

Learning from the world – adding a strategic dimension to lesson-drawing from successful sustainable transport policies

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Abstract

This paper investigates how planning practitioners can increase the effectiveness of lesson-drawing from exemplary case studies in sustainable urban transport development.

There are a number of cities worldwide that have successfully managed a transition in their transport systems towards providing attractive and efficient structures for public transport, walking, and cycling in liveable communities. Several studies have analysed these successful examples of sustainable transport development, and a related body of literature investigates their transferability to other cities.

Based on a review of the existing literature on lesson-drawing and policy transfer, this paper finds that current practice mainly focuses on the content of *what* has been implemented in exemplary case studies. We suggest that there are additional lessons that practitioners can learn from investigating *how* a successful program has been implemented, and *how* practitioners have contributed to this success by advocating their subjects in the political arena. These strategic lessons are especially valuable with regards to interventions that promote sustainability, as these are often discussed in a climate of polarised or adversarial ideas and interests in civil society.

The paper concludes with suggesting three areas for strategic lesson-drawing: suitable policy windows, the role of key individuals, and the quality of stakeholder debate.

1. Introduction

The urban transport policy context has changed considerably in the few past decades. While the development of urban motorway networks and increasing road capacities was widely agreed as a critical objective of transport policy until the 1970s, transport practitioners today need to consider a range of complex and highly interrelated ecological, social and economic issues. In order to contribute to sustainable development, the urban transport system is expected to

- facilitate the exchange of goods and services for firms and private households in order to sustain economic development and meet social responsibilities (Baumann & Zeibots 2010),
- become more efficient in the use of resources and the emission of greenhouse gases (est! 2000), and
- contribute to liveable communities in attractive urban settings (AASHTO 2010).

This broad conceptualization of the role of urban transport leads to multi-dimensional, or *wicked* problems (Rittel & Webber 1973) that are dispersed in space and time and have no single definitive solution. Wicked problem situations increase the number of actors and interests with a stake in the policy process, and enhance the spectrum of ideas and values involved. Such an environment makes it difficult for transport practitioners and politicians to

identify and find consensus on the most effective policies to meet the multiple objectives of sustainable urban transport development.

Rose observes that 'when routines stop providing 'solutions' is it necessary to search for lessons' (Rose 2001, p. 10). Accordingly, it has become a common approach for transport practitioners and politicians to seek orientation from cities that have better managed to deal with the existing challenges. These activities are often referred to as *policy learning*, *lesson-drawing* or *policy transfer*, and are supported by a number of guidelines.

In this paper we investigate to what extent existing knowledge on policy transfer is applicable to wicked problems of sustainable transport development, and what additional lessons could be drawn from exemplary case studies to enhance the effectiveness of the transfer.

We start with introducing the concept of policy learning and transfer in detail and investigate how guidelines have been applied in practice. We then analyse the particular challenges of sustainability policies and to what extent these create barriers in the political process, building on a theoretical framework of the policy process. Based on a review of how the literature has dealt with the political dimension of policy transfer we will highlight some gaps with regards to fruitfully promoting transferred lessons in the political arena. We conclude with proposing several areas for strategic lesson-drawing that could help planning practitioners to more effectively draw lessons from exemplary case studies.

2. Current knowledge on policy learning and transfer

Concept definitions

The theory of policy learning and transfer is based on the assumption that 'problems that are unique to one country are abnormal', and that 'the concerns for which ordinary people turn to government ... are common on many continents' (Rose 1991, p. 4). Accordingly, responses that have proven successful in one place can — to a certain extent — be generalised and transferred to other places.

Generalisability is defined 'as the extent to which data obtained from a particular population, under unique study conditions, at a particular point in time and space can be applied more widely to other populations, conditions, times and spaces' (CURACAO 2009, p. 174). Transferability is 'a subset of generalisability, which ... focuses on identifying contextual differences and dealing with their impacts' (CURACAO 2009, p. 174). The literature on policy learning and transfer is consequently concerned with the aspects that planning practitioners need to consider in drawing lessons from other cities, and in transferring these lessons to their own policy context (Dolowitz & Marsh 1996; Marsden et al. 2010; Rose 2001).

