

Learning from International Comparisons

Contact: coryn.barclay@fife.gov.uk

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Learning from international comparisons is an essential element of modern, professional policy making. Looking abroad to see what other governments have done can point us towards a new understanding of shared problems; towards new solutions to those problems; or to new mechanisms for implementing policy and improving the delivery of public services. International examples can provide invaluable evidence of what works in practice, and help us avoid either re-inventing the wheel or repeating others' mistakes. We can also learn from the way in which other governments undertake the process of policy making itself.

Where to start?

In searching for international comparisons we should not look solely at what national governments do. Administrations at sub-national, state, regional or local government level, and businesses and not for profit organisations working with governments, may be equally valuable sources of ideas and knowledge.

The principles summarised below are intended as general guidance, to help policy makers get the maximum benefit from the use of international comparisons.

Become more outward-looking in your approach to policy

Anticipate

Expand your horizons - make yourself aware of current practice and relevant developments in other countries, so that you are in a position to incorporate comparative information into your analysis and advice as a matter of routine.

Communicate

Identify existing sources of information, expertise and institutional memory, including social science and operational researchers, economists, statisticians, scientists and librarians in your organisation. Talk to the people concerned. Cultivate your networks of contacts in other administrations and international organisations, and in the academic research community.

Find out more about what others are doing in your policy area

Scan

Scan the horizon widely for interesting approaches and innovative developments. It is impossible to study everything in depth, so start with a general look at a range of countries, avoiding preconceptions about where useful ideas might be found. This will be easier if you have made keeping up to date a part of your normal work routine, and identified some sources of information to help you do so.

Select

Select **one** or more promising comparators for closer systematic examination. This takes time, effort and money to do properly, so be clear why you have chosen to expand your horizon in this direction. You might opt to look at the most similar system to our own that you can find; but remember that countries that appear very different may also offer valuable lessons. The places that provide the most fashionable comparisons may not always turn out to be the most useful.

Understand

Understand thoroughly whether, and if so how, your comparator works in practice. Any policy or programme can be reduced to a simple model of key elements linked by cause and effect. As well as this model, you need to understand the detailed context within which the policy functions. It may not be obvious to an outsider like you what factors in the social, economic, cultural and institutional environment are critical to its success - and the insiders who are your informants may simply take them for granted.

Assess

Assess the relevance of the comparator. Think objectively about the key elements of the model and its context, and about the comparable factors in your own policy environment - including the nature of the problem you are trying to solve. How great, if any, are the differences? What effect would they have on the policy or programme? Can they be offset? If not, be prepared to recommend that this example is **not** followed.

Recommend

Recommend what lessons should be learnt. The question is not just 'would it work here?', but would part of it work, or with modifications? If we modify it, are we certain it will still work? Should we simply be inspired by this example to devise something similar, but better suited to local conditions? What can be learnt from what did not work, as well as what did work, in the original setting?

Some helpful tips and hints

- Remember that the aim is to **learn** from the experience of other administrations, and to apply those lessons - not simply to **transfer** a policy or programme from one country to another.
- **Beware of enthusiastic advocates**, particularly of relatively new or untested ideas - you may not get the whole story!
- Cultivate your **networks** of contacts in other administrations. Where appropriate build on existing structures, such as European Commission working groups, and use the opportunities afforded by conferences and symposia to develop your networks. Diplomatic missions here and abroad may also be able to help you establish new contacts when needed.
- Try to find **evaluations** of the policy or programme you are interested in whether in-house or the results of independent research.
- **GOAL - Get Out of the office And Look!** If time and resources permit, make a visit; professional counterparts are usually very happy to share their experience. If possible, speak to front-line staff delivering a service, and their customers, as well as policy makers.
- When you visit, try to ensure that as many **perspectives** as possible (including stakeholders and specialists) are represented - you are more likely to capture the full picture of how your comparator works in practice.
- If possible, ask the people you have borrowed ideas from to **comment** on your proposals - they may well spot things that you have omitted or misinterpreted.
- Remember that you need to understand both the **simple model** of the policy or programme you are examining, and the **complex context** within which it functions. Look out for the hidden factors: use a systematic framework to make sure you have asked all the necessary questions.

Useful Links

International Comparisons in Policy Making Toolkit, see chapter 7 of A toolkit for progressive policy makers in developing countries

<http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/toolkits/rapid-progressive-policy-makers-developing-countries.pdf>

Public service reform and participatory budgeting: How can Scotland learn from international evidence?

<http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/public-service-reform-how-can-scotland-learn-from-international-evidence/>

