



Policy transfer and policy learning in skills development policies. Insights from the Norrag Conference.

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This paper examines some of the ideas and discussions held over the course of the Norrag conference, “**Policy transfer or policy learning: interactions between international and national skills development approaches for policy making**”, hosted by the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva the 25th and 26th of June 2009.² The contributions prepared for this conference (listed in the bibliography) can be accessed on the Norrag Website (www.norrag.org).

Most discussions on policy transfer assume that transfer results from a rational process of imitation, duplication and modification carried out by decision-makers. By summarizing some key points from among the contributions and discussions of the seminar, **this document emphasizes the importance of a procedural perspective, which goes beyond the mechanical transfer model. Policies and processes should be understood in their systemic contexts, as well as in the shifting institutional environment in which they operate. Policy learning is conceived as a result of lessons drawn from this process, which presents much potential. However, as this paper will show, many policy learning challenges remain to be faced in order for this potential to be recognized by all stakeholders involved in international cooperation (IC).**

1. Policy learning and transfer in the context of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness

Alignment and ownership, in relation to policy transfer and policy learning

Present interest in international policy learning is prompted by an alleged growth in policy transfers and a focus on the measures employed by countries that share similar local problems (Malik & Cunningham 2006). In this scenario, policy learning –

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² The opinions expressed herein and choice of subjects are solely those of the author.

understood as “*knowledge* about how policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) [can be] used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting” (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000) – has become a main area of interest for IC.

Nowadays, IC policies are the result of long exchanges and advocacy intended to seek synergies between the policies of countries and those of international agencies. The strengthening of the consensus on development strategies and a commitment to align all IC efforts in that sense have been pronounced as key issues. Notwithstanding, the scope and form of dialogue and exchange vary according to the country, its traditions, institutional strength, priorities, political orientation and, of course, the IC agency.

With this in mind, **how do policy transfer and policy learning operate?**

As the European Training Foundation (ETF) mentions, “the challenge for local policymakers and for international assistance is to find a balance between the urgency of policy development and the necessary time for learning and informing policies” (2008: 7).

The interactions between national and international actors in the definition and implementation of skills development (SD) policies vary depending on their dependence on IC, and their capacity to establish and plan their own development strategies. Therefore, depending on these interactions, policy transfer and policy learning adopt different forms.

Countries should take the first step in developing their own strategies and policy in the SD area, which would then drive the donor community agenda. This would, to some extent, mitigate the adverse effects of a potentially unequal partnership. As can be observed, national policy processes are far from reaching this objective in many countries. **Overall consistency in public policies – between international actors and national, provincial or local actors – is hard or impossible to achieve**, one of the more obvious reasons being that these actors may have different political and/or ideological orientations or limited administrative capacity. In addition, agencies can sometimes follow inconsistent policies in a specific sector. Further complexities can also arise based on mutual suspicions between actors

Alignment between IC and national policies also depends on a country’s policies regarding IC. Some countries, such as India, have developed their own SD agenda and planning, limiting their IC relationships to only five major bilateral donors. This decision was taken primarily because funding provided by other donors was limited and the Indian government considered the transaction costs associated with dealing with such a large number of donors too great for the amount of financial assistance involved (Mehrotra 2009).

Other countries, like Peru or Argentina, which have experienced economic growth since the early 2000s until the recent crisis, have limited IC relationships, specifically where

loans are concerned, or have imposed strong conditions upon IC involvement. Other initiatives show a standardized model in approaching IC, such as those concerning the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) frameworks (Jaramillo Baanante 2009). On another front, Eastern European countries, with their underlying objective of European Union (EU) accession, have prepared their own plans and turn to IC as a resource in aligning with European policies. Due to this strategic objective and in the case of Albania, there is evidence of EU policy domination in national SD policies (Dibra, Llaci & Tabaku 2009).

