

The Politics of European Best Practices for Urban Transport Policy

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DRAFT – Please do not quote!

Abstract

Numerous European programmes and initiatives (e.g. CONCERTO, ELTIS, ETC/ INTERREG, European Framework Research Programmes – including the CIVITAS Initiative, Intelligent Energy, URBACT, IPA and its forerunners¹) have been instrumental in identifying a large (and increasing) number of examples of best practice (or good practice) in the field of urban transport policy. In fact, there is now a profligacy of best practice, creating information overload for policy-makers in the field. Nevertheless, the identification and dissemination of best practices remains central to many areas of European policy, including transport, sustainable development and the urban environment. The underlying assumption appears to be that best practices are *equally applicable and effective in another setting*. The EU's 2006 Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment states for example that '*many solutions already exist in certain cities but are not sufficiently disseminated or implemented*' and contends that '*the EU can best support Member States and local authorities by promoting Europe's best practices... [and] facilitating their widespread use throughout Europe*' (CEC, 2006: p5). Similarly, the EU's 2007 Green Paper on Urban Mobility asserts that '*European towns and cities are all different, but they face similar challenges and are trying to find common solutions*' (CEC, 2007: p1). Bulkeley (2006) argues that the development and dissemination of best practice is often seen as an effective means of promoting urban sustainability, and that underlying this belief is the assumption that promoting and disseminating good practice will lead to changes in policy and practice in other areas. This paper argues that such a belief is too simplistic. The reality is that best practices have a more

limited role in policy-making processes, particularly in the case of best practices from other countries in the European Union where there may be huge differences in the technological, economic, political or social situation between countries.

This paper begins by reviewing recent European policy documents in the fields of transport, sustainable development and the urban environment, and examines the importance they attach to the identification and dissemination of best practices. Next, the paper identifies some of the main reasons why governments are becoming increasingly active in developing (or claiming) innovative policies that represent best practice: reasons include image, prestige, power and funding. The paper then reviews literature on how best practices are actually viewed and used by government officials, and examines the extent to which best practices are influential in changing the direction of policy compared to other sources of information and learning.

Introduction – the prevalence of best practices

“To what extent are transport policy instruments, which have proved to be successful in one urban area, transferable to another, given that the latter has a different historical, cultural or political background, or is in another phase of economic development? Are there ‘best practices’ which are convertible like currencies? If not, how and to what extent must one take account of specific circumstances?” (Güller, 1996: 25)

This quote from Peter Güller in 1996 is just as resonant and valid today, and perhaps even more so. His questions remain largely unanswered. Since he posed these questions in the mid-1990s, the concept of best practice (or good practice) has become rife in European policies and programmes. In the area of urban transport policy, best practices have been developed under a range of European programmes and projects. The underlying belief is that identifying, promoting and disseminating good practice will help contribute to transnational learning and lead to improvements in policy and practice. This paper questions this underlying belief: it examines the *validity* of European best practices, particularly given the fact that there are huge differences in the technological, economic, political or social situation between countries in Europe, and it investigates the *role* of European best practices in influencing policy-making processes. The paper then outlines some conclusions in the form of directions for future activity and investigation in the area of best practice. The paper begins by considering some

of the key European policies and programmes that promulgate the development or use of best practice in areas related to urban transport policy.

Recent attention to best practice in European policy documents is undeniably high. Frequent mention of best practice can be found in diverse European policies relevant to urban transport issues: examples include the 1999 European Spatial Development Perspective – the ESDP (CSD, 1999), the 2001 White Paper on European Governance (CEC, 2001), the 2005 revised sustainable development strategy (CEC, 2005), the 2006 Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment (CEC, 2006), the 2007 Green Paper on Urban Mobility (CEC, 2007), the 2007 Leipzig Charter on Sustainable Urban Cities (German Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs, 2007a) and the 2007 Territorial Agenda of the European Union (German Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs, 2007b).

The ESDP for example states that *‘the exchange of good practices in sustainable urban policy... offers an interesting approach for applying ESDP policy options’* (CSD, 1999: 22). The 2001 White Paper on European Governance highlights the role of the *‘open method of coordination’* (OMC) as a key factor in improving European governance, stating that OMC involves *‘encouraging co-operation, the exchange of best practice and agreeing common targets and guidelines’* (CEC, 2001: 21). The 2005 revised sustainable development strategy highlights *‘the exchange best practices’*, together with the organization of events and stakeholder meetings and the dissemination of new ideas, as important ways of mainstreaming sustainable development (CEC, 2005: 25). The 2007 Green Paper on Urban Mobility asserts that *‘European towns and cities are all different, but they face similar challenges and are trying to find common solutions’* (CEC, 2007: 1) and argues that *‘the exchange of good practice at all levels (local, regional or national)’* (p5) provides an important way of finding common solutions to these challenges at the European level. The Leipzig Charter on Sustainable Urban Cities (German Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs, 2007a: 7) calls for *‘a European platform to pool and develop best practice, statistics, benchmarking studies, evaluations, peer reviews and other urban research to support actors involved in urban development’*.

