, affecting the organizational legitimacy. In this regard, transparency is a key driver of legitimacy since employees provide great value to the openness with which processes are performed and to what level they are clear and explicit. Accordingly, the last hypothesis is:

H3: There is a positive relationship between the transparency perception and the perception of legitimacy of performance assessments among public servants.

Colombian performance appraisal system

Colombia adopted merit in civil service as a principle of the 1991 political constitution. Since then, different governments have strived to achieve merit-based procedures on public employment, and have aimed to adopt modern practices in public employment and human resource management, including the introduction of a performance management system. Recent governments have even introduced institutional arrangements aimed at adopting a comprehensive management system.

A law issued in 2004 defined the appraisal's scope and made evaluations mandatory at all levels of government and agencies. Accordingly, the National Civil Service Commission (NCSC), the organization that rules and controls the Colombian public service, has continuously been specifying and building the performance assessment system according to the general indications of the Ibero-American Charter of Public Management (CLAD, 2003)³. The NCSC has also defined the general standards of performance for the system's implementation, allowing some leeway to both organizations and subnational levels of government to adapt the evaluation instruments to their own particularities. Consequently, a general (de jure) framework to adopt performance management already exists as a strategy within Colombian public organizations. However, as it is usual in performance management systems, the main challenges rely on the implementation.

³ The Ibero-American Charter of Public Management is a non-binding common framework implemented since 2003, which establishes the public function bases to improve the government performance and strengthen democracy. The Charter principles must be adapted to the countries' context by a normative development.

According to the Colombian normative framework (the most recent update was in October 2018), the performance evaluation process is continuous and has four main stages. First, some goals and commitments are established between the manager and the employee. After this, the supervisor has to track the officer's performance and creates an evidence portfolio. With this information, the superior develops the semiannual evaluation, which is a partial assessment that will help to improve officer performance through providing their feedback by the middle of the twelve-month period. Following this, the monitoring process continues until February when the final evaluation takes place.

It is important to highlight that, according to the normative framework, performance assessments are conceived as an objective and permanent tool of Human Capital Management (HCM) and are allowed to measure institutional performance (Acuerdo 6176 de 2018). De jure, they are considered binding for HCM processes such as promotion, training and professional development. Yet, even though the law states that the appraisal results must be used to make decisions about tenure and other key employee outcomes, there is a gap between the expected and the actual results of performance assessments. Despite the Colombian government's efforts to implement the performance system, according to the OECD (2013), it does not yet operate as a proper and effective performance management framework. Nowadays, despite negative perceptions from the citizenry about the quality of public services, a significant proportion of the staff consistently receives high performance ratings. In this context, low performance is widespread throughout the government and the managers find it quite difficult to use the system as a tool to motivate public servants (OECD, 2013, p. 336). The limitations of the implementation reduce the general legitimacy of the assessment among public officials and supervisors, leading to a vicious circle, which does not help to improve either the assessments or the actual organizational performance.

Some actions and norms that currently regulate the performance assessment system generate incentives that could jeopardize its legitimacy. For example, the current regulatory framework places the responsibility of job reinstatement with the evaluators. The above situation can encourage evaluators to remain outside of the process and to prefer to report a positive assessment instead of having the risk of facing conflicts and legal processes. This is consistent with Lin and Kellough (2019), who illustrate those behaviors from certain managers aiming to avoid the procedures, paperwork and time necessary to justify low ratings. However, the authors explain, inflated ratings would weaken efforts at performance management and decrease their utility as a managerial tool.

Some authors illustrate those challenges and warn about their effects on legitimacy. They argue that there is widespread recognition that performance evaluations are ill defined and adopted (Careaga, 2013; Ospina & Hoffman, 2015). According to human resources (HR) officers, an appraisal is not an effective tool and is difficult to connect with the strategy (Careaga, 2013). The HR officers perceive a wide disconnection between formulators and implementers at both the macro (national) and the micro (subnational and organizational) levels (Ospina, 2000; Ospina & Hoffman, 2015).

Furthermore, the evaluation system receives little recognition from key actors involved in the process, and consequently they do not appear to use it as a tool for organizational and individual improvement (Strazza, 2014, p. 29). Moreover, its effects are very low since it does not help to generate a proper incentive framework, but instead can appear to reduce the evaluators' commitment to the process. Those flaws hinder the advancement and use of the performance management system as a management tool and, more importantly, erode its own legitimacy among evaluators and employees. In this way, the Colombian case can inform about the legitimacy challenges that performance management systems in developing countries oftentimes face. More importantly, it can also help illustrate how the lack of legitimacy affects the chances for successful implementation.

