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CROSS-NATIONAL POLICY TRANSFER AND LEARNING IN REGIONAL AND URBAN POLICY

Ida Musiałkowska, Poznań University of Economics, Poland; Marcin Dąbrowski, TU Delft, the Netherlands and Laura Polverari, University of Strathclyde, UK



Introduction

In a globalising world, many countries and regions face similar challenges. As a result, governments and policy-makers increasingly look for policy solutions, ideas and ‘good practice’ examples from other countries, seeking to adapt them to their domestic contexts and to draw from the successes (and avoid the mistakes) realised elsewhere. At the same time, certain states or supranational and international organisations are keen to export their policy approaches and tools to other countries for pragmatic or normative reasons, as is the case with the European Union, striving to export some of its policies and project its values beyond its borders. Such processes of transnational learning, import/export of models and exchange of knowledge on policy approaches are embedded in international relations, diplomacy or para-diplomacy, and relate to an expanding range of policy areas, which involve a plethora of governmental and non-state actors, at multiple territorial levels.

While such policy exchanges and transfers appear to be increasingly commonplace, there are hardly any studies looking at policy transfer in the field of regional and urban policy, even though such transfer does take place, as illustrated by the EU’s intensifying dialogue on this policy with China and Brazil or the processes of adoption of shared regional policy practices across the EU Member States through processes of Europeanisation.

This collection of papers sheds some

light on this under-researched topic from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. It elucidates the motivations for engaging in these types of activities, the mechanisms of influence, as well as the characteristics of transnational learning in the regional and urban policy fields, which make it more successful in some contexts than in others.

The papers discuss different cases of policy transfer: transfer of policy solutions between the EU and its neighbouring states (Lepesant) and between the EU and non-neighbouring strategic partners (i.e. Brazil and China, Musiałkowska et al.); intra-EU transfer of territorial governance solutions (Cotella & Rivolin) and planning approaches (Pojani & Stead); and transnational policy learning across third countries (Tian Miao).

They describe a variety of mechanisms of transfer, which appear to vary depending on the degree of interdependency between the states involved, and the degree of cogency or conditionality attached to the elements that are being transferred (Cotella and Rivolin, Lepesant, Ferry, Musiałkowska et al, Tian Miao). Transfer is much more evident where there are binding legal instruments that promote the adoption of certain policy solutions, as in the spillover of EU Cohesion policy practices (Ferry).

However, the EU/non-EU policy transfer initiatives illustrated in the piece by Musiałkowska et al, show that “transfer through soft mechanisms can take place even in the absence of stringent conditionalities if there is: (i) an underlying need; (ii) strong political commitment; (iii) leadership to drive the process and enact the transition from abstract to applied learning”.

Soft mechanisms are common across all of the examples provided in this special issue. Institutional support and capacity especially play an important role in the learning process in all of the cases illustrated in this collection.

There are also some commonalities across the cases observed in relation to the obstacles to successful transfer.

One of them is difficulties represented by cultural, social and linguistic differences (as in the EU-China initiatives illustrated in the piece by Musiałkowska et al). Other obstacles include, the incongruity of domestic legislations underlying regional policy or the volume of financial resources available to the policy (Ferry), the incompatibility of aspects of the institutional settings, that ‘rather than being subject to change through policy transfer ... can impede the process’ (Ferry), as well as the failure, in some cases, to involve the political elites in the attempted transfer processes (Pojani and Stead).

Policy transfer in relation to the substance, governance and delivery of regional and urban development policy by definition cannot entail one-size-fits-all’ solutions (Cotella and Janin Rivolin); as such all authors stress that better targeted instruments for policy transfer, which reflect upon and address the context-specific needs and obstacles, would improve the performance of policy transfer initiatives like the ones illustrated in this collection. This special issue intends to be a first contribution in this direction.

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Dr. Ida Musiałkowska is an assistant professor at the European Studies Department of the Poznań University of Economics, Poland. Her research interests are: integration processes in the EU and world, regional policy and development, policy transfer and Latin America.

i.musialkowska@ue.poznan.pl

Dr. Marcin Dąbrowski is a research fellow at the Department of Urbanism, Delft University of Technology, the

Netherlands. His academic interests span across regional, urban and policy studies and include such topics as multi-level governance, EU and national, regional and urban development policies, decentralisation and regionalisation, climate change policies in cities and urban regions and cross-national policy transfer.