The EU’s 2006 Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment (CEC, 2006) has perhaps the most to say about best practices. In fact, the exchange of best practices forms one of the four main actions of the strategy. It states that *‘many solutions already exist in certain cities but*

are not sufficiently disseminated or implemented’ and that *‘the EU can best support Member States and local authorities by promoting Europe’s best practices, facilitating their widespread use throughout Europe and encouraging effective networking and exchange of experiences between cities*’ (CEC, 2006: 3). The document argues that *‘improving local authorities’ access to existing solutions is important to allow them to learn from each other and develop solutions adapted to their specific situation*’ and highlights that *‘the Commission will offer support for the exchange of good practice and for demonstration projects on urban issues for local and regional authorities*’ (CEC, 2006: 6).

Examples of best practice in European research programmes and cooperation initiatives are widespread. Examples include programmes funded under the European Regional Development Fund (e.g. INTERACT, ETC/INTERREG, URBACT), pre-accession funding programmes (e.g. IPA – the successor of Phare, ISPA and SAPARD), research programmes and environmental programmes (e.g. LIFE+). The European Research Framework Programme and the European INTERREG III Initiative (2000-2006) have led to a number of projects that have developed best practice guides/comparisons in the area of urban transport policy (see Table 1 for an indicative list of examples). The extent to which these projects have considered the applicability of best practices in another context and the transferability of these examples (especially to new member states of the European Union) has however been very limited.

Attention to best practice is not just limited to the European level. There are numerous national initiatives in many European countries as well as various intercontinental initiatives that advocate, identify or support the use best practices in some way. The idea of best practices can be found in OECD and World Bank publications and activities (e.g. OECD, 2001; World Bank, 2000). Another example, the Best Practices and Local Leadership Programme (supported by UN-Habitat), is *‘dedicated to the identification and exchange of successful solutions for sustainable development*’ (UN-Habitat, 2008) and aims to *‘raise awareness of decision-makers on critical social, economic and environmental issues and to better inform them of the practical means and policy options for improving the living environment... by identifying, disseminating and applying lessons learned from best practices to ongoing training, leadership and policy development activities*’ (UN-Habitat, 2008).

Table 1. Selected examples of European projects containing best practices on urban transport policy

Project title	Funding Programme	Description
<i>ADONIS</i> – Analysis and development of new insights into substitution of short car trips by cycling and walking	FP4 Transport	Produces an overview of best practice for promoting cycling and walking in western Europe.
<i>ARTISTS</i> – Arterial Street Towards Sustainability	FP5 Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development	Focuses on the redesign of arterial streets to improve quality of life and achieve more sustainable travel patterns. Produces best practice guidelines.
<i>BUSTRIP</i> – Baltic Urban Sustainable Transport Implementation and Planning	INTERREG IIIB Baltic Sea	Focuses on the development of Sustainable Urban Transport Plans. Identifies best practices from partner cities in the Baltic Region.
<i>CONNECTED-CITIES</i> – developing a framework for regional and local sustainable mobility policies	INTERREG IIIC West	Develops a framework for regional and local sustainable mobility policies based on experience from cities and towns with good public transport networks..
<i>HITRANS</i> – Development of principles and strategies for introducing High Quality Public Transport in medium sized cities and regions	INTERREG IIIB North Sea	Produces best practice guides and guidelines to facilitate the development of high quality public transport in medium sized European cities.
<i>LEDA</i> – Legal/regulatory measures to influence the use of the transport system	FP4 Transport	Identifies a tentative framework for analysing the transferability of legal and regulatory measures to promote sustainable transport in cities.
<i>PROMPT</i> – New means to Promote Pedestrian Traffic in Cities	FP5 Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development	Identifies best practice examples to promote walking and improve the urban pedestrian environment.
<i>SCATTER</i> – Sprawling cities and transport: from evaluation to recommendations	FP5 Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development	Identifies best practices for managing urban sprawl in western European cities.
<i>TRANSLAND</i> – Integration of transport and land-use planning	FP4 Transport	Identifies best practice in the field of integrating transport and land-use planning, and analyses their transferability, including legal and regulatory requirements.
<i>TRANSPLUS</i> – Transport planning, land use and sustainability	FP5 Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development	Identifies best practices for integrating land use and transport planning.

