



## **Learning from Abroad: A Framework**

A Supplemental Report for the Local Government Research Collaborative

Hal Wolman and Bill Barnes, George Washington Institute of Public Policy  
The George Washington University  
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411 N. Central Ave., Suite 400, Phoenix, AZ 85004  
p: 888.496.0944 | f: 813.704.4393 | [transformgov.org](http://transformgov.org)

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**About the Local Government Research Collaborative:**

In early 2013, 21 local governments and three universities joined together with the Alliance for Innovation, the International City/County Management Association, and the Center for Urban Innovation at Arizona State University to establish the Local Government Research Collaborative (LGRC). The LGRC is developing and funding an actionable research agenda that addresses significant issues confronting local governments. For more information on the LGRC email Toni Shope, Strategic Initiatives Director with the Alliance for Innovation at [tshope@transformgov.org](mailto:tshope@transformgov.org)

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**About the Authors**

**Harold (Hal) Wolman** is a research professor at the George Washington Institute of Public Policy (GWIPP) and an emeritus professor of Political Science at the George Washington University. His published work includes studies on policy transfer and comparative public policy; urban and regional policy, politics, and institutions; urban and regional economic development; local fiscal problems; and national urban policies and politics. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Michigan, a master's in Urban Planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a B.A. from Oberlin College. Contact: [hwolman@gwu.edu](mailto:hwolman@gwu.edu)

**Bill Barnes** is a Visiting Scholar at the George Washington University Institute of Public Policy. He retired after a career in policy analysis, research, and senior management at the National League of Cities in Washington DC. He is a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration. His published work includes studies of local governance and citizen participation, national urban policy, and regional economies. He earned a Ph.D. in history and metropolitan studies from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University and a B.A. from Oberlin College. Contact: [bill3barnes@gmail.com](mailto:bill3barnes@gmail.com)

## **Learning from Abroad: A Framework**

A Supplemental Report for the Local Government Research Collaborative<sup>1</sup>

How can US local governments learn in order to better address their jurisdiction's problems and their residents' needs? One of the most effective methods is to look at the experience of local governments elsewhere that face problems similar to their own. This is an effective approach because it in effect constitutes a "policy experiment" in which an interested local government can actually observe whether a policy or practice in place elsewhere works.

While learning from elsewhere occurs all the time, it largely ignores the experience of local governments outside of the United States. This is a mistake and a missed opportunity. Many local governments in other countries act to address problems, from broad to narrow, that are quite similar to those faced by US local governments. These practices constitute a very large pool of "policy experiments" from which learning could occur.

There is a broad range of features in local governments abroad from which learning can occur. These include, among others: problem conceptualization, policies, programs, practices, institutions, structures, and even political strategies and pitfalls (for ease of exposition we use the term "policy" to refer to all of these in this report). And, it should be noted, sometimes the lessons can be negative, what not to do, as well as positive.

Learning from abroad can involve complexities that go beyond learning from US localities, but the basic functions<sup>2</sup> are similar:

1. Defining the problem/opportunity to be addressed;
2. Getting information about policies elsewhere that address that problem/opportunity;
3. Assessing the effectiveness of the policy/practice;
4. Considering whether it is "transferrable," i.e., whether it could be effective in a different context (yours).
5. Changing/adapting the policy for possible use in your locality, and
6. Deciding whether to actually try to adopt it and to carry it out.

**Learning from elsewhere and particularly from abroad involves two key questions about each policy:**

- 1. Did it work, or more formally, what was its effect, where it was in place?**
- 2. Given the differences in context and setting between where it was in place and your own local government, is it likely to work and with what adaptations for your own situation?**

<sup>1</sup> The full Reports for the "Learning from Abroad" project are available on [www.transformgov.org](http://www.transformgov.org). For this "Framework" paper, we draw upon our own previous experiences, insights from our work on this LGRC project, review of scholarly literature on cross-national policy transfer, and the experience of others who have engaged in and written about such activity.

<sup>2</sup> This basic framework is drawn from Mossberger, Karen and Harold Wolman, "Policy transfer as a form of Prospective Policy Evaluation: Challenges and Recommendations", 2003, PAR 63 428-440, although it has been expanded and adjusted based on our experience with the LGRC project.