Finally, in the least wealthy countries, IC has been shown to promote a standardization of public policies, yet these countries are very dependent on IC support. In this respect and in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, the omnipresent crisis signals a marked disenchantment with the lack of public action autonomy and over-dependence on international aid. In such countries, the Paris Declaration includes a number of instruments that recipient states should implement, ranging from the program approach, to the medium term expenditure framework and recommended budgetary support structure. While the implementation pace varies from one country to the next, policy contents are nearly identical for all countries that are ultimately agreeing to bend their national policy options to the contents of the Declaration (Tidjani Alou 2009).

How does **ownership** (another concept related to the Paris Declaration) work in each model? Ownership can take different forms, depending on the strategies behind the relationship developed with IC by each country. Some countries may learn from policy transfer while developing their own strategies. This situation can be considered as “inspiration”, in Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) terms. Others may adopt a “model”, but still adapt it to their own needs, or in a form of “emulation”. **But in other cases, rigid policy transfer is still prevalent. Despite the Paris Declaration that underlines the importance of aligning international policies with national policies, many of the cases discussed during this seminar demonstrated that the same exact policies were implemented in many countries at the same time, without local modification or adjustments. In the more dependent countries, this was sometimes done with no specific regard for different contexts.** There are, however, situations of explicit or implicit resistance to adopt models, even for countries that accept IC funds.

Policy learning often does not work. The recent history of Sub-Saharan African states was strongly shaped by the transfer of policies produced elsewhere. The dynamics of these policies lead to new chains of change in states that still shift between autonomy and dependence, with powerful trends toward dependence as a chief characteristic of policy transfers. Policy learning is nowadays an achievement defeated by the weakness of state capabilities in both the working out and the implementation of these policies (Tidjani Alou 2009).

Context, institutional and individual factors in policy transfer and learning

It is generally argued that policy transfer and learning depend on the context, referring most frequently to a macro context.

A **macro-social level** can allude to a country's social structure, history and traditions, which have an impact on many aspects of SD, policy transfer or learning. Macro-social factors play a role in determining the difference between the 'transferor' and the 'transferee' country in the existing education systems, as well as their differences with respect to industrial development and the organization of productive enterprises in each country, including agriculture, industry and in the services sector. The political situation, stability, and level of 'democracy' in each country play a role in how IC can operate in each country. For instance, three features characterize the political context of SD policies in Peru: instability, the low priority given to vocational training in national policies, and lack of inter-sectoral cooperation. All these affect the relations between IC and national actors (Jaramillo Baanante 2009).

SD policy transfer or learning are also related to the institutional and individual levels, as we will consider below. The **institutional level** includes regulations, institutional autonomy, management and strategies, technical and professional profiles, as well as resources. Implementation processes take place at this level. In order to evaluate policy learning, the institutional and partnership conditions in which the programs are set up must be analyzed, particularly with regard to the links with the private sector, including not only companies but also NGOs, other sectors' public policies, etc. **There is a permanent tension at play between the technical nature of the implementation process and the socio-political and cultural conditions in which it is deployed.**

Disregarding the institutional and learning processes means ignoring the fact that social actors behave according to their expectations and strategies. Furthermore, there are many substantive aspects of teaching and institutional management that could be taken into consideration, such as the technical/political profiles of the teachers and tutors involved, the institutional strategies of partnership, curricular and didactic strategies, as well as available mechanisms for facilitating internships or employment, spotting better practices, interpreting outputs and outcomes, and developing institution-strengthening practices.

In short, the organizational climate can stifle or stimulate learning. Taking the case of multilateral banks: the most serious failures are observed in their bureaucratic machinery, which is considered off-limits to any correction that might seem obvious to a perceptive observer. Hence, policy learning is seriously curtailed by unspoken rules, such as the hesitation to embarrass colleagues, or the avoidance of decisions that would require a major upheaval for implementation (De Moura Castro 2009).