These European and intercontinental policies, programmes and initiatives all serve to illustrate that the development and dissemination of best practice is widely considered to be an effective means of promoting policy transfer and learning. According to Bulkeley (2006: 1030), the assumption that the *'dissemination of best practice can lead to policy change has become an accepted wisdom within national policies and programmes, as well as in international arenas and networks'*. The logic seems to be that by providing information or knowledge about specific initiatives, other individuals and/or organisations will be able to undertake similar projects or processes, or learn from the experience, which will lead to policy change (ibid). Nevertheless, despite all the attention on best practice in policies, programmes and projects, little is known about the ways in which best practices are produced and used, and their role in processes of policymaking.

The validity of European best practices

A common assumption behind best practices is that they are equally applicable and effective in another setting. In Europe, the large number and diversity of member states, where there are substantial differences in governance, administrative cultures and professional capacities, make such an assumption questionable. This assumption is particularly questionable in the case of transposing best practices between dissimilar countries, such as from west to east Europe ('old' to 'new' member states of the EU), where the social and economic situation, as well as the institutional frameworks, are often very different in the 'borrowing' and 'lending' countries. Nevertheless, examples can be found where countries in eastern Europe have used best practices from western Europe as a way of trying to catch up politically and/or economically (Rose, 1993). Politicians often see policy transfer as the quickest solution to many problems without having to reinvent the wheel (Rose, 2005; Tavits, 2003). Randma-Liiv (2005: 472) states that *'policy transfer has become a fact of everyday life in various countries'* and that *'post-communist countries have been especially willing to emulate the West'*. The cases of Wroclaw (Poland) and Riga (Latvia), described briefly below (and discussed in more detail by Stead et al, 2008), illustrate this point in relation to urban transport policy.

Two similar projects in Wroclaw and in Riga were funded by the German Federal Environment Agency (Umwelbundesamt – UBA) with the original aim of establishing German-style public transport executives (Verkehrsverbänden) or similar structures as a way

of promoting more integrated public transport operation in the two cities and the regions around them. The idea behind both projects was to provide more coordinated public transport services and timetables, common information, communication and marketing for transport services, and integrated ticketing across different transport operators. However, the public transport situation was (and still is) quite different in the two cities compared to German cities. The experiences and outcomes of the two projects were quite different in Wroclaw and in Riga and, in both cases, direct transfers of German practice did not occur (Stead et al, 2008).

Various factors, including European initiatives for research, territorial cooperation and development assistance (see above), have inspired these processes of policy transfer from west to east Europe. In eastern Europe, policy transfer is frequently regarded as a means of avoiding newcomer costs: using the experience of other countries is cheaper because they have already borne the costs of policy planning and analysis, whereas creating original policies requires substantial financial resources (Randma-Liiv, 2005). The availability of financial resources to support these processes of west-east policy transfer is of course another (and perhaps the most important) factor behind these processes taking place, especially where funding from other levels is limited. However, as the OECD report *'Best Practices in Local Development'* recognises, best practices is not without its complexities and challenges because *'the possibilities of what can be achieved by policy may vary between different areas and different times'* and because there is *'no single model of... what strategies or actions to adopt'* (OECD, 2001: 29).

There are also limitations of best practice in terms of the ability to transfer sufficient detailed knowledge and information about case-studies. In effect, best practice seeks to make the contextual, or tacit, knowledge about a process or instrument explicit by means of codification (Bulkeley, 2006). However, this process is not as straightforward as the production of best practices might make it seem because *'expressing tacit knowledge in formal language is often clumsy and imprecisely articulated'* (Hartley & Allison, 2002: 105). Wolman et al (1994) make a similar point in relation to the difficulty in conveying the full picture of best practice. They report that *'delegations from distressed cities are frequent visitors to... 'successful' cities, hoping to learn from them and to emulate their success'* but *'these visitors – and others who herald these 'urban success stories' – are frequently quite unclear about the nature of these successes and the benefits they produce'* (Wolman et al, 1994: 835).

