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

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### 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)



Officials from the European Commission and the Brazilian, Peruvian and Chilean ministries in charge of regional development discussing policy transfer and learning at a workshop on EU-Latin America cooperation on territorial cohesion policies and instruments in Brussels, 7 October 2014 © Marcin Dąbrowski.

than active EU promotion of its models” (Börzel and Risse, 2011: 196). The regional policy dialogues between the EU and third countries, on the contrary, have been largely conceived and pursued by the European Commission and Parliament. Does this different underlying rationale – a desire to export a model rather than a learning need – have an impact on the mechanisms and concrete outcomes of policy transfer?

Lastly, regional development policy is in principle not conducive to policy transfer. It is place-based and relies on context-dependent solutions. Regional development paths depend on the presence of assets that are place-specific (Storper and Scott, 1995; Farole et al., 2011), thus policies successful in stimulating development in a particular place would not necessarily produce the expected results in another. So, can policy transfer occur also in the framework of a policy that is place-based and context-specific and, if so, are the mechanisms and tools the same as for other policy areas?

We attempt to shed some light on these issues by analysing the experiences of the EU–Brazil and EU–China regional policy dialogues applying the concept of policy transfer, as defined by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 5): “the process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system”. This choice allows us to focus on the process of transfer itself, rather than on its outcomes (policy diffusion). We investigate the following research questions. What was the rationale behind the regional policy dialogues? What were the activities? Did learning take place and how? Is there evidence of policy transfer? What lessons can be drawn on the applicability of the policy transfer concept to place-based policies, and on the factors that can facilitate (or hinder) it?

### EU–China

The EU–China collaboration in regional policy started with a Memorandum of Understanding (2006) aimed at facilitating knowledge exchange on regional and urban development as well as innovation and cluster policies. The co-operation involved research activities, a series of visits and training sessions for Chinese officials from national and sub-national administrations, and annual High-Level Seminars covering a score of issues from the classification of regions for policy interventions, to governance and solutions for sustainable urban development. The cooperation also involved organising special events such as sessions at annual Open Days in Brussels or the EU–China Urbanisation Forum in Beijing.

From the Chinese perspective, the rationale for engaging in the dialogues was to seek new solutions for the reduction of extremely deep regional disparities, in the context of a major policy reform and preparation of the 12th Five-Year Plan. The latter ushered a shift towards a more ‘harmonious’ model of development and development of the lagging West of the country. There was interest in the EU cohesion policy’s range of instruments for cities and urban development (which is a fundamental issue for China, considering its hyper-fast and massive urbanisation) and in what looked like an attractive model of a highly visible redistributive policy yet fuelled by a relatively modest budget. The dialogue was also seen as an opportunity to promote trade links, investment opportunities and people-to-people interactions, involving universities, sub-national authorities and businesses.

Despite the official discourse on mutual learning, the activities were geared towards offering the Chinese partners opportunities to learn from the EU experience, i.e. a one-way transfer. Moreover, the dialogue was essentially EU-driven, with Chinese authorities reportedly manifesting a more passive and reactive engagement. Perhaps as a consequence, it is difficult to pin down

concrete outcomes of the eight years of cooperation, except for the establishment of ‘block areas’ in China, similar to the EU cohesion policy’s less developed regions. Beyond this, the impact has been mostly intangible, one of inspiration. There is also no evidence of transfer of practices from China to the EU, despite the interest of EU officials in the rapidly changing patterns of regional and urban development in China. This notwithstanding, the exchanges are set to intensify from 2015, particularly in the field of urban development, with China committing its own financial resources to what has thus far been essentially an EU-funded initiative.

### EU–Brazil

The cooperation between the EU and the Brazilian federal State in regional policy also began with the signature of Memorandum of Understanding (in 2009), part of a wider EU–Brazil Joint Action Plan comprising cooperation in a number of policy fields through: annual high-level EU–Brazil summits; ministerial dialogues; annual business summits; and 31 ‘sectoral dialogues’, one of which was on regional policy. Cooperation in the regional policy field stemmed from the recognition of a common goal: overcoming territorial disparities is a constitutionally enshrined objective in both Brazil (art. 3 of the Constitution) and the EU (art. 158 TFEU). This paved the ground for a perceived opportunity to learn from each other and identify novel solutions.