Mossberger and Wolman (2003: 428), drawing upon earlier work by Rose (1993), view various forms of policy transfer as *prospective policy evaluation*: “how policy makers assess the effect of a proposed policy or program *before* it is put into place.” This usage has the advantage of placing the possibly exotic-sounding “learning from abroad” under the broader and more conventional rubric of evaluation. We want to stress, however, that this is not simply or even largely a technical exercise. The topic of “learning from elsewhere, including abroad” is deeply purpose- and value-driven and, at the same time, strongly analytical and rigorous.

This report follows the linear and rather rational six-point order, above. We do not, however, believe that actual practice usually occurs in that order, nor do we believe that linear and rational is necessarily the best way. The orderly categories do have the advantage of being, well, orderly, and thus they are helpful for presenting our information.

We emphasize that addressing each and all of the six functions is necessary, but that the actual process will probably jump around a good bit. In fact, it likely will be rather messy. For example, an “assessment” insight might result in a re-definition of the problem to be solved or the “adaptation” analysis might produce a search for a different dimension of information. Moreover, whole practices do not have to be transferred in entirety; the item may be only a part of a policy.

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It may be (indeed, it is likely) that the policy will have to be adapted to fit your local circumstances and to make it workable in its new setting. Or, the program may simply suggest an idea that bears little resemblance to the policy abroad.

## **1. Defining the Problem/Opportunity to be Addressed**

Becoming clear about the local issue to be addressed is a key factor, often overlooked, in being able to derive benefit from learning from elsewhere, especially abroad. Results of a search for policies elsewhere will be greatly shaped by how you define the problem you face. To put it more sharply, a problem definition that is poorly described or inappropriate to your local circumstances will greatly increase the risk of a fruitless search or a dangerously wrong-headed policy recommendation.

This clarity may also emerge from other phases of the process discussed below. So the problem definition can be done once and/or in iterations throughout the learning process, but it should always be kept in mind and revision of the problem definition should always be an option. Indeed, such revision may be among the benefits of the process.

We don’t want to formulate this task as a philosophical exercise, and we realize that recommending careful problem definition is a standard step in public administration and public policy textbooks and practice. It’s nonetheless worth saying that it requires a bit of thought.

Two examples may illuminate the point. Let’s say your problem is that property taxation is an endlessly toxic political issue. You might abstract from that problem the simpler issue of

reducing complaints about property assessments and then institute a search to learn what local governments elsewhere have done to reduce such complaints. This example reduces the scope and complexity of the issue and seems to make it more actionable. An opposite example might use comparison with practices in other places to help figure out the local complexity. Let's say that, no matter what you have done, property assessment remains a hugely contentious local governance challenge. You might change the problem definition by learning about how some other localities have looked at their underlying contexts for taxation issues. This might lead to trying to find solutions by engaging citizens to move from the specific contentious challenge (i.e., property assessments) to more broadly understand, work through, and address larger issues, the resolution of which will make the specific problem easier to solve.

## **2. Getting Information: How Do You Learn About Policies Abroad?**

How do you become aware of and knowledgeable about policies abroad that are relevant to your own local government's problems? One way would be an *intentional* search for policies that address the problem you have defined. A second way would be through *opportunistic* encounters through conversations with peers at conferences, formal site visits, mentions in the mass media, professional journals, newsletters and/or other such means.

Intentional searches can consist of either ***ongoing scans*** or ***targeted problem-oriented searches***.

Ongoing scans consist of you or your organization seeking out information through establishing procedures that involve systematic searches for policies abroad that might be relevant to your local government. These examples can then be channeled to relevant people in your local government for analysis. Such a system might involve, for example, organizing a set of people each of whom is responsible for scanning specific sources (which could include US examples as well) and doing an initial assessment of the relevance of the identified practices for your jurisdiction. This information could then be provided to responsible persons for further assessment and possible action.

Targeted scans consist of efforts to gain information about responses to a specific problem that your local government is facing or expecting to face. We discuss below where to look for such information.

Opportunistic encounters involve a process more akin to stumbling across an interesting policy from elsewhere. This is probably the more usual (and not at all systematic) means of finding policies that just sounds good and relevant. (Dolowitz and Medearis report that most US administrators find information about policies abroad through "anarchic" processes.<sup>3</sup>) It's a good idea, of course, to put oneself in situations where this might occur (for example, through reading or conversation or attending sessions at conferences.)

Sometimes searches can be a combination of intentional and opportunistic. For example, a local government official and selected staff can participate in national and international networks

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<sup>3</sup> Dolowitz, D and Medearis, 2009, p685

of practitioners and analysts who share information about problem-solving in particular functional areas.