The terms *lesson-drawing*, *policy learning*, and *policy transfer* are often used interchangeably; yet some researchers make distinctions. Dolowitz & Marsh define lesson-drawing as *voluntary* activity of 'political actors or decision-makers in one country [who] draw lessons from one or more other countries, which they then apply to their own political system' (Dolowitz & Marsh 1996, p. 344), while policy transfer can have a *coercive* element. Marsden et al. describe this distinction as a continuum from voluntary learning that originates from a 'dissatisfaction with the status quo and an inability to find suitable historical policy lessons locally' (Marsden et al. 2010, p. 3), to means that constrain the choice of policy such as regulations or financial conditions by so called *donor* countries or institutions. In their study that investigates the application of existing guidelines on policy learning and transfer in 11 European and North American cities they find that voluntary motivations for searching for lessons dominate (Marsden et al. 2010, p. 22).

Sustainable transport policies can be both the subject of voluntary or coercive transfer. For example, planning practitioners can start looking at other cities for programs on how to reduce urban congestion and increase urban livability; or national regulations on emission reductions can force planners to develop appropriate solutions.

There is also criticism that the process of lesson-drawing is in fact not very distinct from routine planning processes, as ‘it is hard to think of any form of rational policymaking that does not, in some way, involve using knowledge about policies in another time or place to draw positive or negative lessons’, and that ‘even rational policy-makers’ preference for the status quo in their own jurisdiction could be seen as implicitly involving negative lessons about alternatives in other countries or in other times’ (James & Lodge 2003, p. 182).

What is transferred, and by whom?

As result of a major review of the literature, Dolowitz & Marsh identify seven possible objects of transfer: ‘policy goals, structure and content; policy instruments or administrative techniques; institutions; ideology; ideas, attitudes and concepts; and negative lessons’ (Dolowitz & Marsh 1996, p. 350), as well as six main categories of actors involved: ‘elected officials, political parties, bureaucrats/civil servants, pressure groups, policy entrepreneurs/experts; and supra-national institutions’ (Dolowitz & Marsh 1996, p. 345).

Our analysis is not limited to specific objects of learning, but focuses on the perspective of planning practitioners in promoting sustainable transport policy lessons. Marsden et al. have identified these actors as the ‘leading players in transferring experience’ (Marsden et al. 2010, p. 22).

Guidelines for policy learning and transfer

Rose has summarised the knowledge on lesson-drawing in a ten stage process: ‘diagnosing your problem; deciding where to look for a lesson; investigating how a programme works there; abstracting a cause-and-effect model for export; designing a lesson; deciding whether to import; dealing with resource requirements and constraints; handling the problem of context; bounding speculation through prospective evaluation and using foreign countries as positive or negative symbols’ (Rose 2001).

Rose’s guidelines are based on the assumption that best practice policies are not inherently successful, but that they have evolved as adequate response to specific circumstances in a certain area. He emphasizes the investigation of the context of a particular program in order to develop an understanding for the factors that made effective. CURACAO for example describes a wide range of factors that affect the transferability of road-pricing experience from one city to another: ‘city size, density and transport supply and demand; cultural impacts on user response and acceptability; the detailed design of the scheme, any complementary policies and the ways in which revenues are used; and, fundamentally, the objectives of a given scheme’ (CURACAO 2009, p. 173).

Despite the availability of guidelines, some researchers suggest that the study of policy learning and transfer in transport research is not mature (Marsden et al. 2010). CURACAO reviews a number of European projects that have applied findings from the transferability literature and concludes that the area of transferability ‘is still in its infancy and there is currently no single accepted methodology’ (CURACAO 2009, p. 178). Geerlings & Stead note as a conclusion of a broad review of projects on transport policy integration that ‘although the issue of policy transferability is mentioned in a number of the research projects ... few of them consider the issue in great detail’ (Geerlings & Stead 2003, p. 193).

