

Helpdesk Research Report: Policy Learning and Transfers
17.09.08

Query: Please identify the literature regarding policy learning and transfer, primarily at international level, but also at national level (particularly where the two are linked). How do such learning and transfers happen, what mechanisms exist, under what conditions does one or the other work, and which types of actors have been key to learning and transfers?

Enquirers: DFID China

- 1. Overview**
- 2. Key Documents**
 - International and non-governmental actors
 - Critiques of the literature
 - Case studies
- 3. Additional information**

1. Overview

There is extensive literature on policy learning and transfers and this helpdesk research report can only offer a sample of the rich discussion that is currently taking place. This interest in the processes of policy transfer has mainly been attributed to the increasing visibility of policy convergence between states. The most notable example of such convergence is the wide-ranging wave-like trend toward liberalisation and deregulation in developing countries during the 1980s and 1990s, which analysts argue was seemingly driven by more than just domestic considerations.

For a definition of policy transfer, many analysts refer to the explanation by Dolowitz and Marsh – that it describes “a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions etc. in one time and/or place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements and institutions in another time and/or place.”¹ A wide range of actors can be involved in this process, including governments officials, civil servants, pressure groups, policy entrepreneurs and experts, transnational corporations, international, regional and non-governmental organisations, think-thanks, and consultants.

The literature also identifies several approaches and terms for policy transfer. These include ‘lesson-drawing’; ‘policy band-wagoning’; ‘emulation’; ‘harmonisation’; and ‘systematically pinching ideas’. The more general terms of ‘convergence’; ‘diffusion’; and ‘learning’ are also used.

Most commentators agree that there are a wide range of items that can be transferred. These can include policies, institutions, ideas, ideologies and even negative lessons. However, a distinction is made between voluntary and coercive transfer. Voluntary transfer usually occurs

¹ Dolowitz, D. and Marsh, D., 1996, ‘Who Learns What From Whom: A Review of the Policy Transfer Literature’, *Political Studies*, Vol. 44, Issue 2, pp. 343-357

when a policy-maker looks to remedy a problem by looking outward for alternative solutions, and perhaps by emulating successful policies from elsewhere. There are a number of factors which facilitate policy transfer – these include relationships between policy-makers, common contexts, languages and ideologies, as well as the existence of think-tanks and non-governmental, international and regional organisations. Many commentators argue that policy transfer processes should be seen less as occurring between states and more as part of networks of receivers, producers, senders and facilitators of information.

Coercive transfer on the other hand, occurs when the political actors of a particular state or international organisation, such as the International Monetary Fund or World Bank impact the policy-making of another country, through for example, aid conditionality. In further contrast to both the processes of voluntary and coercive transfer, policy ‘convergence’ or ‘diffusion’ is usually deemed to occur as a result of overarching, structural forces, and imputes a less active role to policy-makers.

Several commentators highlight the potential pitfalls of policy transfer. These include:

- policy-makers being unsure of their motivations for pursuing policy change;
- a lack of understanding about the political and social contexts within which the two policies in question operate, and uninformed adaptation of the new policy to a foreign environment; and
- failure to look beyond what is familiar and having a narrow view of the possibilities.

More generally, some analysts argue that even though research on policy transfer and lesson-learning is fairly well-resourced and actively pursued, there is still limited understanding of *what* is being achieved by spreading policy ideas and good practice, and consequently, *how* to maximise benefits from the process.

2. Key Documents

Book: Evans, M., 2004, ‘Policy Transfer in Global Perspective’, Ashgate Publishing, UK

This book is available for purchase from Ashgate Publishing:

http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=6006&edition_id=6711

A preview is available from Google Books:

http://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&id=mIRKdrwOWbgC&dq=Policy+Transfer+in+Global+Perspective%E2%80%99&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=wOs9sH-WS-&sig=3NKJyofG1c-CV62HqdpKjOqTPU&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result

Note: I have not been able to review this book. The summary below is adapted from the publisher’s website and the pages available in the preview above.