Data and Methodology

This article uses a mixed method approach. First, we conducted four initial semi-structural interviews in order to explore key aspects of legitimacy of performance assessment implementation in government organizations. Our qualitative analysis focused on the human resources managers' perception about the performance assessment and its implementation within their organizations, keeping in mind the key determinants that were listed before.

The interviews were conducted in person in 2015. The interviewees were Human Resources Managers of four different subnational agencies with diverse administrative, economic and social contexts. These interviews were transcribed and codified by the authors using NVIVO software and the procedure allowed us to identify the principal ideas and link the quantitative results with the theory framework. The coding variables were selected in order to have information about the aforementioned determinants, the importance of the assessments as a managerial tool and its legitimacy, the type of the organization, recommendations and improvements that the interviewee mentioned that took place in their organization.

The interviews provided us with key insights for the analytical design and allow us to confirm some of the literature review conclusions about the perception of performance assessments and their determinants, and moreover, to know about the implementation process of the normative guidelines at the subnational level. One of the major observations is that most interviewees consider performance assessments as a key tool to manage human resources. However, at the same time, they were highly critical of the system and its approach, although they certainly consider and identify opportunities to improve the assessments. This gives some idea of how important the evaluation process is regarded independently of their perceptions of legitimacy.

Yet, the perceptions of legitimacy about the performance assessment process contrasted according to the particular location and the institutional capacity associated with local government. For instance, in Quibdó, the capital of Chocó, the poorest province in Colombia, negative perceptions prevailed in the interview with the official in charge. On the other hand, in Antioquia

and Valle del Cauca (the most developed provinces in the country) the HR officials expressed positive perceptions about this process. This is not surprising considering that the most deprived areas have historically lacked State presence, and, in these same places, the HR practices appear to be less modern. This might explain the stark differences between the two neighboring departments of Chocó and Antioquia. Thus, the level of institutional capacity at the subnational level appears to affect perceptions of effectiveness and legitimacy in the performance assessments.

In general, conceptual categories such as supervisor role, management tool, and goal alignment are the principal constructs that the interviewees mentioned systematically as key to the assessment processes. In fact, the role of supervisor/evaluator appears as the most prominent determinant of legitimacy for most interviewees. This is reflective of how the HR officials link up the managers' attitudes and behaviors with the overall performance assessment implementation.

Most statements regarding legitimacy and transparency perceptions included negative perceptions of the evaluations among the interviewed HR officers. In a few cases, they gave positive testimonies about the system as a whole and its effects on organizational performance. Nonetheless, they emphasized how the alignment between the individual and the organization is instrumental to truly improve performance.

Building on the confirmation of the key constructs from the interviews, we conducted a quantitative analysis of the drivers of legitimacy of performance evaluations. We built a model that aims to explain the legitimacy perceptions among employees in the Colombian public sector in the national government. We based the analysis on two dependent variables regarding employees' perceptions about the individual and organizational effects of performance assessments.

Considering that the two dependent variables are categorical with more than two options (Long and Freese, 2001), we did run two ordinal probit model estimations. In these variables the employees, using a five-point Likert scale, expressed different levels of agreement (totally disagree, disagree, agree and totally agree) about the role of the performance assessments as a management tool in the mentioned two dimensions (incentive and input).

Our unit of analysis is public employees at the provincial level (*departamentos*⁴). The main source data is the yearly Survey of Institutional Environment and Development (EDID by its acronym in Spanish) conducted by the Colombian National Statistics Department (DANE in Spanish). The EDID survey collects information about public employees' views on several aspects of the working environment and organizational performance (DANE, 2013). We relied on data from this survey from 2009 to 2012 (available data), a sample above 19.000 observations. Although the EDID is a perception-based survey, the sample size helps to control for common source bias and other usual measurement errors in such types

⁴ Colombia is divided into 32 departments and one Capital District.

of data. We added key controls at the organizational and subnational levels. Table 1 lists our dependent and independent variables:

Table 1

Variables Description

Variable	Type	Description	Survey Question	Source
Legitimacy Incentive (First Dependent variable)	Ordinal Categorical	Public officer views as to how the performance appraisal operated to improve her/his performance	– The implementation of officials' performance evaluation encouraged officials to improve their work	Survey of Institutional Environment and Development (EDID) Colombia's National Statistics Department (DANE)
Legitimacy Input (Second Dependent Variable)	Ordinal Categorical	Public officer views as to how the performance appraisal operated as an input of the organization performance management system	– The implementation of officials' performance evaluation was taken into account to improve the service provided by the entity	
Managerial Role (Independent variable)	Index (0 to 100)	Index built with perception questions on the managers legitimacy (team building, direct knowledge, double-loop learning)	– The directors had full knowledge of the difficulties and solutions presented in the development of the tasks. – The directors took into account the contributions of the teams in the decision-making process. – The directors led to personal and technical growth of its team	
Individual and organizational assessment alignment (Independent variable)	Ordinal Categorical	Use of individual performance assessment in the evaluation of the global government performance	– For the institutional evaluation: How much is considered the result of performance evaluation of officials?	
Organizational Transparency perception (Independent variable)	Index (0 to 100)	Index constructed with perception questions about transparency on key organizational processes (Budgeting planning and allocation)	Planning and budget execution is based on: – Personal, family or friendship ties? – Ties or political pressure? – Unofficial payments? – Logrolling? – Regional links?	

CONTROLS			
Variable	Answer	Description	Source
Provincial Yearly GDP	Billions of Colombian pesos	Provincial yearly GDP at 2005 constant prices	Provinces National Accounts
Provincial Yearly GDP Growth	Percentage	Provincial yearly GDP growth between 2011 and 2012 at 2005 constant prices	Provinces National Accounts
Municipal Size Category	Ordinal Categorical	Provinces capital classification according to the population size	Resolution 705 de 2013 Contaduría General de la Nación
Distance	Kilometers	Provinces capital distance to Bogotá	Google Earth
Administrative Capacity	Index (0 to 100)	Index of Municipal Performance (IMP)	Integral Municipal Performance National Planning Department (NPD)
Abstention	Percentage	Percentage of the eligible voters who did not vote in 2011 local elections	Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil

Source: Compiled by the authors.

In this study, the first dependent variable (Legitimacy Incentive) refers to the employees' perception about the assessments' capacity to induce a positive change in the public officials' behavior. It is an ordinal categorical variable, which takes values between 1 and 5. Higher values in the variable represent a more positive perception of effectiveness in improving performance. It does not only measure how legitimate they are perceived by public servants, but also how useful they consider them in regard to improving organizational performance. This variable has 19,471 observations between 2009 and 2012 with a mean of 3.28 and 1.23 as standard deviation. The subset distribution is left-skewed. However, almost 40% of the employees do not perceive the performance assessments capable of inducing a positive change in the public officers' behavior.

According to Gerrish (2015, p. 15), allowing the public officers to know the performance measurement results may be associated with better performance conditions. In this sense, the second independent variable is Legitimacy Input. It refers to the public servants' perception about the use of assessment results as an input to improve the organization's performance. This variable also has 19,471 observations between 2009 and 2012 with a mean of 3.56 (1.2 standard deviations). It has a left-skewed distribution and more than 70% of the subset consider the assessments as an input to the global organizational performance.

The empirical literature on public management has shown that the supervisor's role and attitude can have a positive effect on organizational and individual performance (Kellough, 2002; Kim, 2010; Meier & O'Toole, 2002, 2003; Prowse & Prowse, 2009). Accordingly, our first independent variable is Managerial Role index. It measures the employees' perception of their supervisor's attitude.

This index ranks between 0 and 100 and has 77.4% of internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha). The mean is 65, which indicates that the perception about supervisor roles in the provincial governments is over the median value. The standard deviation of this variable is 23.1.

The second independent variable is Individual and Organizational Assessment Alignment. These variable measures whether the performance assessments are able to align individual performance with organizational goals and outputs. (Ayers, 2013; Kellough, 2002; Kim, 2001; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). This ordinal categorical variable reflects the employees' perceptions as to how the individual performance assessments are taken into account within the global organizational performance evaluation. This variable distribution is left-skewed with a mean of 3.6 and 1.3 standard deviation, which imply a positive employee perception about the alignment between organizational performance evaluation and individual performance assessments.