Applicability to sustainability problems

From the literature it appears that many guidelines see policy transfer primarily as a technical exercise based on rational facts and arguments. However, wicked problems of sustainable transport development often face difficulties that go beyond the implementation barriers mentioned in the transfer literature, for example, differences in institutional composition (Stead, de Jong & Reinholde 2008) or constraints in legislation, regulations or resources (Marsden et al. 2010).

The following sections analyse the particular challenges of sustainable transport policies in detail. In so doing we investigate to what extent these can create additional implementation barriers and so make the transfer of policy lessons less efficient and effective.

3. Ideological challenges for sustainable transport policies

There is a large spectrum of ideas on how the ecological, social and economic sustainability of urban transport systems can be increased, depending on the definition of problems and their sources, desirable outcomes, and the most suitable means to achieve them. Given that the transport function affects almost every sector of the urban system, and that causes and effects are highly interrelated, interventions that improve one aspect of the problem often cause negative impacts elsewhere (Baumann & Zeibots 2010). This complexity makes it difficult to predict the potential impacts of political decisions, so that there is often some degree of risk or trade off involved.

These characteristics make transport policy-making a highly political process: as it is difficult for policy makers to find solutions that make the transport-related interests of every group in civil society better off, organised groups attempt to increase their political influence so as to not have their interests negatively affected.

Bratzel defines the main tendencies of values and interests in the transport sector as environment- and growth-oriented (Bratzel 1999, p. 6). Environment-oriented actors prioritise values such as urban liveability, energy efficiency and spatial economies over economic growth and individual motorised mobility, while growth-oriented actors have a reversed list of priorities. Bratzel emphasises that this distinction is not a dichotomy but rather reflects priorities in the policies and strategies these actors prefer. He argues that the relative strength of these value coalitions determines the direction of policy development.

These value priorities can also be associated with the type of infrastructure relevant actors prioritize for development and investment: motorized individual transport (MIT) or public and active transport (PAT).

There are intensive debates in expert communities on how to breach the gap between the objectives of economic growth and environmental conservation and social inclusion, for example with regards to the quantification of the economic benefits to society of agglomeration economies that come with an effective, sustainable public transport system.

However in civil society conflicts of interests between MIT- and PAT-oriented groups are often more adversarial and create barriers in the political process. Schaller for example describes the attempted implementation of road pricing in New York City, and how this has been blocked by the strategic activities of one small auto-user group (Schaller 2010).

Given the influence of these ideological controversies on the policy process, the following section investigates to what extent sustainability barriers in political decision-making can limit the effectiveness of lesson-drawing activities. Our analysis builds on a theoretical framework of the policy process that will form the basis for identifying additional lesson-drawing areas.

4. Sustainability barriers in the political process

Some models of the process of public policy-making assume a rational sequence of the stages of problem identification, alternative specification, appraisal, and decision-making. We consider this conceptualisation as somewhat remote from policy-making reality and for that reason not ideally suited to investigate the role of values and interests in the transport policy process. Our analysis therefore employs John W. Kingdon's empirically grounded model of public policy-making that sees the policy process as composed of three streams — problems, policies, and politics — that run in parallel and independently from each other (Kingdon 2002) (see Figure 1). According to Kingdon,

Participants do not first identify problems and then seek solutions for them; indeed, advocacy of solutions often precedes the highlighting of problems to which they become attached. Agendas are not first set and then alternatives generated; instead, alternatives must be advocated for a long period before a short-run opportunity presents itself on an agenda. (Kingdon 2002, pp. 205-206)