This book aims to explore the relationship between systemic globalising forces and the increasing scope and intensity of policy transfer activity. It provides an explanation of policy transfer as a process of organisational learning; an insight into how and why such processes are studied by policy scientists; an evaluation of its use by policy practitioners; and the first published collection of policy transfer case studies between developed countries, from developed to developing countries, and from developing countries.

Evans argues that the literature on policy transfer is organised into two schools – one which deals with different aspects of the ‘policy transfer’ process without using the term; and the other which does. The former includes literature on band-wagoning; convergence; diffusion; evidence-based practice; learning and lesson-drawing. Some of the seminal examples of this include:

- Ikenberry, G., 1990, 'The International Spread of Privatization Policies: Inducements, Learning and Policy "Bandwagoning"' in Suleiman, E. And Waterbury, J. (eds.), 'The Political Economy of Public Sector Reform and Privatization', Westview, Oxford, pp. 88-110
- Bennett, C. J., 1991, 'Review Article: What is Policy Convergence and What Causes It?' *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 21, Issue 2, pp. 215-233
- Eyestone, R., 1977, 'Confusion, Diffusion and Innovation', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 71, No. 2, pp. 441-447
- Davies, T. O., Nutley, S. M. and Smith, P. C. (eds.), 2000, 'What Works? Evidence-Based Policy and Practice in Public Services', Policy Press
- Rose, R. 1993, 'Lesson-Drawing in Public Policy: A Guide to Learning Across Time and Space', Chatham House, London

The author argues: "Much of the literature on policy transfer focusses on the nation state, with public officials usually considered the key agents of transfer [...] Nevertheless, it is recognized that transfer often involves non-state actors or occurs both within and across national boundaries [...] It has been argued that instances of policy transfer are best understood by considering the various actors involved as a 'policy transfer network' drawn from a range of endogenous and exogenous governmental and non-governmental actors." (p.114)

Book: Simmons, B. A., Dobbin, F. and Garrett, G. (eds.), 2008, 'The Global Diffusion of Markets and Democracy', Cambridge University Press, UK

This book is available for purchase from Cambridge University Press:

<http://www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521703925>

Note: I have not been able to review this book. The summary below is adapted from the publisher's abstract.

The diffusion of markets and democracy around the world was a defining feature of the late twentieth century. Many social scientists view this economic and political liberalisation as the product of independent choices by national governments. This book argues that policy and political changes were influenced heavily by prior actions of external actors - not just other governments, but international organisations and communities of experts. Drawing together insights from economics, sociology, political science and international relations, the contributors focus on four mechanisms by which markets and democracy have diffused through interdependent decision-making: coercion and the impact of powerful countries and international actors; economic competition for markets and investment; learning from experiences of other countries; and emulation among countries. These mechanisms are tested empirically using sophisticated quantitative techniques in areas as diverse as capital account and investment policy, human rights and democratisation, and government downsizing, privatisation and taxation.

(As recommended by Dr Beth Simmons, Harvard University, 15 Sept 08)

Dobbin, F. Simmons, B. and Garrett, G., 2007, 'The Global Diffusion of Public Policies: Social Construction, Coercion, Competition or Learning', *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 33, pp. 449-472

This article is available for Purchase from Annual Reviews:

<http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.090106.142507?journalCode=soc>

Note: I have not been able to review this article. The summary below is adapted from the publisher's abstract.

Social scientists have sketched four distinct theories to explain a phenomenon that appears to have ramped up in recent years - the diffusion of policies across countries. Constructivists trace policy norms to expert epistemic communities and international organisations that define economic progress and human rights. Coercion theorists point to powerful nation-states, and international financial institutions, that threaten sanctions or promise aid in return for fiscal conservatism, free trade, etc. Competition theorists argue that countries compete to attract investment and to sell exports by lowering the cost of doing business, reducing constraints on investment, or reducing tariff barriers in the hope of reciprocity. Learning theorists suggest that countries learn from their own experiences and, as well, from the policy experiments of their peers. We review the large body of research from sociologists and political scientists, as well as the growing body of work from economists and psychologists, pointing to the diverse mechanisms that are theorised and to promising avenues for distinguishing among causal mechanisms.