Finally, the Transparency Perception index measures the employees' opinions about how well the organization plans, allocates and executes the budget. Higher values in this index suggest better perceptions about budgeting processes in the organization. This index ranks between 0 and 100. The internal consistency in this index is 95.8% according to Cronbach's Alpha. In this case, the subset mean is 49.3 (with 28.3 standard deviation), implying that the perceptions about transparency in managerial practices are neither positive nor negative.

To capture factors that explain the organizational and subnational heterogeneity we added some covariates/control variables. The economic productive differences are controlled with the provincial yearly GDP (2005 constant values). The second control variable is the percentage of the provincial yearly GDP growth between 2011–2012. Additionally, differences in population sizes are measured with the Colombian municipal classification system⁵. A third control variable regarding centralization measures the geographical distance between national and subnational government. Then, the administrative capacity variable measures different aspects of municipal activity, as well as the local governments' capacity (HR and technological resources availability) (DNP, 2012). Finally, voting abstention measures the percentage of eligible voters who did not vote in 2011 local elections, as a proxy of trust and legitimacy of local governments.

Results

The results of the ordinal probit estimations are shown in Table 2. The first and fourth specifications present the dependent variables, legitimacy incentive and legitimacy input, explained only by the independent variables without control/covariates. Results show that in both specifications, the supervisors' legitimacy, organization/individual alignment, and transparency perception are 99% statistically significant.

⁵ Nowadays, Colombia has 1.098 municipalities that are classified in seven categories according to population and income levels in 2007, 89% of the municipalities were classified in the lowest category (six), and only five cities were considered in the special seventh category.

Table 2

Ordinal probit results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
VARIABLES	Legitimacy _Incentive	Legitimacy _Incentive	Legitimacy _Incentive	Legitimacy _Input	Legitimacy _Input	Legitimacy _Input
Managerial Role	.0171***		.0173***	.0173***		.0173***
	(.000396)		(.000484)	(.000394)		(.000401)
Individual and organizational assessment alignment	.294***		.293***	.336***		.335***
	(.00669)		(.00685)	(.00715)		(.00767)
Transparency perception	-.00158***		-.00113***	.00204***		.00218***
	(.000316)		(.000299)	(.000253)		(.000261)
Provincial Yearly GDP		4.65e-07	2.73e-06***		-1.81e-06***	6.08e-07
		(3.68e-07)	(3.71e-07)		(4.01e-07)	(3.88e-07)
Provincial Yearly GDP Growth		-.390	-.550*		-.387	-.530*
		(.272)	(.246)		(.288)	(.243)
Municipal Size Category		-.100***	-.0121		-.111***	-.0202*
		(.0112)	(.00942)		(.0103)	(.0135)
Distance		.000272***	.000224***		.000152***	8.80e-05*
		(3.95e-05)	(4.49e-05)		(4.82e-05)	(3.68e-05)
Administrative Capacity		-.000632	-.000376		-.000639	-.000500
		(.000752)	(.000844)		(.000751)	(.000744)
Abstention		.00178	-.00436**		.00608***	8.80e-05
		(.00172)	(.00175)		(.00190)	(.00164)
Pseudo – R2	0,1297	0,0028	.1317	0,1523	0,0026	0,1526
Wald Chi2	3709.62	176.45	4114.01	6262.03	143.80	5739.26
Observations	19,471	19,471	19,471	19,471	19,471	19,471

Note: *0.1; **0.05; ***0.01.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

In the second and fifth specifications, only control/covariates were included. This seeks to establish whether the control variables are relevant to explain differenc-

es between Colombian local/provincial governments. In the first case, when we understand the legitimacy as the assessment’s ability to incentivise the public officers, Municipal Size category and distance between the provincial capital and Bogotá are statistically significant. Additionally, on the other dependent variable (fifth model specification), Provincial Yearly GDP and Abstention are also statistically significant. In conclusion, the addition of the control/covariates is relevant in this model for both dependent variables and increases the robustness of the estimations.

The third and sixth specifications show the complete model exhibiting more robustness and highest goodness of fit measures. All independent variables are statistically significant. The magnitude of the change in legitimacy explained by the determinants is shown in Table 3, as well as the marginal effect coefficients of the third and sixth ordinal probit model specifications. These results help to identify how much –on average– the Supervisors’ Role, the Alignment between the Individual and the Organization, and the Transparency Perception, change the officers’ legitimacy perceptions about the performance assessments.

