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Introduction: drawing lessons from international policy-transfer initiatives in regional and urban development and spatial planning

Marcin Dąbrowski[a], Ida Musiałkowska[b] and Laura Polverari[c]

ABSTRACT

The collection of papers in this issue brings new insights to the processes of international policy transfer and learning in the fields of regional and urban development policy, regional innovation and transit-oriented development. It explores, through the perspective of different disciplines, the motivations of actors, tangible and non-tangible outputs, the role of factors affecting the process, and the spillover effects of such process. The contributions bring new insights into what represents success and failure in policy transfer and provide valuable lessons for policy-makers facing the challenges of a fast-changing global context.

KEYWORDS

policy transfer; lesson drawing; transit-oriented development; regional and urban development; regional policy; industrial parks

JEL O2, O18, O19, R58

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of four papers sheds a new light on the factors affecting the process of cross-country policy transfer through the lens of regional and urban development policy and spatial planning. By examining the motivations of the actors involved in policy transfer, the outcomes of the interactions between them, the mechanisms of influence and their change over time, and the constraining and facilitating factors for drawing lessons from abroad, these contributions provide new insights relevant to both theory and practice.

The papers bring fresh insights into the understanding of policy transfer in several ways. A first novel aspect is the combination of various theoretical perspectives on the topic, from the policy-transfer concept itself, as conceptualized, *inter alia*, by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) in the field of political science, to the policy mobility concept, more often used in geography (McCann & Ward, 2012; Peck, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2012) or planning studies (Healey & Upton, 2010), and their application to study why, how and under which conditions regional policy and spatial planning solutions can 'travel' across space. Second, the papers offer new insights into a combination of diverse research methods to explore the transfer process, from the traditional qualitative semi-structured interviews and participant observation to the active engagement of stakeholders engaged in policy transfer in 'charrettes', a technique used in urban planning to engage stakeholders in designing policy measures. Third, the papers explore policy transfer in different types of policies aimed at steering the development of territories from different scales: from regional policy, implemented by supranational organizations (such as the European Union – EU) or states, to territorial policies implemented at regional or local scales, such as those for the promotion of regional innovation or transit-oriented development. Each policy is a challenging object for international policy transfer due to the complexity of the issues at stake, the uncertainty about the outcomes of the interventions and the varying degree of place-embeddedness of the conditions and tools used. The studies cover a gamut of cases, from the dialogue on

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regional policy between the EU and Brazil and China (Dąbrowski, Musiałkowska, & Polverari, 2018, in this issue), to the export of EU and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) regional policy notions to Turkey (Ertugal, 2018, in this issue), to the engagement of Singaporean actors in the emergence of science parks in China, and, lastly, the import of transit-oriented development practices from a variety of countries into Dutch cities (Thomas et al., 2018, in this issue). Finally, what binds this collection of papers together is the policy orientation of all papers and their focus on drawing lessons for practitioners engaging in policy transfer in the areas of regional and urban development and spatial planning.

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

The findings of the four studies confirm issues revealed by analyses of policy transfer in other fields, such as the importance of institutional and administrative capacity (Benson, 2009; Borrás, 2011) or the nature of the possible pitfalls in the transfer process, such as those related to insufficient information on the 'sender' or 'recipient' sides, and about the practice to be transferred. However, the papers also highlight several previously overlooked issues. They relate to the importance of accounting for unintended consequences, the variety of factors that affect policy transfer, and the definition of what constitutes success or failure in policy transfer.

Unintended consequences

A first issue is the relevance and value of the process of policy transfer per se, even where there is no tangible evidence of outcomes from this process. Ertugal (2018, in this issue) and Dąbrowski et al. (2018, in this issue) show that engagement in a process of dialogue on a policy can kick-start a process of learning and lead to policy change in a non-linear way, stressing the importance of unplanned and unintended consequences of the intended transfer that may unfold over time. The process may not seem to lead to much at a given time, but may be revived and lead to tangible outcomes at a later date. In the Turkish case, Ertugal (2018, in this issue) demonstrates how the concept of regional policy evolved across time in three clearly identifiable stages, as a consequence of a shift of focus from the EU to the OECD. In the case of EU–China dialogue, the process of transfer started with a focus on regional policy and then has shifted to sustainable urbanization, illustrating the unexpected course that policy transfer may take (Dąbrowski et al., 2018, in this issue).

