



To: City Development

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Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: No 71: Policy transfer and learning in the field of transport

Top line: As the appetite for foreign policy lessons increases greater understanding about policy transfer in the transport arena might offer new opportunities for accelerating progress towards more sustainable policies that are appropriate to specific contexts.

Policy transfer raises questions about who participates in the process, as well as how and why. It also raises questions about what individuals and organisations seek to learn. Ultimately, it is of interest not just to know that transfer occurs and to understand why but also to evaluate whether it is able to facilitate better policy outcomes than might otherwise be achieved, and under what conditions this is most likely. Arguably the appetite for policy transfer from other locations has increased as a result of discontent with existing policies and/or the failure of policies to achieve existing policy objectives. For example, since the introduction of the Congestion Charge in London many foreign transport planners have visited the city to learn the lessons from a 'successful' intervention.

There are various definitions of policy transfer but most share the idea that it is a process of using knowledge about policy-making from one setting and applying it to another. One of the most frequently cited definitions states that policy transfer is "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 The literature suggests various reasons why policy transfer takes place. One common explanation is that public organizations do not always possess the necessary in-house expertise to tackle new or more complex policy problems, and therefore increasingly look outside their own organisation to other governments or nongovernmental organisations for answers. In general, policy transfer mainly occurs when there is dissatisfaction with existing policies and this provides a motivation for change in the status quo. New solutions are sought either by looking at how the problem is dealt with in the same place in the past, or by examining how the same problem is (or has been) dealt with elsewhere.

In a recent review the authors noted that few of the policy transfer studies reviewed had traced policies through to implementation.² One conclusion was that there is a significant gap in the evaluation of the success (or failure) of policies that have been subject to some kind of transfer. Research has only just started to scratch the surface on questions relating to the search for new or different solutions, the adaptation of good (and bad) examples to fit local circumstances, the degree of transferability of different 'objects' of transfer and negative cases of where policy transfer/diffusion has not occurred.

The effectiveness of a search for policy lessons is dependent in part on framing the problem. Examples can be found where policy learning has been highly politicised and used to justify existing positions ('non-lessons') rather than as a genuine search for new ideas. In some cases it appears that the search is heavily influenced by a preconceived preferred answer.

¹ Dolowitz, D., Marsh, D. 2000 Learning from abroad: the role of policy transfer in contemporary policy making. *Governance* 13 (1), 5–24.

² Marsden, G., Stead, D. 2011 Policy transfer and learning in the field of transport: A review of concepts and evidence, *Transport Policy*, 18(3): 492-500.