Beyond the institutional level, the **individual level** must be considered. Social actors behave according to their own strategies and knowledge. Despite the expected integration and alignment of different actors with SD policies, many deviations, power games, and contradictions can be observed, or "this web of interests, prizes, penalties,

habits and inertia that may drive the impulse to learn. Indeed, if those involved in a process do not reflect critically on what is being done, the chances of learning are minimal” (De Moura Castro 2009: 4).

Differences in cognitive and cultural perspectives as well as in language can play an important role. In fact, implementation is often carried out by social actors that take part in different levels of program development: from the public agents in charge of its main design, to the training centres, the companies and the young people, including the intermediate level of technical experts and public agents at regional and/or municipal levels, etc. It is crucial to recognize that policy transfer and the possibility of learning are related to the actions of diverse social, individual and collective actors that influence and modify the initial design as a result of their political and technical strategies and motivations. Cognitive, instrumental and political individual factors operate in this scenario.

In the end, the so-called “**hidden agendas**” of people and institutions are always present, accounting for mistakes produced beyond policy learning (De Moura Castro 2009). A great number of contextual factors at different levels are responsible for implementation, and it is actually through this process that policy learning is possible or not. There are steps, negotiations, and incentives that operate at each stage of the implementation process. One should not only look at the results but pay attention to the process itself. The process is itself a social construction where power plays a main role, and with hidden agendas driven by self-interest and organizational culture. Sometimes, the problem is not learning, but using what was learnt.

2. Relationships, obstacles and tensions in constructing cross-sectoral approaches to SD

One major obstacle for SD policy transfer and policy learning is that they stand at the crossroads of several fields (education policies, labour market analysis, economic development and rural development) and depend on many different actors such as the private sector (including for-profit actors but also NGOs and civil society), ministries of education, labour, economy, agriculture, etc. All these actors have contexts, institutions and strategies of their own, and often lack integration or stability (for example, as governments change their priorities, strategies, etc).

The interactions between sub-sectors take place within the logic of competition for resources. In Nicaragua, there is a key tension concerning funds assigned to the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) policies in relationship with TVET’s low strategic importance for the government. This lack of importance has implications in terms of the funding each sub-sector receives (Castillo & Elvir 2009), which then translates into weakened possibilities for complementarities and synergies between sub-sectors.

Even the meaning of SD differs depending on the context. Some use SD to refer to TVET, others to primary, secondary and TVET; for others still, the notion includes

tertiary skills or even soft skills. The notion of SD can be vague and yet educational and training systems are designed to improve their supply (Jaramillo Baanante 2009; Loc 2009). There is also the issue of the meaning of “skills” in different languages. All this makes our understanding of the links between SD and education more complicated.

Moreover, SD perspectives are frequently different or even contradictory. Ministries of Education and Labour differ in such key training issues as skills certification systems, while the social-oriented institutions in charge of poverty reduction programs fund more traditional *ad hoc* training, where skills-based curricula and certification are not even contemplated. Sometimes national public organizations involved in SD have little internal coordination and linkage with other institutions, as they work on isolated objectives, interests and priorities and have never developed a long-term vision in TVET policies. In Bangladesh, even if SD is a priority in national policies, there is no comprehensive or common vision and many duplicated efforts. Various actors (government, NGOs, development partners etc.) provide support, but with limited coordination: a staggering twenty-two ministries and other stakeholders, including donors, are involved in SD in Bangladesh (Ahmed 2009).