Dolowitz, D., 2003, 'A Policy Maker's Guide to Policy Transfer', *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 74, Issue 1, pp. 101-108

This article is available for purchase from Ingenta Connect:

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/bpl/poqu/2003/00000074/00000001/art00013>

This article argues that there is a tremendous amount of diversity in policy transfer in terms of:

- What is and can be transferred;
- The strategies and processes involved in transferring information from one setting to another;
- Who becomes engaged in the transfer process, depending on when and where in the policy-making process policy transfer occurs;
- When they become involved; and
- What motivates them to engage in policy transfer.

The author argues: "Just as there is a limitless number of transferable items, so there is also a limitless array of individuals who can become involved in the policy transfer process and of motivations underpinning their decision to enter the process. While most individuals talk of how they learned about a policy during their 'regular' job duties, policy transfer does not require anything more than a vacation, trip, a stroll along the internet, discussion at a conference, or even ideas gained through the interactions of a given policy network." (p. 102)

There are several common problems in engaging in policy transfer that should be considered:

- "(While) one must understand how the source political/social system operates, it is equally necessary to understand the wider social and policy context in which the model under examination operates. Without this dual understanding it is likely that the real reasons why the item under investigation works or does not work in the original jurisdiction will be overlooked.
- [...] Individuals tend to look for ideas in familiar places, or those perceived as offering lessons that will encounter the least amount of resistance when attempting to introduce them into the policy-making system. This often limits a search to such a narrow field that only a biased view of what is on offer emerges, while what might be more appropriate or innovative remains hidden.
- [...] Failure often results when policy-makers attempt uninformed adaptation. In other words, while many ideas may seem good in general, if the possible complications of placing them in a foreign environment are not examined and understood there is a greater likelihood of failure." (p. 106)

Ultimately, the author argues, in order to maximise the benefits of the policy transfer process, policy-makers must question their own motivations for engaging in the process as well as the motivations of those requiring it. They must also examine the “institutional and cultural structures surrounding any given policy, programme, institution or processes”. (p. 106)

Dolowitz, D. P. and Marsh, D., 2000, ‘Learning From Abroad: The Role of Policy Transfer in Contemporary Policy-Making’, *Governance*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, pp. 5-23

This article is available for purchase from Wiley InterScience:

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/119046305/abstract?CRETRY=1&SRETRY=0>

This article focuses on the relationship between voluntary and coercive transfer, and the links between policy transfer or policy success or failure. It is divided into four major sections. The first section considers the extent of, and reasons for, the growth of policy transfer. The second section outlines a framework for the analysis of transfer. The third section presents a continuum for distinguishing between different types of policy transfer, and the last section addresses the relationship between policy transfer and policy "failure."

The authors refer to nine categories of political actors involved in policy transfer process: elected officials, political parties, bureaucrats/ civil servants, pressure groups, policy entrepreneurs and experts, transnational corporations, think tanks, supra-national governmental and nongovernmental institutions, and consultants. This article focuses on the last two categories.

- Consultants: the authors argue: “(Their role) is particularly important because they tend to offer advice based upon what they regards as the “best practice” elsewhere, often paying little attention to the particular context in the borrowing political system. For example, Policy Management Groups (PMGs) are being set up in numerous African countries, with limited consideration of their appropriateness, simply because one consultancy firm has been pushing this model into these countries [...] The role of international consultants makes less clear the distinction between voluntary and coercive transfer. For example, while consultants may “force” a uniform model of market reform upon developing nations, if they are hired by a government, either as an agent of an international aid agency or “independently”, such a situation clearly has elements of both voluntary and coercive transfer.”
- International governing organisations (IGOs): “IGOs such as the OECD, G-7, IMF and the UN and its various agencies, are increasingly playing a role in the spread of ideas, programs and institutions around the globe. These organisations influence national policy-makers directly, through their policies and loan conditions, and indirectly, through the information and policies spread at their conferences and reports.
- Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs): “NGOs are also increasing their influence over global public policy through their ability to spread ideas and information on an international level.” (pp. 10-11)