In terms of the transferability of best practice, the OECD report on Best Practices in Local Development (OECD, 2001) differentiates between various components of best practice and identifies the extent to which each of these can be transferred (Figure 1). At one end of the spectrum are ideas, principles and philosophies which have low visibility (since they can be difficult for the outside to fully understand and specify) and are difficult to transfer because it is often difficult for others to make them relevant to their own situation. At the other end of the spectrum are programmes, institutions, modes of organisation and practitioners which tend to have high visibility and are relatively easy to understand but are not very transferable since they tend to be specific to particular areas or contexts. According to the OECD report, it is components such as methods, techniques, know-how and operating rules, with medium visibility, that make the most sense to exchange or transfer. The report also highlights the need to examine who is involved in the process of transfer in order to gauge transferability of best practices. It distinguishes between top-down transfer processes initiated by promoters (e.g. national agencies) seeking to disseminate best practices and bottom-up processes that are initiated by 'recipients' in response to a need that they have recognised themselves. It argues that the latter is likely to work best. This is very much linked to the notions of demand and supply led processes of policy transfer: demand-based policy transfer is based on the initiative and acknowledged need of a recipient administration, whilst supply-led policy transfer is based on the initiative of the donor and the donor's perception of the needs of the recipient such as foreign aid initiatives (Randma-Liiv, 2005).

How are best practices identified? Wolman et al (2004) take a very critical view about this, arguing that best practice in urban public policy is frequently built around perceptions without evaluation.² They conclude that identifying best practice is often '*an exercise in informal polling*' (p992) and argue that the reputations of so-called best practice often snowball as observers become self-referential. Best practice, they suggest, may just represent '*the manifestation of the best advertising and most effective programmatic or municipal spin doctoring*' (p992). Benz (2007) argues that sub-national governments in Germany are becoming increasingly active in developing (or claiming) innovative policies, which they then try to sell as 'success stories' and best practices. To be highly ranked and used as a benchmark is not only a good image for the locality, but can also attract additional money from the federal government. It is equally likely that this is also the case in other countries and also at the EU level with sub-national governments competing for EU funding by

promoting ‘*success stories*’ and best practices. According to Lidström (2007: 505), ‘*in this new competitive world of territorial governance, most units depict themselves as winners*’. In so doing, they not only attract additional national and regional funding, they can also use EU funding to partly bypass traditional structures of domestic policy making and vertical power relations, should they so wish (Heinelt & Niederhafner, 2008; Le Galès, 2002).

Figure 1. Components of development practices and their transferability (source: OECD, 2001)

Visibility	Component for exchange	Transferability
Low	Ideas Principles for action Philosophy	Low
Medium	Methods Techniques Know-how Operating rules	High
High	Programmes Institutions Modes of organisation Practitioners Joint projects	Low

The creation and use of best practice as a means of reward and recognition for particular initiatives, individuals, and places means that only ‘good news’ stories are disseminated, and that the sometimes murky details of how practices were put into place (and any difficulties or failures along the way) are obscured. Aware that best practices represent sanitised stories, practitioners often pursue their own networks of knowledge in order to gain an understanding of the processes involved (Bulkeley, 2006). Wolman & Page (2002) report that UK local government officials involved in urban regeneration are sceptical about good practice documents, exemplified in the following three quotes from some of their interviewees:

1. “*I’ve found some of the good practice guides so simplistic that they are almost of no value*” (regeneration partnership official)
2. “*There seems to be a lot of material promoted as good practice that wouldn’t stand the light of day if it were seriously evaluated*” (national government official, DETR)
3. “*Everyone has to be seen as ‘succeeding’*” (official from the Government Offices for the Regions)

The role of best practices

Despite the proliferation of best practice examples, there appears to be some opinion in the academic literature that the practical use and usefulness of best practices may be rather limited. While a high proportion of local authority actors agree that learning from the experience of others is important and indicate that they engage in such activity, only a small minority of officials believes that it plays a large or significant role in their decision-making. In a study of urban regeneration policy, Wolman & Page (2002) for example report that officials generally find government documents and conversations with other officials more useful for finding out what is going on than from good practice guides. The results of their questionnaire survey suggests that the majority of officials believes that information about other examples from the same country may have some effect on decisions within their own authority, although few think that the effects will be 'significant' or 'large' (Table 2). However, when questioned about the effect of examples from abroad on decisions within their own authority, most officials believe that the effects of these examples will be either 'little' or 'none'. Wolman & Page (2002: 484) quote a member of a local authority association who asserts that *'knowing what other authorities are doing is a very low priority for councils'*: most authorities want to do things in their own way and not just copy what others are doing. They also quote another official who states that *'there are many factors that are much more important [than best practice]'* and that *'good practices elsewhere don't matter that much'*, particularly since *'projects have to be very sensitive to local circumstances'* (Wolman & Page, 2002: 495-496). Informal contacts with peers, according to Wolman & Page (2002), are the most trusted and useful sources of information among local government officials, while mechanisms such as seminars, conferences and good-practice guides are less useful. One of the most important reasons for looking at examples from elsewhere, they contend, is primarily to gain information about what kind of proposals the government is likely to fund, rather than using best practices as inspiration for new policy or practice.