Table 3

Marginal Effects – Coefficient of Third and Sixth Model Specification⁶

Legitimacy Incentive	Coef.	Legitimacy Input	Coef.
Totally Disagreement		Totally Disagreement	
Managers Role	-.0013973***	Managers Role	-.0006738***
Individual and organizational assessment alignment (Independent variable)	-.0236543***	Individual and organizational assessment alignment (Independent variable)	-.0130219***
Transparency Perception	.0000909***	Transparency Perception	-.0000847***
Provinces GDP	-2.20E-07	Provinces GDP	-2.36E-08
Provincial Yearly GDP Growth	.04436*	Provincial Yearly GDP Growth	.0205952*
Municipal Size Category	.0009777	Municipal Size Category	.0007832*
Distance	-.0000181***	Distance	-3.42E-06*
Administrative Capacity	.0000303	Administrative Capacity	.0000194
Abstention	.0003519**	Abstention	-3.42E-06
Disagreement		Disagreement	
Managers Role	-.005137***	Managers Role	-.0046076***
Individual and organizational assessment alignment (Independent variable)	-.0869635***	Individual and organizational assessment alignment (Independent variable)	-.0890409***

⁶ The marginal effects of an ordinal probit model presents always opposite sign in the first effect (i.e. when β_k has a positive sign, an increase in x_k reduces the probability of the lowest category). In the other hand, the last marginal effect presents the same sign (i.e. a positive β_k indicates that an increase in x_k increase the probability of the highest category).

Legitimacy Incentive	Coef.
Transparency Perception	.0003341***
Provinces GDP	-8.09E-07
Provincial Yearly GDP Growth	.1630867*
Municipal Size Category	.0035945
Distance	-.0000666***
Administrative Capacity	.0001116
Abstention	.0012937**
Agreement	
Managers Role	.0037713***
Individual and organizational assessment alignment (Independent variable)	.0638439***
Transparency Perception	-.0002452***
Provinces GDP	5.94E-07
Provincial Yearly GDP Growth	-.1197295*
Municipal Size Category	-.0026389
Distance	.0000489***
Administrative Capacity	-.0000819
Abstention	-.0009497**
Totally Agreement	
Managers Role	.002763***
Individual and organizational assessment alignment (Independent variable)	.0467739***
Transparency Perception	-.0001797***
Provinces GDP	4.35E-07
Provincial Yearly GDP Growth	-.0877172*
Municipal Size Category	-.0019333
Distance	.0000358***
Administrative Capacity	-.00006
Abstention	-.0006958**

Legitimacy Input	Coef.
Transparency Perception	-.0005791***
Provinces GDP	-1.61E-07
Provincial Yearly GDP Growth	.1408256*
Municipal Size Category	.0053551*
Distance	-.0000234*
Administrative Capacity	.0001329
Abstention	-.0000234
Agreement	
Managers Role	.0021702***
Individual and organizational assessment alignment (Independent variable)	.0419389***
Transparency Perception	.0002728***
Provinces GDP	7.60E-08
Provincial Yearly GDP Growth	-.0663298*
Municipal Size Category	-.0025223*
Distance	.000011*
Administrative Capacity	-.0000626
Abstention	.000011
Totally Agreement	
Managers Role	.0031112***
Individual and organizational assessment alignment (Independent variable)	.0601239***
Transparency Perception	.000391***
Provinces GDP	1.09E-07
Provincial Yearly GDP Growth	-.0950909*
Municipal Size Category	-.003616*
Distance	.0000158*
Administrative Capacity	-.0000897
Abstention	.0000158

Note: *0.1; **0.05; ***0.01.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The first independent variable, Supervisor’s Role, has a positive relationship with the performance assessments legitimacy, both as incentive (first dependent variable) and as input (second dependent variable) at a 99% level of confidence.

This result is consistent with Hypothesis 2. The higher the perception of the managers' role, the lower the probability of having a negative perception about the performance assessments. In other words, when the employees perceive managers to have an effective role throughout management activities such as team building, shared knowledge, and double-loop learning, the legitimacy of the performance assessment, as a managerial tool, increases.

The alignment variable is also statistically significant at a 99% confidence level in both specifications. In this case, the independent variable has a positive relation with the assessment's legitimacy (dependent variable), as was expected in Hypothesis 1. The implication of this result is that, when the perception of alignment increases in one unit, the legitimacy perception increases too. Consequently, when employees see individual performance as instrumental for the evaluation of the general organization's performance, the legitimacy of the performance assessment increases.

