

Local goes global

In the last article in his series on Public Service Futures, **Robin Hambleton** suggests that the international transfer of ideas and approaches can spur significant improvements in policies and services



The transfer of policy approaches from one country to another is on the rise. At one level, this growth in dialogue between policy-makers and practitioners in different countries is a natural consequence of 'globalisation'. For example, improvements in international communication – not least, the stunning expansion of the Internet during the last decade – have made the exchange of ideas and approaches far easier than in the past.

Back in the old days, it was the top brass in central government who engaged in dialogue with other countries about the potential for cross-national learning. For example, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson met US President Richard Nixon in 1968, and this exchange influenced directly the early years of UK urban policy in the 1970s.

Today, the cross-national learning process is much more decentralised. Locality-to-locality is now, arguably, more important than nation-to-nation dialogue.

To illustrate the point, last month my college helped organise a one-day workshop bringing together Mayor Daley of Chicago and Mayor Han of Shanghai, as well as other leading figures from each city.

Built around the theme *Creating a global city* the day involved detailed exchange of practice between leaders from the public and private sectors in both cities.

The day was a great success, not least because both Mr Daley and Mr Han are outward-looking leaders. They envision international dialogue between cities in different countries providing opportunities for building economic ties, as well as opportunities for practical lesson-drawing for public policy.

International city-to-city dialogue is, of course, far more developed in Europe than elsewhere. The European Union (EU) has played a crucial role in improving the quality of this dialogue in two main ways.

First, it has created international settings within which local policy-makers can meet and exchange insights and ideas – notably through the European Committee of the Regions.

Second, it has funded a large number of successful cross-national research projects which have examined issues of great interest to local authority leaders and managers. Many EU research projects now include local authorities as full partners with academic institutions in shaping research questions and executing cutting-edge research projects.

Thus, the EU can be praised for facilitating world-class cross-national research on, for example, sustainable urban development.

As global forces shrink the planet, we can expect cross-national policy transfer to expand and flourish in the foreseeable future. But we need to get better at doing it.

At its worst, cross-national policy transfer can be a disaster in the sense that policies are transferred from one country to another without any serious consideration of the local culture and context.

The export of western approaches to urban development



The world is getting smaller as technology enables international exchange

to less-developed countries provides an unhappy example. Looking ahead it may be helpful to distinguish three kinds of cross-national transfer:

- specific public service improvements, often taking advantage of new technology
- policy innovation to address pressing concerns
- reforms in the institutions of local governance.

The first may be challenging, but is probably the easiest to do. A good transatlantic example is happening at this very moment. During the 1990s, US local authorities pioneered the creation of a three-digit, non-emergency telephone service – 311 – to operate alongside the US emergency 911 service (which is equivalent to 999 in the UK).

When Wendy Thomson, the prime minister's top adviser on public service reform, gave a public lecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago in March last year, I arranged for her to visit the highly successful 311 centre operated by the city. This is one of the best non-emergency helplines in the country providing, as it does, an immediate answer to virtually any query on a 24-hour basis.

Follow-up dialogue and investigation by officials took place, and the White Paper, *Building communities, beating crime* (CM 6360), published in November 2004, refers explicitly to 'The Chicago way'.

The chances are that the UK will have a direct, single, non-emergency telephone number in the next couple of years modelled on the successful US approach.

The second level of exchange is rather more demanding, as culture and context become critical. The research on the transfer of policy instruments between countries suggests that much practice is haphazard.

A minister or a local authority leader may spot something interesting on a trip to another country and immediately advocate the virtues of the approach.

For example, ex-Tory minister Michael Heseltine, following a fleeting visit to the US when he was secretary of state

for the environment, introduced Urban Development Grants (UDGs) into UK public policy in 1982. He clearly believed the US Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) was a good idea, and should be imported.

No research, no analysis. It was really little more than a conviction that pumping public sector funds into public-private projects in rundown areas via an 'action grant' programme would generate significant job growth.

It approved a duff policy. Later research on both the UDAG and the UDG programmes showed that, on the whole, public funding bolstered private sector profits and had little impact on jobs. Not surprisingly, the UDG policy was quietly dropped after a relatively short period.

The lesson here is that policies need to be evaluated before they are transferred.

The third area where transfer takes place – reforming the institutions of governance – is the most demanding of all. This is because institutions are embedded in the society that created them. Culture, history, established power relations and belief systems are all important factors.

It follows that those seeking to transfer ideas about institutional design from one country to another need to be particularly sensitive to the local context. It is almost certainly the case that successful models in one country will need significant adaptation if they are to work in another society.

The Local Government Act 2000 provides an example. Critics argue that the new leadership models introduced by the Act – directly-elected mayors and so on – were 'off the shelf' designs imported from other countries. As such, they were bound to encounter resistance in the English context. Defenders claim that a serious effort was made to draw on experience abroad to create new models. The institutional arrangements introduced by the Act are, in fact, like nowhere else.

The signs are that local authorities are becoming increasingly active in learning from abroad. Reaching out in this way can build international understanding.

More than that, if approached in the right way, cross-national exchange can lead to significant improvements in policy and practice to the benefit of local citizens. ■

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