Factors affecting policy transfer

The papers share a focus on the factors (both facilitators and inhibitors) that influence policy transfer. They range from cultural and language affinity/difference (Dąbrowski et al., 2018, in this issue), to the changing power dynamics and political shifts that may lead to either withdrawal from the transfer process (the case of EU–Brazil transfer in Dąbrowski et al.) or a shift in focus (e.g., the reorientation towards a different 'source of lessons' described by Ertugal, 2018, in this issue). Related to this is the role of the motivation of both sides of the transfer process: when there is perception of gains on both sides, recipient and sender, this tends to facilitate engagement. Such gains can relate to concrete incentives, such as the presence of funding opportunities for the initiatives launched by the transfer process (Dąbrowski et al., 2018, in this issue; Ertugal, 2018, in this issue; Thomas et al., 2018, in this issue) or be less tangible or seemingly outside the scope of the transfer itself (Dąbrowski et al., 2018, in this issue). This, in turn, points to the importance of the embeddedness of transfer activities in a wider strategic partnership, reaching out to other policy areas and shaping long-term goals, and of the presence of an 'eco-system' for transfer, inclusive not only of platforms and normative conditions but also of networks of actors who can drive the process, 'territorialize' it (Miao, 2018, in this issue) and create the conditions for the implementation of the ideas and practices being imported.

Moreover, the contributions highlight the dependence of policy transfer on policy entrepreneurs, the engagement of whom may make or break the transfer. This dependence underscores the vulnerability of the process because of reliance on some key actors, the withdrawal or removal of whom can undermine the continuity of the process and its iterative nature. Hence, defining long-term objectives and planning for the process of transfer as well as political buy-in seem crucial for the success of the process.

All the papers in this issue also highlight the role of context change and stress how the policy-transfer process itself changes as the context evolves, goals shift, actors join or leave the process, and the political situation changes. Thomas et al. (2018, in this issue), for instance, show how the financial and economic crisis influenced the process of transit-oriented development policy transfer, while Ertugal (2018, in this issue) describes the impact of the shift towards more centralization in Turkey on the transfer of EU/OECD regional policy approaches, and Dąbrowski et al. (2018, in this issue) show how China's priorities in its policy dialogue with the EU changed over time and how change of political leadership in Brazil undermined such a dialogue.

Success and failure of transfer

Last but not least, the four studies add to the discussion of what represents success and what represents failure in policy transfer (Marsh & Sharman, 2009). They demonstrate the crucial importance of negative lessons in the process of learning from abroad (Dunlop, 2009; Evans, 2006), i.e., of learning about what not to do (Miao, 2018, in this issue; Thomas et al., 2018, in this issue). The transfer process is 'creative'; it is not about copying and adopting the senders' solutions, but requires actual learning and adaptation to the given context. This includes avoiding the mistakes of others, as well as improving the original practices where possible (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Stead 2012, cited in Thomas et al., 2018, in this issue). Learning, even without a lack of tangible outcomes, can be an aspect of success as such. For example, in the EU–China case discussed by

Dąbrowski et al. (2018, in this issue), despite the lack of tangible outcomes the process continues as a learning platform.

LESSONS FOR POLICY

One critique of the literature on policy transfer has been that 'policy transfer analysts fail to make their research relevant to the world of practice' (Evans, 2006, 2009, p. 238). In response to this, the studies in this issue highlight a number of lessons for policy-makers. A first is that the success or failure of policy transfer can depend on a number of factors and these need to be factored in from the start. A policy-transfer strategy can be helpful in this respect. Such a strategy should outline the intended goals of the policy-transfer initiative, how they would be pursued (concrete activities), the actors that should be involved at different stages, and the target recipients and policy areas or practices. Crucially, the policy-transfer strategy should include a risk-management strategy, outlining how current challenges and potential future pitfalls would be dealt with. Further, while policy transfer, when it occurs, can relate to specific, narrow issues of policy implementation (as shown in the Brazil–EU example discussed by Dąbrowski et al., 2018, in this issue), policy-transfer strategies should be systemic rather than ad hoc, i.e., linked to a vision about the long-term goals and direction of travel for the given policy. And because goals can shift over time, a feedback loop should be built into the process to ensure that as goals evolve policy-transfer efforts continue to be relevant, granting resilience to the process. Through such a strategy, the process of drawing lessons from abroad can become much more than the response to a 'dissatisfaction' at a given point in time (Rose, 1991): it can transform into a tool for systematic, ongoing reflection about 'what works' and what can be learnt from others to keep a policy relevant and effective.