Activities have comprised study visits by Brazilian delegations to the EU and vice-versa, conferences, training events, dedicated sessions at the annual Open Days in Brussels, EU participation in the Brazilian ‘National Exhibitions’, and comparative policy research (e.g. on monitoring and evaluation). Emphasis has been primarily on institution and capacity building, and on the transfer of ‘good practices’. Financially, these initiatives have been supported primarily by a dedicated ‘support project’ signed by the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs of Brazil and the European Commission, and executed by the Brazilian Federal Ministry of Planning. Thanks to this 'support project', Brazilian actors have shaped the content of the exchanges and pursued projects that matched their real needs. This has rendered the cooperation more akin to a genuine mutual exchange. Notwithstanding this, policy transfer has been mostly one way: EU to Brazil. It has been more tangible than in China however.

The European experience has been instrumental for a reframing of Brazilian regional policy aimed at improving the strategic, financial and operational synergy between pre-existing instruments through the creation of a single federal strategy (new National Regional Development Plans, PNDR I and II). It included subsuming a variety of previously separate regional funds into a new 'National fund for regional development'; identification of set 'objectives' (one of which denominated 'Convergence'); implementation through Operational Programmes; and coordination of sectoral policies (Castro, 2012). European Cohesion policy was "one of the strongest sources of inspiration" (interview).<sup>1</sup> There have also been exchanges on certain fields (e.g. local clusters, innovation, urban and metropolitan networks) and procedures (e.g. auditing, financial control, monitoring and evaluation), as well as transfer of expertise from European producers in selected sectors (e.g. gems and jewellery, honey and furniture). Examples of transfer include the piloting of a 'single audit approach' involving the Brazilian Court of Auditors and the Comptroller General, and the introduction of procedures, like payment conditional to expenditure certification, that were

novel to the Brazilian context. The policy dialogue also generated an important spin-off: the setting up of an academic network, Observa DR. Originated in one of the first Brazil-EU regional policy seminars, it has developed into an autonomous entity with funding from the Brazilian federal government (c. €3 million for three years). The greatest value of the cooperation, for both Brazil and the EU, has arguably been the creation of links and networks within and outside the administrations that could pave the way for more bilateral learning in future.

### Conclusions

Our research shows that applying policy transfer theory to the study of cross-national transfer and learning in the context of regional policy is both valid and useful. It allows one to appreciate the true potential as well as the limitations of this type of initiative.

In the two cases considered, policy transfer has related to both substantive policy issues (e.g. policy priorities or target areas) and operational issues (e.g. auditing practices) showing that, with the necessary adaptation, there is scope for transfer irrespective of the context-specific policy problem to be solved. The Brazil-EU case has shown that transfer within regional policy can occur not just in relation to the operational aspects of policy delivery (considered more readily transferrable), but also in relation to the underlying philosophy, ideas and principles of policy (considered scarcely transferrable), and 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.

The research suggests that the outcomes of transfer processes, and the degree to which foreign practices are adopted, depend on existing levels of institutional and administrative capacities, as well as on other contextual factors like the degree of political stability, the engagement of policy entrepreneurs, political and administrative commitment at apical and middle levels and awareness of international policy debates. Anecdotal evidence from our empirical research indicates that language and cultural affinity, and similarities in administrative traditions and institutional settings also play a role. A combination of these factors explains why, as we uncovered, the Brazil-EU cooperation is achieving more success than that between EU and China, which was more EU-driven and resulted in less clear outcomes. As the EU embarks on a wider-ranging programme of regional policy dialogues, undertaking further research on the dynamics of international policy transfer in this context will provide precious insights to improving this initiative.

### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For the moment, however, these are plans as the PNDR II is awaiting Parliamentary approval (possibly an uncertain Parliamentary approval, given that elections to appoint the new federal President will be held in October 2014).

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## THE VOICE OF THE MEMBERSHIP

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. 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 project some of its policy norms and 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, involving governmental and non-state actors at multiple territorial levels.

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.



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