One form of such networking is the case of group travel visits and tours. What can be gained? What to be concerned about? A downside is the potential for public criticism of “junketing” (an expense-paid trip, presumably to a pleasant locale.) Another is that the visitor is much more likely to hear about the pluses of the site’s practice than the minuses. Also most such tours are better at describing the generic qualities of the policy than at analyzing the unique ways the policy’s effectiveness is dependent contextual factors that may not be present in your local. A tour’s value can be greatly enhanced by careful homework beforehand that can guide the search for information on site. Unfortunately, time for such homework is hard to find for busy administrators. Despite such reservations, travel visits can be useful if you regard the experience as one of active searching rather than passive listening.

In the remainder of this report, we organize our further comments around the idea of an intentional, targeted, problem-oriented search. Our comments also apply to any of the above approaches for getting information.

Major concerns regarding getting information include feasibility, accuracy and adequacy. Some suggestions:

- Look first at the most likely places – local governments similar to your own, facing problems similar to your own (e.g., if your concern is snow removal, don’t look at local governments near the equator!), in countries whose structure and culture are reasonably similar to your own (perhaps a focus on Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations.) Then, if interesting possibilities aren’t produced through looking at the most likely places, move on to the next most likely.
- You will benefit from information about the multiple places in which a similar policy has been used. This will provide different perspectives on the policy, including comparative insights that may emphasize key elements and/or call into question assertions derived from only one place.
- Use multiple sources for the same practice in a given city.
- Try to find information that fully describes and analyzes the policy. To enhance convenience and feasibility, look for places where it is reasonably easy to get additional information (which may mean where English is either the first language or where it is likely people will be able to speak it).
- Look for analyses and evaluation by impartial observers and critics as well as description and promotion by advocates.
- Don’t feel you need to start from scratch or do it all yourself. There are plenty of places to begin to search and people who can help you find relevant examples.

### ***Where to Search***

The easiest place to start is to examine the websites of international organizations that have information about local governments and their policies/practices that relate to the problem that you have defined. The most likely of these are the OECD, the European Union, the United Nations and similar organizations (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, German Marshall Fund, foundations.) An Appendix to this document includes a list of websites



and e-newsletters that can be helpful. In addition, a simple Google search, albeit with well-specified terms, may yield good starting points (e.g., “local government and affordable housing Europe”).)

Another type of source to begin with might be your professional association (Alliance for Innovation, ICMA, NLC, USCM, NACO, etc.) They might have someone who is knowledgeable about interesting examples abroad for the problem you are concerned with or who can put you in touch with someone who is knowledgeable.

It’s worth being imaginative about potential sources of information: reference staff at the local public or university library, relevant faculty at your local university, people at a local branch of an international corporation, sister city relationships. It never hurts to ask.

### **3. Assessing the Effectiveness of the Policy**

How do we know whether the policy is effective in the local government or local government system where it has been in place? Clearly this is a critical question. But how do you pursue it? What questions need to be asked? First, what are the policy’s objectives? What was it trying to accomplish? In particular, are the problems addressed similar to ones faced by your own government?

***What are the policy’s objectives? How did it try to accomplish its objectives? Did the policy work?***

Second, how did it try to accomplish its objectives? What is the policy design and what is the *theory of*

*change* the logical links between the policy design and the intended outcomes. In other words, how is the policy supposed to bring about the objectives? Identifying the causal pathways through which policy design and activities are supposed to be related to policy outcomes can provide an analytic structure that can serve as a useful tool when informal evidence is used for prospective policy evaluation. In particular, if policy makers were to construct a “theory of change” for a program or policy of interest, it might help them assess the validity of informal evidence regarding program effectiveness.

Third, did the policy work? By this we mean was it effective, *relative to what would have occurred had the program not been in place*. This is what social scientists call the *counterfactual*. Counterfactual thinking is critical to thinking about policy impact and whether the policy is desirable. In order to determine the impact of a policy, counterfactual analysis compares the actual outcome with what would have happened in the absence of the policy. Anecdotes and testimonials from participants generally focus on the actual outcome without providing any information regarding the counterfactual. Even in the absence of formal evidence, an effort to compare such outcomes to a “guesstimated” counterfactual is a critical component of an effective prospective policy evaluation.

The problem in answering these questions is not only where to look for information, but how do you know how to assess and interpret it and whom to believe. Assessments from program operators and interest group advocates should not necessarily be dismissed, but neither are they likely to be fully objective. They are likely to have self-interest in telling you that the policy

is truly terrific, even when it may not be. Assessment from multiple and diverse (both pro and con) sources is therefore important. But how do you find them?