The book also identifies various other dimensions of the policy transfer process:

- Types of policy: There are eight categories of policy that can be transferred - policy goals, policy content, policy instruments, policy programmes, institutions, ideologies, ideas and attitudes, and negative lessons.
- Levels of governance: Policy makers look to three levels of governance - the international, the national and the local.
- Degrees of transfer: There are four different gradations of transfer - copying, involving direct and complete transfer; emulation, involving the transfer of the ideas behind the policy or programme; combinations, which involve mixtures of several

different policies; and inspiration, where policy in another jurisdiction may inspire a policy change, but where the final outcome does not actually draw upon the original.

Meseguer, C., 2005, 'Policy Learning, Policy Diffusion and the Making of a New Order', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 598, No. 1, pp. 67-82

This article is available for purchase from Sage Journals Online:
<http://ann.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/598/1/67>

This article explores the role of learning as a mechanism of policy diffusion in the context of the creation of a new political order. "Just as policy failures provide information about what not to do, good performance or policy successes provide information about alternative courses of action. The outstanding performance of Chile and the East Asian tigers seems to have been the most important source of inspiration for leaders in developing countries. Crucial to their appeal was the interpretation of their success. While the crises of the 1980s were seen as the result of too much state intervention, the Chilean and East Asian experiences were taken to be the living examples of the benefits of liberalization and deregulation. Much has been written about the validity of this interpretation, which is dubious. Yet it became the official creed in international financial institutions (IFIs) and international policy-making circles." (p. 70)

The author discusses policy learning against the background of recent research on the diffusion of deregulatory and regulatory policies and tries to distinguish learning from other mechanisms of diffusion. Within learning, the author argues that policy emulation is a "blind" action in that it does not entail the enhanced reflection about the mapping from policies to outcomes that many other forms of learning do. Because governments emulate based on following certain trends, emulation becomes a symbolic act whereby politicians seek to enhance their status, credibility, or "modernity."

The article reports the results of preliminary efforts to test learning as applied to the diffusion of regulatory policies. She concludes that learning cannot be rejected as a plausible mechanism of the diffusion of policies, although it shares its explanatory role with less rational mechanisms of diffusion, in particular policy emulation. Further research and analysis is needed.

Tyran, J. R. and Sausgruber, R., 2005, 'The Diffusion of Policy Innovations – An Experimental Investigation', *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*, Vol.15, No. 4, pp. 425-455

This article is available for purchase from SpringerLink:

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/xk57048w92662623/>

Note: I have not been able to review this article. The summary below is adapted from the publisher's abstract.

This article aims to explore that factors that cause a government to adopt a new programme or policy? The authors argue that despite a large number of empirical studies available to date, the relative importance of various determinants remains obscure because of difficulties of statistical identification. They present an experimental setting to study the diffusion of policy innovations in the laboratory. Their approach discriminates between experimentation, experience, and emulation as determinants of policy adoption. The policy innovation they study is an internalisation tax to mitigate a local market externality. Their results demonstrate the importance of information about innovations in other states in the diffusion of policy innovations.

Stone, D., 2000, 'Non-Governmental Policy Transfer: The Strategies of Independent Policy Institutes', *Governance*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, pp. 45-70

This article is available for purchase from Wiley InterScience:

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/119046307/abstract>

This paper addresses the role of think tanks in promoting the spread of policy ideas about privatisation. The author argues that the importance of think tanks to policy transfer is their ability to diffuse ideas by:

- acting as a clearing-house for information;
- their involvement in the advocacy of ideas;
- their involvement in domestic and transnational policy networks; and
- their intellectual and scholarly base that provides expertise on specialised policy issues.