M.M.Dabrowski@tudelft.nl

Dr. Laura Polverari is a Senior Research Fellow within the European

Policies Research Centre at Strathclyde University, UK. Her research expertise is on the design, implementation and evaluation of Cohesion policy across the EU, and on national regional policy in EU Member States. Her other interests include constitutional territorial reform in Italy and the UK and regional policy in Brazil.

Laura.polverari@strath.ac.uk

EU-CHINA AND EU-BRAZIL POLICY TRANSFER AND LEARNING IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Ida Musiałkowska, Poznań University of Economics, Poland, Marcin Dąbrowski TU Delft, the Netherlands, Laura Polverari University of Strathclyde, UK



Introduction

Governments confronted with major challenges, requiring new policies or addressing the failures of pre-existing ones, often seek new ideas abroad (Rose, 1993; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). They engage in a dialogue with other governments to learn from their experiences and bring new solutions into their domestic contexts. Some governments

and supranational bodies, such as the EU, are also keen to export their policies and norms, in order to deepen strategic relationships with third parties.

The literature on international policy transfer is vast and includes many studies focusing on transfer between the EU and third countries in various policy fields. Apart from the previous work of the Authors, hardly any studies to date have focused on regional policy, even though since 2007 the EU has been engaging in ‘policy dialogues’ in this field with a growing number of developing countries. Our study – which focuses on the EU-Brazil and EU-China regional policy dialogues and is based on interviews with key informants, participant observation and documental analysis – is a first attempt at exploring these experiences and examining their motives, mechanisms and outcomes.

Theoretical underpinnings

Studies on EU external governance have

looked into the mechanisms and conditions of transfer of EU rules beyond the EU Member States (Lavenex, 2011; Börzel and Risse, 2011), focusing on those countries upon which Europe is considered to exert its strongest influence, through conditionality or proximity: candidates for accession or neighbouring countries. These studies reveal that the EU’s ability to export its norms is inversely proportional to the distance from its borders and enhanced by conditionality. There is also a growing literature on international diffusion of EU institutional approaches and policy practices in non-neighbour third countries and international organisations such as ASEAN, but it has not yet focused on EU regional policy. Investigating policy transfer in the regional policy field will bridge a research gap and offer timely insights into the already established formal cooperation on regional policy between the European Commission and several third countries.

There are theoretical challenges, however. First, existing studies on policy transfer between the EU and third countries have tended to focus on policy areas which have clear implications for these countries, have an explicit external dimension or involve a strategy of diffusion through engagement in international organisations (e.g. security, energy, trade and agriculture). One may ask, however, if the traditional approaches to the study of policy transfer are suitable to appreciate these processes in an inward-oriented policy such as regional policy.

Second, most of the literature on policy transfer focuses on cases “driven by the demand for institutional solutions rather



President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso speaking at 2013 EU-China Urbanisation Partnership Forum (photo by Vincent Nadin)

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While this phenomenon appears increasingly commonplace, there are few studies looking at the policy transfer in the field of regional and urban policy, even though such transfer does take place, as illustrated by the EU's intensifying dialogue on this policy with the major developing countries or the processes of adoption of shared regional policy practices across the EU Member States through processes of Europeanisation. Our Regional Survey, edited by our Guest Editors, Marcin Dąbrowski, Ida Musiałkowska and Laura Polverari, is a collection of papers that sheds light on this under-researched topic from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. It elucidates the motivations for engaging in these types of activities, the mechanisms of influence, as well as the characteristics of transnational learning in the regional and urban policy fields, which make it more successful in some contexts than in others.

The question of whether countries are better "going it alone" or being more integrated is also the subject of our Comment and Debate which contains the views of three academics, Mike Danson, Andy Pike and Igor Calzada, on the Scottish Independence question and recently held Referendum.

In our In Depth, Martin Arias examines the complex relation between private firms and the State in promoting mining clusters in Chile.



Regional Studies Association, PO Box 2058, Seaford, East Sussex BN25 4QU, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1323 899 698, Fax: +44 (0)1323 899 798
info@regionalstudies.org, www.regionalstudies.org

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