Unless you have direct contacts in the foreign country whose policies you are interested in, one way is by making contact with knowledgeable individuals in local government associations, professional associations, and universities and research institutes in the United States and asking them to recommend whom to get in touch with abroad. Another way is to conduct internet searches of the policy in place abroad, access and read the material and then follow up through phone conversations or emails with the authors. If you are lucky there will have been several reviews or assessments of the practice by experts in the field or social scientists. You will want to read these and, if necessary and appropriate, follow up with the author(s). Journalists, particularly those from specialist publications and newsletters in the foreign country, are another good source of information about the policy as well as whom else to get in touch with.

Since English is a common second language in many non-English speaking countries, there is a very good chance that professionals, academics, researchers, journalists and others will be able to communicate with you. You will be surprised about how forthcoming and interested in your questions these people are likely to be, particularly if it is a policy or program they are deeply involved in or familiar with. In such a case, it is exciting to find that a foreigner is interested in the program and wants to find out more about it. In each case, when you communicate with someone, ask them if they can suggest someone with other views or perspectives (such as critics of the program) whose writings you should consult or whom you should talk to.

#### **4. Can the Program/Practice Work in Another Setting (yours!)?**

The fact that a policy works in one local government doesn't necessarily mean that it will work elsewhere. The context in which the policy exists may be critical. Local government settings and circumstances may differ in ways that might affect the policy's effectiveness. This is particularly of concern when thinking about assessing the likely viability of a policy in a foreign country for use in local government in the United States.

Therefore, an assessment has to be made of the extent to which particular features of the policy environment in your local government differ from the policy's original setting, and whether these differences will matter. Candidates for consideration include contextual variables such as

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political, social, and economic institutions, political culture, public opinion, available resources, and the existence of other policies that impact effect.

Are there legal, political, or administrative structures that are needed to support the policy? Structural concerns such as whether the local government is embedded in a federal system or a unitary one or whether the local government system is highly constrained by higher levels of government or has substantial local autonomy may matter in some cases; in others they may not. Do the proposed solutions run counter to cultural beliefs or public opinion in local



governments in the United States, or, more relevantly, in your own local government? Are there major forces that might oppose the introduction of the policy/practice in your community and that might be strong enough to prevent its adoption? If so, what kinds of changes might be made to mollify them and what kind of argument or narrative might persuade them or at least reduce their opposition? Are there related policies that are present in the original setting but lacking in your local government? Does the policy require substantial fiscal resources and/or manpower and are these resources available in your setting? Does the policy require substantial amounts of intergovernmental assistance, assistance that is unlikely to be forthcoming in the US, at least in the current political environment?

Differences in setting are sure to exist, but differences, even perhaps large ones, don't necessarily mean a policy in one country can't work, perhaps with some adaptation, in your setting. What is necessary is that a judgment be made about how important these differences in policy environment are to the effectiveness or the political viability of the proposed policy in your setting.

We are not suggesting that this requires a trained social scientist to conduct a systematic study. Rather we are simply suggesting that you, your colleagues, and others you trust ask and consider a set of questions. If you are particularly fortunate you will be able to find someone (or more than one) who is familiar with the context in both countries and be able to help you think these questions through.

## **5. Adapting the Policy to Your Locality**

Almost inevitably some changes will be necessary when taking a policy from another setting and moving it to your own. Some of these will result from structural or environmental differences and some of these relate to changes necessary to make the program politically viable in your locale. For example, in our report on the possible transfer of regional districts (multi-purpose special districts) in British Columbia for use as a replacement or complement to single-purpose special districts in US metropolitan areas, we note that the local government structure in British Columbia is different than that of the United States in several important ways. First, it consists of only a single layer of general purpose of local governments – municipalities – with no counties or townships. To adapt regional districts for use in the US, it will be necessary to consider how counties can be represented in a regional district, given that their residents are already represented through local governments in the county. In addition, the large number of local governments in US metropolitan regions will require a decision making structure that differs from that the simple plenary session forum used by regional districts in British Columbia; such a system would simply be too unwieldy in metropolitan areas with sometimes hundreds of local governments. Finally, we note that regional districts employ population-weighted representation and voting, a method that is rarely used in the United States (but which, in any case, will probably be required given constitutional provisions requiring one person-one vote elections for service delivering public bodies in the U.S.)