The author argues: "In the dynamics of policy transfer there are limits to what think tanks can achieve. Their prime importance is in the construction of legitimacy for certain policies and in agenda-setting. They transfer the ideas and ideologies, the rationalizations and legitimations for adopting a particular course of action, and it is part of their endeavors to draw attention to developments overseas. They analyze the impact of these policies and their relevance or applicability to local circumstances. However, to see policy transfer occur, these organisations are dependent on formal political actors. The details concerning the wording of new legislation or the creation of new policy-delivery agencies is in the hands of government officials. While think tanks can provide some of the necessary conditions for policy transfer—by developing knowledge, assessing policy options and drawing lessons—this knowledge is not a sufficient condition for transfer, nor do think tanks establish a causal force for transfer. They are better described as policy entrepreneurs for transfer." (p.66)

Stone, D., 2004, 'Transfer Agents and Global Networks in the 'Transnationalisation' of Policy', *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 545-566

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/staff/stone/publications/transferagents/transfer_agent_s.pdf

This paper aims to highlight the role of international organisations and non-state actors in transnational transfer networks. It also draws attention to the importance of 'soft' forms of transfer – such as the spread of norms – as a necessary complement to the hard transfer of policy tools, structures and practices and in which non-state actors play a more prominent role. The author also argues that transnational networks are an important vehicle for the spread of policy and practice, cross-nationally and in structures of global governance.

The second section of this article provides a general overview of the various theoretical approaches to policy transfer and their limitations:

- **Diffusion:** This is "a trend of successive or sequential adoption of a practice, policy or programme [...] (The) literature suggests that policy percolates or diffuses; something that is contagious rather than chosen. It connotes spreading, dispersion and dissemination of ideas or practices from a common source or point of origin." (p. 547) Diffusion may be created in four ways: a national communication network among state officials; states being influenced by neighbouring states; leader states pioneering the adoption of a policy that other states follow; national governments acting as a vertical influence for emulation. However, a limitation of this approach is that it has little to say about how policies or practices are altered during processes of adoption. "The determinants of policy arrangements can include factors that are

- internal* to a system more so than external factors; such as the changing dynamics of political interests and the socio-historical make-up of a polity.” (p. 547)
- **Convergence:** “This (new institutionalist) school suggests that transfer is more the outcome of structural forces; that is, driven by industrialization, globalization or regionalization forcing a pattern of increasing similarity in economic, social and political organization between countries. This approach emphasizes entrenched ‘path dependencies’ and the taken-for-granted aspects of political life where actors follow rules, shared interpretations, schema and meanings.” (p. 548)
 - **Learning:** “Policy learning occurs when policy-makers adjust their cognitive understanding of policy development and modify policy in the light of knowledge gained from past policy experience. Policy learning may result in a more coherent transfer of ideas, policies and practices whereas mere copying may well be *ad hoc* and piecemeal. Policy coordination and/or implementation is more likely to result when there is a reasonably wide consensus of the desirability of introducing policy lessons among actors inside and outside government.” (p. 548)

The third section outlines the various transfer activities of states, international organisations and non-state actors to highlight some of the dilemmas and contradictions in the process. The final section looks at the collaborative pursuit of transfer via policy/knowledge networks and its consequences for global governance. The author argues: “(P)olicy transfer not only takes place in international domains but can also be considered as one constitutive element of transnational governance [...] (T)he transfer of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas happens within regional associations, between international organizations and is integral to networks. Circumstances of complex multilateralism bring additional considerations of how non-state actors bypass national policymaking processes to influence international organizations. [...] (T)ransfer activity transcends both the national and the international and also takes place ‘in the spaces within and between these overlapping and competing agencies’ as ‘something that passes for a global governance mechanism’ (Deacon *et al.* 2003: 15–16). One consequence is the ‘transnationalization of policy’.” (p. 561)

Benz, A. and Furst, D., 2002, ‘Policy Learning in Regional Networks’, *European Urban and Regional Studies*. Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 21-35

This article is available for purchase from Sage Journals Online:

<http://eur.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/9/1/21>

The article aims to identify favourable conditions for policy learning in regions. The authors argue that the existence of autonomous policy networks in regions is regarded as a fundamental prerequisite for generating innovations. However, they note that previous research does not clarify how networks have to be organised and linked to the institutional framework inside and outside a region, how actors should interact in networks, and whether competitive or cooperative orientations of actors are more conducive to change. The authors find that learning regions are those that manage to meet different, to a certain degree contradictory, demands regarding structures of networks and actors involved: “On the one hand the management of information (detection of demand for change, mobilization of new or tacit knowledge, finding new solutions) requires pluralistic, polyarchic and open networks including competitive and internally autonomous actors in flexible but intensive patterns of communication. On the other hand, the effective solution of conflicts is more likely in homogeneous, hierarchical and closed networks with cooperative, interdependent actors forming stable coalitions of change-promoters. Therefore, to rely entirely on networks is insufficient. The contradictory criteria can only be met in more complex structures or more complex modes of regional governance, that is by an adequate mix of networks and institutions.” (p. 28-29)

The article further argues that successful learning, the generation and implementation of new patterns of politics and new policies depends not only on specific structural characteristics of

networks, but also on the cognitive dispositions, orientations, strategies and interactions of the actors. They also offer some recommendations for a 'proactive' strategy of regional learning:

- "Since the structure of regional networks is influenced by the institutional setting, a *longer term strategy* should make the design of regional institutions an element of regional development policy. This does not require an overall reform of institutions, but regional policy should continuously evaluate the existing institutions with a view to reducing the transaction costs for institutional change.
- [...] (T)his should be done as a *joint task of regional and state actors*, since some of the elements constituting the institutional setting are controlled by the state.
- [...] Regional policy as performed by the region should be regarded as a governance concept which takes into consideration the specific cultural traits of an individual region [...] A *project-oriented network management* should – on the one hand – encourage competition on an interregional scale. On the other hand, a regional management focused on projects is more promising as a means of supporting cooperative behaviour within the region. The latter is important for accumulating positive experience in cooperation, while networks could help to generate a cooperative culture and the social capital required for a learning region.
- [...] But in order to prevent networks from becoming cartels for preserving existing structures, *internal competition for ideas and innovation* should be stimulated. It is in this way that conservative coalitions can be broken up and incentives for forming new networks dealing with new projects provided.
- [...] Finally, *boundaries of regions* should be taken as a *strategic variable* of regional policy. This is no plea for territorial reform. Rather, we think of shaping functional interdependencies and of regional networks. Learning regions should be able both to control their internal development and to adjust to external pressure. In order to enhance the region's ability to control its development, it seems imperative for the region to be able to integrate external actors into regional networks or to extend its boundary-spanning networks among regions or between regions and higher levels of government." (p. 32)

Critiques of the literature

James, O. and Lodge, M., 2003, 'The Limitations of 'Policy Transfer' and 'Lesson Drawing' for Public Policy Research', *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, pp. 179-193

http://people.exeter.ac.uk/ojames/psr_3.pdf

Note: I have not been able to review this article. The summary below is adapted from the publisher's website.

The concepts of 'lesson drawing' and 'policy transfer' have become increasingly influential ways of understanding public policy, especially in the UK. However, the main proponents of the concepts, Rose for 'lesson drawing' and Dolowitz and Marsh for 'policy transfer', have difficulty in providing convincing answers to the following three questions that are important for them and those engaged in similar studies. First, can they be defined as distinctive forms of policy-making separate from other, more conventional, forms? 'Lesson drawing' is very similar to conventional accounts of 'rational' policy-making and 'policy transfer' is very difficult to define distinctly from many other forms of policy-making. Second, why does 'lesson drawing' and 'policy transfer' occur rather than some other form of policy-making? The proponents of 'policy transfer' put a set of diverse and conflicting theories under a common framework, obscuring differences between them. Third, what are the effects of 'lesson drawing' and 'policy transfer' on policy-making and how do they compare to other processes? Whilst the effect of more 'lesson drawing' seems to be more 'rational' policy-making, the effect of 'policy transfer' on policy 'success' and 'failure' is less clear. Dolowitz and Marsh redescribe aspects of 'failure' as different forms of 'transfer' rather than giving independent reasons for outcomes based on features of transfer processes. Overall, particularly in the case of 'policy

transfer', researchers may be better off selecting from a range of alternative approaches than limiting themselves to these conceptual frameworks.