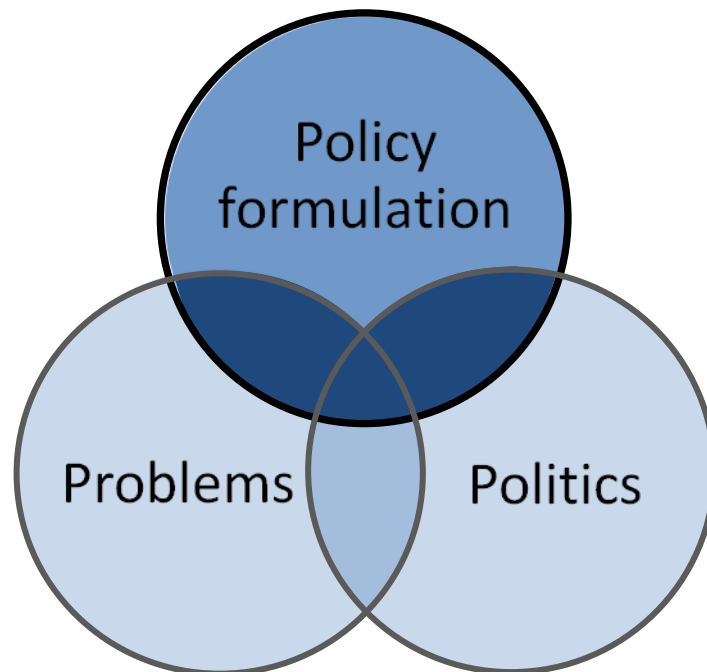


Figure 1: Three parallel streams of policy-making and opening policy windows (adapted from Kingdon 2002)

Lesson-drawing and alternative generation take place in the policy stream. Agenda setting and decision-making are part of the political stream as a response to problems that are considered politically relevant. Policy proposals can only become implemented when the three streams are coupled, that is, when a proposal can be linked to a problem that is pressing on the agenda, and at the same time meet a 'ripe political climate' (Kingdon 2002, p. 201). Opportunities for partial couplings — as a first step towards complete linkage — arise when 'policy windows' open either in the problem stream or in the political stream (Kingdon 2002, p. 165). For example, new knowledge or swings in national mood shift the attention of politicians to different problem areas, or changes in administration or legislation offer opportunities for planners to push attention to their proposals. Policy windows can be predictable such as in the case of administrative change, or open unexpectedly.

Kingdon compares lesson-drawing and alternative generation in the policy stream to a process of natural selection where only ideas that meet certain criteria are presented for political consideration (Kingdon 2002, pp. 131-139). However these criteria do not necessarily correspond with selection criteria in the political stream. A successful coupling of the streams requires proposals to also correspond with a problem that is high on the political agenda. This is where 'politics takes over from policy analysis' (Rose 2001, p. 18).

The problem-orientation of the political stream explains why the assessment criteria of politicians as decision-makers differ largely from those of planning practitioners who are mainly concerned with the inherent qualities of a proposal. Politicians need to be convinced that the policies they support provide effective solutions to the problems of citizens in their electorate. As public opinion is subject to influence by the communications of organised interest groups, for example through the media, and as some of these interest groups also have influence on economy and employment, politicians are likely to take these interests into account as well.

Political decision-making criteria could accordingly be defined as two-dimensional: the politicians' own values and ideas with regards to the problem situation, desirable outcomes and the means to achieve them; and the politicians' assumptions on stakeholders' reactions to policy candidates. Political barriers arise when these values and interests among politicians or stakeholders are adversarial, as it is often the case with sustainability policies.

Based on this analysis, it appears that advocacy on the grounds of the inherent benefits of a program might be insufficient to gain political support. It rather seems that in order for practitioners to effectively advocate their transferred policy lessons benefits need to be promoted in terms of how they satisfy the various interests involved, and how they avoid opposition or public controversies.