## **6. Deciding and Implementing**

The ultimate question is whether the new policy, as adapted, will work in your local government and whether it should be approved and implemented. With respect to whether it should be fully

put in place, there are two questions that will be relevant to any such decision. The first is will the outcomes be an improvement over those of current policies or practices, and is it worth it if

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***Will it work? Find out through a pilot or pre-test of the practice.***

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there are additional fiscal costs involved? This is the counterfactual question discussed above and is the subject of what we (after Richard Rose) have called “prospective policy analysis – an effort to estimate (or “guesstimate”)

the probable effects of a policy before it is put in place. In some cases the whether it will work question can be at least partially answered through a pilot or pre-test of the practice.

The second question is contingent on the answer to the first. If the policy is likely to be an improvement over current policy, is adoption and implementation politically feasible, and, if so, how much expenditure of political effort will be necessary to bring it about? What we are talking about here is what is often called “opportunity costs.” A modest improvement in outcome, even with no additional fiscal cost, may not be worth it if there is substantial political opposition or a high cost of transitioning from the existing policy/practice. Policy makers, both elected and appointed, are busy people, faced with a multitude of problems and concerns waiting to be addressed. Unless the promised improved outcomes are sufficiently high and can be obtained at reasonable effort, both technical and political, it simply may not be worth it to expend the energy necessary to adopt and implement it.

## Conclusion

It is not unusual for local governments to look to other local governments to get ideas for new or improved policies, programs, practices, or institutions for their own use. This makes sense, since they can then observe policies in actual operation, a kind of policy experiment that gives them some idea of how effective they might be. However, local governments in the United States are much less likely to turn to local governments abroad for new ideas. We contend that this is a mistake, for there is much that might be learned.

The practice of “policy transfer,” or, more appropriately “policy adaptation,” while potentially productive, requires careful analysis and observation. This is particularly the case when learning from the experience of a foreign country. The threshold question is whether and how well it works where it is in operation. Particularly when it is in operation in a foreign country this may not be an easy question to answer, since those most familiar with the policy and likely to publicize it – program operators and advocates – are unlikely to be fully objective. The best way to adjust for this understandable bias is to seek out multiple sources and critics as well as supporters. It is important to determine not only whether the policy works, but also how and why. You need to understand the program design that links the program to its outcomes.

The fact that a policy might work well in one local government does not necessarily mean it will in yours. This is particularly true when considering a policy in place in a foreign country where differences in institutions, political culture, public opinion, and history are likely to exist. But neither do such differences necessarily mean that the program will *not* work in your locality. The questions to consider are 1) whether and how much these differences are likely to matter, both in terms of gaining political approval and in terms of the program’s success and 2) whether

the program can be restructured so that it is more suitable for the setting of your local government.

The critical question about whether to try to put in place a policy that works well elsewhere and can be restructured so that it is suitable for your own local government is consideration of the counterfactual - will the results be better than what is currently in place. And, since attempting to put a new policy in place requires some effort, both political and administrative, the opportunity cost of doing so must be considered.

In many respects the above discussion is standard advice for evaluating any new policy idea, regardless of its source. Since learning from observable “policy experiments” undertaken by other local governments has obvious attraction, it is nonetheless useful to keep the advice in mind. This is even more the case when the source of the “policy experiment” is local government in another country. Nonetheless, we believe that the potential payoffs of such learning from abroad, if done carefully, are substantial.

## **Appendix and Bibliography**

### **Websites and e-Newsletters**

CityLab.com (from *The Atlantic*) is an e-newsletter, more focused on US stories and examples.

City Mayors Foundation (An international think tank dedicated to urban affairs)

[http://www.citymayors.com/gratis/city\\_mayors.html](http://www.citymayors.com/gratis/city_mayors.html)

Congress of the Council of Europe, National Associations of Local and Regional Authorities

[http://www.coe.int/t/congress/whoswho/associations-nat\\_en.asp?id=12](http://www.coe.int/t/congress/whoswho/associations-nat_en.asp?id=12)

Citiscopes <http://citiscopes.org/>

Council of Europe Committee on Regions

<http://cor.europa.eu/en/Pages/home.aspx>

Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CCRE & CEMR) <http://www.ccre.org/>

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

<http://www.oecd.org/gov/regional-policy/urbandevlopment.htm>

United Cities and Local Governments <http://www.uclg.org/>

URBACT a European Union-focused organization devoted to local and regional policy and practice. Also has an e-newsletter. [www.urbact.eu](http://www.urbact.eu)

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