Finally, the Transparency Perception variable is also significant at a 99% confidence level but evidences a mixed relation with the dependent variable. When the legitimacy is determined by the ability of the performance assessments to induce a better individual performance (Legitimacy Incentive), in those cases when the Transparency perception decreases (i.e. the employee perceives irregular activities inside the organization), the probability of perceiving the performance assessments as an effective tool to change behaviors increases. This result suggests that negative perceptions about transparency on key organizational processes, such as budgeting planning and allocation, may increase the legitimacy of the performance assessments among the employees. This result does not fall in line with Hypothesis 3 expectations but can be explained by the fact that individuals who demand greater transparency might be better aligned with the rationale and logic of the performance management processes itself.

On the other hand, when we operationalize the legitimacy of assessments through the use of appraisal information in order to improve organizational performance (Legitimacy Input), the relationship with the Transparency Perception variable is positive, as we expected in Hypothesis 3. In other words, when employees perceive irregular practices in their organizations, their legitimacy perception of the assessments decreases and vice versa.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that factors like supervisor's role, the alignment between the global performance evaluation with the individual assessments, and the perception of transparency about key organizational processes, are correlated with the public servants' views about the legitimacy of the performance assessment system. These organizational aspects provide insights about the degree of acceptance of the performance assessment process inside organizations in developing civil services, but also inform us about the usefulness of such strategic processes by bringing (or not) valuable information to the management process.

Our results indicate that even in civil services not fully developed, employees' perceptions of the role of supervisors in the performance evaluations affects

their acceptability of the process. Therefore, when: a) the managers are concerned about the employees' issues, b) consider the employees' contributions to the team, and c) encourage personal and professional growth within the teams, the legitimacy of the performance assessments increases. This might indicate that although some power relationships and managerial lines are not clear in civil services in developing countries, they still operate to affect employee acceptance of new managerial strategies such as performance assessments.

However, in accordance with the Human Resources Managers that were interviewed, it exposed the following about the managers role in the assessment process in the Colombian context:

"... It is more a matter of the empowering level of each department's head to assimilate it as a good managerial practice within each unit. Sometimes, we find that it is taken more as an instrument that generates greater administrative burden and not as a benefit. In other words, they take it more as something that has to be done. But they do not take it as system that will allow departments to improve"

"Therefore, they bear too many responsibilities, and in the last three years, they have been more sensitive, they have listened a little bit more and they have responded in such a way that it has increased a lot, at least the task (the evaluation). However, we have not been using it as a management tool. We are not getting there yet. But at least they are realizing that we have to start evaluating".

On the other hand, our evidence also shows that when the employees see an alignment between the performance assessments and the global evaluations of the organizational results, the legitimacy of the performance management system also increases. In this case, when the organizational evaluation includes the results of the employees' assessments, the perception of the assessment as a managerial tool increases too. Thus, we can infer that the management can combine organizational and individual performance assessment results in order to communicate better and facilitate alignment. Accordingly, such processes appear to help to induce positive behaviors among employees from those agencies where the organizational and individual incentives/goals are aligned.

Accordingly, aligning individual and organizational evaluations of performance is a powerful way to generate more legitimacy for the system as a whole. This can lead in turn to facilitate the alignment of the goals of the individual with those of the organization. Hence, communication strategies must be focused on. In contrast, despite some human resources managers in Colombia pointing to the importance of this alignment, it continues to be a common problem in public administration as we can see from their statements:

"it is feedback for the employee, to make personal improvement plans. So, evaluation is needed to know how you are doing and how you can improve. That seems very important to me. Besides, I think this is part of the administration's plan, then, the area, and then the working group. It tells us how far we have come and how far we can go."

"Essentially the evaluator does not have exact knowledge about the government plan and its program. (The institutional goals, what it really is). Therefore, perhaps, the commitments are settled outside that frame. To which, perhaps, they deem it to be convenient or at least what the functions manual says. Nothing more. It is all about it".

“All the individual performance must be evaluated. So, from there it is that the individual improvement plans are immersed, as well as the evaluation of the units’ progress, if they are meeting the goal of the Government’s Plan and if they are doing the procedures and processes of each area. Therefore, it is pertinent to the administration to implement the assessment system”.