Wolman, H. And Page, E., 2002, 'Policy Transfer among Local Governments: An Information-Theory Approach', *Governance*, Volume 15, Issue 4, pp. 577-601

This article is available for purchase from Wiley InterScience:

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/118922236/abstract>

This article argues that despite the burgeoning literature in the area, the processes of policy transfer are still not properly understood: "Most of the policy-transfer studies have been single-issue case studies from which it is difficult to generalize, because the studies vary in both policies and countries examined. The policy-diffusion literature also presents difficulties from the perspective of policy transfer. First, diffusion does not necessarily imply transfer (see Collier and Messick; Eyestone), and second, the diffusion studies, although methodologically sophisticated in many respects, identify the determinants of the pattern of policy adoption but tell us little about the processes involved (see Mintrom; Mintrom and Vegari). These processes remain a virtual black box." (p. 477-478). The authors argue that part of the difficulty is the lack of an analytical framework that would facilitate understanding. They suggest that policy transfer should be conceptualised as occurring through a communications and information framework and that its study should focus on information networks that include producers, senders, and facilitators of information, as well as recipients. The article applies this framework to a study of how British local-authority officials involved in urban regeneration policy learn from each other's experience. They highlight the following findings:

- "(There exists) a communications and information system of linked networks of receivers, producers, senders, and facilitators of information. The ultimate receivers of information (regeneration partnerships) express an interest in obtaining information about the experience of other regeneration partnerships in order to generate new ideas and to avoid "reinventing the wheel."
- [...] (W)hile a high proportion of regeneration partnerships agree that learning from the experience of other local authorities is important and indicate that they engage in such activity, only a small minority of partnership officials state that it plays a big or significant role in their decision-making.
- [...] (I)nformal contacts with peers are the most trustful and useful sources of information among urban regeneration partnership officials, while some of the other more formal mechanisms—seminars and conferences and the production of good-practice guides—are less useful.
- [...] (I)nformation senders frequently shape the information they send to support their own objectives and to enhance the reputation of their own programs, activities, and policies.
- [...] (T)here is a lack of ability on the part of regeneration partnerships and local authorities to assess the quality and veracity of the information they receive. Are claims of success for regeneration activity elsewhere really valid, or are they some combination of hype and wishful thinking? Are "good"- and "best"-practice guides really useful roadmaps for action, or do they reflect unique circumstances of other partnerships, difficult to transfer?
- [...] (R)ecipients are likely to react to large amounts of disseminated good practices by seeking their own trusted methods of assessment and evaluation. Above all, such methods consist of relying on immediate personal experience, trusted individuals, and information relating to the institutional structure of the policy area in which they are operating." (pp. 497-498)

Case Studies

Tavits, M., 2003, 'Policy Learning and Uncertainty: The Case of Pension Reform in Estonia and Latvia', Policy Studies Journal, Vol. 31, Issue 4, pp. 643-660

This article is available for purchase from IngentaConnect:

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/bpl/psj/2003/00000031/00000004/art00009?crawler=true>

Note: I have not been able to review this article. The summary below is adapted from the publisher's abstract.

This article addresses the question of under what conditions does the need for urgent solutions to societal problems lead to transferring a policy designed for another political system? The argument developed in the article is based on the theoretical frameworks of learning and historical institutionalism. The author argues that the urgent need for quick solutions to existing policy problems is a catalyst for policy transfer only if there is not enough prior successful experience with self-designed policy reforms. The article tests this theoretical argument using the case of pension reform in Estonia and Latvia, which proves to be difficult to explain with the arguments in the existing policy transfer literature.

3. Additional information

Author

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Beth Simmons, Harvard University

Websites visited

Google, Google Scholar, Google Books, GSDRC, Eldis, Ingenta journals, University of Warwick, University of Liverpool, University of York, Cambridge University Press, World Bank, IDS, IDPM, Policy Studies Journal, Political Studies Review (journal), Politics (journal), Governance (journal), Political Quarterly (journal), Annual Review of Sociology (journal)

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