The lack of a SD holistic planning opens the door to more rigid policy transfer and less policy learning approaches. In Peru, although in theory the IC’s role is to help in whatever way necessary according to beneficiary country requirements, in practice proposals by IC are executed simply because there is no such national plan (Jaramillo Baanante 2009). **The lack of a clear national policy leads to cooperation efforts that meet their own agenda rather than a national agenda. Thus, local institutional weakness and IC’s impositions seem to be very closely related.**

More than that, donor harmonization in SD is not always evident. In Albania, international policies combined with the numerous, overlapping and non-prioritised Albanian objectives created an ambiguous SD policy situation for a certain period of time. Stimulated by international developments, most of the important donors operating in Albania initiated coordination activities between themselves (Dibra, Llaci & Tabaku 2009). In Vietnam, an evaluation report indicated that huge transaction costs were imposed by donors, due to poor coordination at the strategy planning and project formulation stages. It also reported that the various procedures of multiple donors hampered aid effectiveness (Loc 2009).

In some cases, as with the South African experience, strategies promoted by the IC helped to construct a joint national vision and supporting strategy by social partners and government. The creation of shared goals proved to be helpful in identifying gaps and overlaps between implementers and provided a basis for building collaboration behind common goals. Social dialogue on the success or otherwise of key policy measures was a vital feature of policy learning. It has also assisted local and international partners in contributing to the process of learning (Bird & Heitmann 2009).

To summarize, **there are several tensions in adopting multi-sectoral, integrated approaches on SD.** One of them is between **competitiveness vs. the social model.**

Indeed, IC has been involved in programs both fighting against poverty and supporting vocational training systems. These actions frequently have different logics. Usually there are parallel actions: high-level training oriented towards competitive sectors, and lower-quality operations oriented towards the poor. In spite of the many efforts to overcome this dual approach on vocational training interventions through an emphasis on local development, tensions persist.

Another tension lies between **labour market needs vs. people's demand**. Market orientation has prevailed consistently in vocational training therefore underestimating the inclusion and social participation of beneficiaries as well as their requests. In fact, the “double pertinence” concept has lately gained importance, as training should respond to both demands: competitiveness as well as people's needs.

Finally, another tension lies between **the formal sector vs. recognition of the informal/grey sectors**: while training is predominantly oriented towards the economic formal sector and what can be termed “decent” jobs, most of today's economic activity is informal and requires skills-based training to support not only the activities but also management and other related sustainability issues. One key question around this discussion is: Can we have a global definition of employability? Or even a definition of basic skills in what is a highly diversified and uncertain world of work?

3. Knowledge requirements and research capacity building

To which extent are SD policies proposed by donors, such as national qualification frameworks (NQFs), skills-based training, or demand-driven training, based on research evidence? The answer is that in many examples, policy models transferred by IC are not based on research evidence. NQFs, for example, have been conceived “theoretically” and it is only very recently that these policies are being evaluated.

What are the reasons for the scarcity of policy models based on research evidence? Many factors help to explain this.

First, available research studies have frequently been criticized for their lack of depth as well as for their weak, quickly drawn and unsubstantial recommendations; the “evidence based policies” label is hardly realistic: in South Africa, there is currently no comprehensive, system-wide research and knowledge production strategy or capacity with regard to SD. There is also no strongly embedded culture of evidence-based policy development (Bird & Heitmann 2009). This is certainly the case for many countries.

Second, it is not clear if donors are looking at the most reliable or even the correct research evidence. For instance, rate of return studies used to have a significant impact on policy, but nowadays confidence in this measure has decreased.

Third, research questions are sometimes unclear and therefore result in poor recommendations for future action. The South African experience suggests that

agreement between researchers and policy drivers on the formulation of research questions is a means to improving the capacity of those engaged in policy dialogue to learn from the findings generated by research (Bird & Heitmann 2009).

Fourth, the production of reliable statistics, on which good diagnoses depend, is often lacking. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, statistics are produced in fairly insecure contexts, and are often marred with reliability issues. Moreover, even when they are reliable, quantitative representations prevail, which do not reflect concrete realities and fail to provide the complex information needed to understand evolving realities (Tidjani Alou 2009).