Additionally, the quantitative results indicate that when the employees perceive irregular practices in their agencies, the perception about the performance assessments as an incentive to improve performance decreases. In this case, employees who care more about the transparency of some organizational processes are more likely to perceive as more legitimate a fair, due process based, performance management system. On the other hand, when the appraisals operate as an input to improve the global organizational performance, the relationship with transparency perception is positive. Our results confirm previous evidence that employees respond differently to performance management systems according to their views on transparency and fairness. Those employees who put a lower value on transparency can be less willing to be assessed and this can eventually elicit lower levels of legitimacy of performance management systems that in turn lead to a rejection/critique of the instruments.

Our analysis and data portray some limitations. First, the study uses information from the Survey of Institutional Environment and Development (EDID by its acronym in Spanish) and Administrative Capacity Index (ACI), which depend on self-reported information and employees’ perceptions about HCM practices. Additionally, the administrative capacity index, supplied by the National Planning Department, is based on self-reported information by the subnational governments. This kind of information could have some measurement problems, especially while the agencies learn how to present the information to obtain better results. In addition, surveys can be affected by social desirability bias. To mitigate the effect regarding quantitative data, we used a time series with more than 19,000 observations in three years and added key control variables and covariates. However, the nature of the study and the information sources that are available reduce the options to moderate the biases.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

This article provides three main contributions: First, it provides an empirical study of the legitimacy of the performance assessment in the context of a country still striving with the professionalization of its civil service, bringing new insights about the limitations of strategic management in the public sector. Second, the results can enlighten policy improvement and highlight the pitfalls of the implementation process in a context that has been little studied. Third, the findings can help to understand better how public organizations can act to affect legitimacy perceptions in a positive way.

In Colombia’s local government context, when managers display an active role, and an alignment between the individual and the organization is perceived, the legitimacy of performance assessments increases. These results reveal that improvements to the current level of legitimacy do not necessarily need a change

in normative framework. In fact, since the determinants of the assessments' legitimacy appear to be mainly related to cultural and organizational aspects, key changes can be induced without costly *de jure* changes (Deephouse et al., 2017). For example, improving communication between employees and their supervisors about performance may be better than redesigning the entire appraisal system (Rubin & Edwards, 2018).

Accordingly, our results remark the importance of reinforcing three key contextual aspects of the performance assessment process in order to improve its legitimacy and, beyond that, to ensure its usefulness for the organizational strategy. First, the role of the supervisor can be enhanced through training and repetition and the process itself must be clear and transparent in order to generate useful information and facilitate the relationship between the supervisor and the employee along the process of evaluation (Sanabria et al., 2016; Sanabria & Avellaneda, 2014). Second, the communication process must strategically link the contribution of the employees to the organizational mission in order to display more clearly the alignment between individual and organizational performance assessments, and to ensure goal alignment. Third, transparency is key to generate civic organizational behaviors that facilitate the implementation of a successful performance management system that informs the organizational strategy and helps improve the general performance of the organization.

Thus, the policy effort, along central government guidelines, could be better implemented at the organizational/subnational level, where it is easier to induce cultural change that is sensitive to context (Sanabria, 2015; Sanabria et al., 2015). Our results confirm that legitimacy perception is a key input to the complete organizational and governmental performance, even in developing civil services. Because of that, the construction of legitimacy must be based on a cultural process that must be mainly support for effective communication processes (Suchman, 1995), the quality of the relationship the employees have with their supervisors (Kim & Holzer, 2016) and continuous socialization strategies that ensure transparency and goal alignment. Actions can be also oriented to create safe spaces where the employees can participate in the bottom-up design and development of the performance management process and its implementation (Johnsen, 2005). These cultural oriented changes could increase the performance assessment legitimacy among public officials, improving the current situation by changing the crucial aspects in the mentioned determinants.

As we mentioned earlier, any evaluation system should be perceived as legitimate in order to be truly effective. Under this premise, efforts can be oriented to improve the perception of employees about the key variables but also to portray more transparency to other organizational processes, not only the performance management system. In this sense, HR policies in the public sector should benefit from a bottom-up approach that allows them to account for the diverse levels of institutional capacity at the subnational level, as is common in several developing (and even developed) countries. Legitimacy is crucial for government activities in and of itself. Performance assessments require a strong basis of trust and reliability to fully achieve its managerial potential and to actually inform and induce better government performance.

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