5. The neglected political dimension of policy transfer

We suggest that current knowledge does not pay much attention to the political dimension of policy transfer, and that research to date 'has focused much more on *what* to implement than on *how* to implement it' (Geerlings & Stead 2003, p. 194, emphases added). Given the often polarised or adversarial ideas and interests on transport policies in civil society, we suggest that additional policy lessons on *how* successful policies have been implemented in exemplary case studies, and *how* planning practitioners have contributed to this success by advocating their subjects in the political arena would be particularly valuable with regards to programs that promote sustainability.

Our literature review found that lesson-drawing guidelines for planning practitioners mainly ask about *what* has been implemented in exemplary case studies, and to what extent successful policies can be transferred to other contexts. However, a practitioner who has studied a successful program in another city and addressed all possible concerns of feasibility and transferability with regards to his own policy context is rarely in the position to make an authoritative decision on implementation. Rather, he needs to find ways on how to bring his proposal to the positive attention of decision-makers.

The lesson-drawing literature provides only limited indications on *how* planners can strategically advocate their transferred knowledge. Nonetheless political support is often mentioned as 'critical success factor or barrier in relation to transferability' (NICHES+ 2008, p. 192). NICHES+ highlights that 'securing a committed champion to argue the political case for an intervention is vital' (NICHES+ 2008, p. 192). Pucher investigated the policy process in Freiburg, Munster and Munich and found that 'in each city, advocates of 'taming' the car carefully garnered the necessary political support for restricting car use and expanding alternative transport modes. ... With political support in hand, it was possible to implement a truly coordinated, mutually reinforcing set of policies and programs' (Pucher 1998, p. 308).

It seems that there is a general lack of attention in the planning literature towards the political aspects of the process. Geerlings & Stead observe that 'there is still only a limited understanding of what has made some places more successful than others in implementing effective strategies, and very little work on ways of transferring this experience of best practice' (Geerlings & Stead 2003, p. 194). Kane & Del Mistro have summarised observations of various researchers on the problematic, political nature of transport planning:

Meyer and Miller (1984) have argued that transport planning is insufficiently orientated to decision-making, and that transport planning is as much a political exercise as it is a technical one. Szyliowicz and Goetz (1995, 1997) ask why large infrastructure projects have repeatedly failed, and conclude that the political dimension is repeatedly ignored or underestimated. Khisty (1992) sees that 'ultimately all plans are really political statements; indeed all attempts to implement them are political acts'. Most recently Chisholm noted a recurring theme in his own report that 'coping

with the nation's transport needs is as much a matter of politics as it is of technical expertise' (Chisholm 2000). (Kane & Del Mistro 2003, p. 119)

The evidence suggests that transferred policy lessons remain mere ideas in the bureaucratic sphere as long as there is no political willingness or consensus to promote them. Barriers to more sustainable transport development might therefore be due to of a lack of strategic knowledge or skills in finding political support for a program rather than a lack of suitable policy lessons.

6. A suggestion of areas for strategic lesson-drawing

Our analysis has pointed to several areas that seem relevant for drawing strategic lessons from exemplary case studies, in order for practitioners to more effectively secure political support for the implementation of their transferred policy lessons: suitable policy windows for coupling the streams, the role of key individuals as policy entrepreneurs, and processes to mitigate ideological barriers in the political process.

Identifying suitable policy windows

Kingdon's notion of policy windows implies that opportunities for coupling policy proposals to the political and problem stream largely depend on dynamics and events that take place outside the policy process, and that are beyond the control of planning practitioners, for example, changes in national mood or exceptional incidents that can suddenly change the public perception of problems. Bratzel identifies social crises and impressive political mandates as important external factors for structural policy change in his study of 'relatively successful' European cities. He describes policy windows 'as a political opportunity for change, a necessary but not sufficient condition' (Bratzel 1999, p. 177).