Second, a crucial element in policy transfer is learning (Rose, 1991). The papers in this issue show that policy-transfer initiatives can lead to (soft) learning, while not resulting in concrete outcomes in terms of transferred policy principles or practices. As the papers argue, soft learning without transfer is in itself a valuable outcome. However, while there can be learning without transfer, there can hardly be transfer in the absence of learning. As is widely acknowledged, policies and practices cannot be taken 'off-the-shelf' and adopted without adaptation (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2012; McCann & Ward, 2012). Thus, in designing policy-transfer strategies, policy-makers need to tailor the planned activities to the domestic contexts, matching them to underlying needs on both sides of the policy-transfer process. This requires involving stakeholders in the design of policy-transfer strategies to ensure that needs are accurately identified. A corollary to this, and a novel insight contributed by the papers in this issue, is that policy-transfer initiatives, even when they do not result in actual transfer of policy principles or practices, can be powerful capacity-building tools.

Third, the papers highlight that a key challenge in implementing policy-transfer initiatives can be the difficulty in overcoming cultural differences and moving from ideas to implementation. Addressing both of these challenges may require specialist skills. As illustrated in the examples discussed by Thomas et al. (2018, in this issue), the success of policy-transfer initiatives may be enhanced by the mobilization of professionals from outside government who can provide the specialist skills needed to overcome barriers and act as 'transfer brokers' supporting policy-makers in their journey from abstract (ideas) to applied learning (implementation). Experts external to the administration can bring in techniques that are novel to the specific policy or context (e.g., gaming simulations and design charrettes, as discussed by Thomas et al., 2018, in this issue) and facilitate communication among actors whose mindsets are different culturally, disciplinarily and institutionally.

Fourth, 'lesson-drawing is part of a contested political process' (Rose, 1991, p. 6). This means that the success of policy-transfer initiatives requires politicians to think that the proposed policy or practice is desirable. The contributions by Dąbrowski et al. (2018, in this issue) and Ertugal (2018, in this issue) confirm that political buy-in is essential to guarantee not only the success of policy-transfer initiatives but also their resilience. The Brazil–EU example, in particular, shows that even when a policy-transfer initiative has been successful in generating momentum amongst a variety of actors, administrators alone lack the necessary traction to sustain activities once political support shifts. While the change of political preferences cannot be prevented, it can be steered: the resilience of policy-transfer initiatives can be supported by enhancing the understanding of the utility of the initiatives for all the actors involved and creating communities of supportive stakeholders.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Beyond these policy lessons, the papers in this issue here also open up a range of exciting avenues for further research. The first concerns the need to shed more light on the elements of institutional capacity that create fertile ground for policy transfer and examining whether there is a specific set of skills and capabilities that are needed for policy transfer to succeed. Thomas et al. (2018, in this issue) take the first step towards answering this question; however, further exploration across different contexts and kinds of territorial policies is needed. This paper also points to the potential of applying methods from the realm of spatial planning, such as gaming simulations or design charrettes, to explore the critical issues in policy transfer to and from specific territorial contexts. Finally, future research could investigate whether and how the 'climate' for international policy transfer might be worsening in the context of the growing criticism of globalization and nationalistic backsliding affecting several Western democracies. As noted, a supportive 'eco-system' can be crucial for yielding results from policy-transfer initiatives. Are these

political trends discouraging the search for policy solutions from abroad altogether or are they merely entailing a reorientation towards other 'sources' of inspiration and learning? Is this retrenchment likely to weaken the role of international 'lessons-providers', such as the OECD or the EU, or shift the global trajectories of policy transfer?

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