This scarcity of research also concerns the training resources available in TVET. The training institutions for the most part do not consider the latter as a specific field of study, except when they focus on the training of the trainers and project designers. If TVET is taken into account, it is mainly as a sub-component of education. In this sense, the supply of TVET is not adequate for strengthening co-operation agencies' capacity for policy analysis, or for the constitution of TVET as an autonomous scientific and strategic field (Weyer, 2004).

Fifth, there is also a difference in timing between research and policy. Research delivery is typically long, and the timing of policy needs is typically shorter.

In terms of evaluations, the prevailing input-output approaches leave little room for the already discussed complexities. More precise evidence is required to better generate policy learning. Clear-cut rigid perspectives of analysis and research may be content with an input-output model. However, an in-depth understanding of implementation processes and the so called “externalities” of the programs call for a more complex model of comprehension and research including subjective strategies, institutional perspectives, and the systemic macro-level. As the ETF (2008) mentions, policy learning involves participating in collaborative activities, which in turn involves social and intercultural dialogue and negotiation. ETF proposes an innovative evaluative approach with a sharper focus on the organising of policy learning platforms that may facilitate stronger stakeholder involvement and horizontal network learning, leading to more consistent follow-up decision-making.

Another key matter is the way in which research findings are disseminated, where language and communication strategies play an important role. Usually, research findings are disseminated in an academic language not really emphasizing the links between findings and possible further actions or recommendations. Bridges between findings and possible policy recommendations are missing. Governments' capacity to understand international research findings – especially when produced in “economics-speak” – is not very common. In addition, many studies in the context of developed countries should allow for the input of developing countries and must take into account the national context, as recommendations based on the “northern” findings are all too common.

Last but not least, sometimes the lack of research is not regretted: in many cases the adoption of a policy model or strategy is based only on political perspectives and reasons.

Taking into account the seminar discussions, a new agenda for comparative research seems to be taking form, resulting from a lack of comparative applied research on the different levels of implementation and in different contexts. **There are three key areas that would further an understanding of better policy transfer processes and increased policy learning: a) considering the influence of the context; b) analyzing implementation as a social construction process, where institutional and individual skills, interests and strategies, play a significant role in the success or failure of policies; and c) studying the exchanges between these different levels.** In this field, the role of IC actors could be multiple. First, IC could assist with building an independent research community in developing countries where the possibilities of developing such a capacity are weak and strongly linked to research capacities in developed countries. Second, IC could evaluate opportunities for strengthening existing research capacities in developing countries. North-south research “partnerships” that have normally favoured the north should be re-thought. Third, efforts must be undertaken to build capacities among policy makers so that they can fully understand how to benefit from research evidence in policy making and implementation. Fourth, IC can support the persistence and strengthening of regional networks or learning communities such as Ernwaca³, redEtis⁴ and Norrag, that may help increasing learning through comparative studies and dissemination in different countries and regions undergoing policy transfer. And last but not least, dissemination of research learning must cover different languages and communication strategies but also include the participation of actors at varied levels: policy makers, researchers and the institutions, as well as individual actors.

A final comment

There is a consensus concerning the importance of policy learning and a recognition that it can lead to more sustainable development policies in partner countries.

But policy learning faces many obstacles, which this paper has attempted to highlight including the unequal relationship between donors and recipients, and institutional and individual weaknesses that put forward singular interests that work against learning. Contextual constraints, a lack of holistic planning, and difficulties in harmonization also play a role in hindering learning opportunities for developing policy. Research is often scarce, fails to answer key questions and doesn't support the need for correcting certain political choices. When learnings are available, acting on the evidence in order to engender change is a very different issue.

In the end, policy learning might be considered as a gradual process. A main lesson can be gleaned from most of the experiences discussed at this conference: policy learning is

³ Educational Research Network for West and Central Africa (www.rocare.org).

⁴ *Red de Educación, Trabajo e Inserción Social* (www.redetis.org.ar).

also a political issue, which concerns negotiation, reflection, data gathering and analyses, and dialogue between all stakeholders involved.

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