Given the relevance of suitable policy windows for significant policy change, we suggest that valuable insights could be gained by investigating the coupling process in exemplary case studies. Although the opening of windows cannot be influenced in a direct way, relevant insights could help advocates of a policy proposal to better read the signs and time their activities. Kingdon quotes one of his informants on the role of policy windows: 'As I see it, people who are trying to advocate change are like surfers waiting for the big wave. You get out there, you have to be ready to go, you have to be ready to paddle. If you're not ready to paddle when the big wave comes along, you're not going to ride it in' (Kingdon 2002, p. 165).

The role of key individuals as policy entrepreneurs

According to Kingdon coupling activities are often managed by key individuals, or policy entrepreneurs 'who are willing to invest their resources — time, energy, reputation, money — to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive, or solidary benefits' (2002, p. 179). Policy entrepreneurs lie in wait for policy windows to open in order to push their proposals. They can be found in all areas of the policy process. Kingdon picks up the surfer image to explain the qualities of a successful policy entrepreneur: 'Entrepreneurs are ready to paddle, and in their readiness combined with their sense for riding the wave and using the forces beyond their control contributes to success' (Kingdon 2002, p. 181).

Policy entrepreneurs are also engaged in activities of 'softening up' relevant audiences (Kingdon 2002, p. 127), that is, pushing their ideas in many forums in order to get the public, interest groups, experts and politicians in a policy community receptive to new ideas.

We suggest that an investigation of relevant key individuals and their contribution to success in exemplary case studies might provide valuable lessons for practitioners on how to attach their transferred policy lessons to a policy entrepreneur who is willing and able to advocate their subject.

The quality of stakeholder debate

Our final suggestion for strategic lesson-drawing is an investigation of the quality of stakeholder debate in exemplary case studies.

The literature shows several pathways towards policy change: Bratzel for example describes a change of the political actor regime as a basis for structural policy change (Bratzel 1999), while others describe more consensus-oriented and incremental ways to overcome barriers in the political process. Hajer & Kesselring and Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith for example describe processes that can promote trust, learning and understanding between members of adversarial advocacy or value coalitions (Hajer & Kesselring 1999; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993).

Consensus-oriented processes usually consist of an organized deliberative forum that brings planning practitioners and politicians together with citizens, interest groups, or both, in order to find a consensus based on mutual understanding of all aspects of the debate (Baumann & White 2010). They do not have the potential for sudden policy change that a radical shift in political power allows. However, it is based on the *force of the better argument* (Habermas 1984) and so offers equal opportunities for all stakeholders to have their arguments heard. This change in the quality of stakeholder debate can reduce conflict and opposition in implementation of policy proposals and reduce political barriers, and so lead to significant change on an incremental basis.

Changing a political actor regime depends on many circumstances and can hardly be planned. Consensus-oriented processes might therefore present a valuable alternative pathway towards overcoming political barriers to more sustainable transport development. An investigation of the quality of stakeholder debate in exemplary case studies could provide helpful insights on how to initiate such a process.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we assume that significant policy change rarely emerges from within the isolated routines of the planning process, and that political decision-making is rarely based on the inherent qualities of a transferred policy lesson. We rather see policy change linked to changes in framework conditions such as new problems or swings in national mood, to relevant activities of key individuals that take advantage of these dynamics to advocate their subjects, and to the dynamics of relevant stakeholders and the quality of debate.

We consider these aspects especially relevant for policies that promote sustainability, as these are often linked to adversarial values and interests in civil society and policy communities that create barriers in the policy process.

While the literature on lesson-drawing provides guidelines that are fundamental for the quality of the policy transfer, it provides little advice on how planning practitioners can effectively bring their lessons to the positive attention of decision-makers. We therefore argue that guidelines on policy learning and transfer should also point to the strategic lessons practitioners can draw from exemplary case studies. Such insights might also be valuable for sustainability advocates outside of government such as citizen associations and NGOs.

Regarding the generalisability of strategic lessons, we suggest their applicability is not limited to specific policies. Each case of successful policy change towards more sustainable transport development can provide general strategic insights on how sustainability-oriented policies can be effectively implemented in an adversarial or polarised policy environment.

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