Wolman & Page (2002) conclude that, despite the enormous effort that has been devoted to disseminating good practice, their findings throw cold water over activities concerning the identification and dissemination of best practice, at least in the area of urban regeneration. They acknowledge that the same is not necessarily true for other areas of policy, although there seems little reason to think that the situation may be much different in the area of urban transport policy. They also conclude that, even when well resourced and pursued actively, the effects of spreading lessons and 'good practice' are not very well understood by those

involved in the processes of dissemination and that this observation is unlikely to be unique to the area of urban regeneration alone. Similarly, Bulkeley (2006: 1041) concludes that the impacts and implications of disseminating best practice on urban sustainability remain poorly understood. According to Wolman & Page (2002: 498) it is '*much easier to offer a compendium of practices and ideas and leave it up to the recipient to decide which is the most appealing than to offer an evaluation of what works best, let alone what works best for highly differentiated audiences*'.

Table 2. Opinions of local authority officials about the effects of information from elsewhere on decisions in local authorities (source: Wolman & Page, 2002: 495-496)

	From national examples	From international examples
Big effect	2%	1%
A significant effect	11%	1%
Some effect	69%	21%
Very little effect	16%	42%
No effect	1%	35%
Number of respondents	288	286

Conclusions – a reappraisal of best practices

This paper has identified a number of issues and concerns related to the validity and role of best practice. In terms of validity, there are concerns about issues of transferability, especially between dissimilar situations (e.g. from 'old' to 'new' member states of the EU), the lack of detail that best practices are able to convey (and the fact that some are sanitised, good news stories without details of problems, difficulties or failures along the way), the lack of evaluation of many examples of best practice and a certain degree of distrust or scepticism in best practices on the part of practitioners. In terms of the role of best practice, there are concerns about the proliferation of examples and the overload of information for policy officials, the low level of impact that these examples often have, especially in the case of international examples (compared to examples from the same country) and the lack of a wide and systematic assessment of the impacts and implications of disseminating best practice on policy-making. Given these issues and concerns, a reappraisal of the status and use of best practice is perhaps necessary, particularly at the European level. Four key areas for reappraisal are identified below.

First, it is time to reappraise the importance attached to best practice in policies, programmes and projects, particularly at the European level. There are substantial social, economic and institutional differences between EU member states but there is little recognition of the fact that policy options need to be differentiated: the underlying assumption of many European policies and programmes is that best practices are equally applicable and effective in another setting. A study of the way in which best practice examples of urban transport policy are used across Europe (building for example on the work of Holman & Page, 2002) would be instructive and help to inform the way in which best practice examples are used in European policies and programmes.

Second, it is time to reappraise the way in which best practice examples are presented and consider whether it would be better to differentiate between various components of best practice according to the extent to which these can be transferred (see also Figure 1). Because of the diversity of member states, institutions, planning instruments and cultures, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider a move away from the idea of best practice examples and refer instead simply to examples of practice, which policy officials can draw on and adapt to their own circumstances (as advocated in OECD, 2001). Similar sentiments are expressed by Nedović-Budić (2001: 49), who recommends that policy-makers in central and eastern Europe should *'stay away from any automatic transfer of Western methods and models, and... consider what is appropriate to keep from their own traditions'*.

Third, there is substantial merit in carrying out more detailed examinations of the transferability of urban transport planning methods, techniques, operating rules, instruments, programmes and so on. Detailed, systematic work is lacking in this area and research in this area would provide an interesting contribution to debates in both academia and in practice. Related to this, research on the processes of transfer of transport planning methods, techniques, operating rules, instruments, programmes and so on would be very instructive, particularly in cases where examples have been transferred between dissimilar situations (e.g. between 'old' to 'new' member states of the EU). Such research might also include theories and concepts from the policy transfer (and related) literature (e.g. Rose, 1993 & 2005) as well as literature on organisational cultures (e.g. Hofstede, 1980), social or welfare models (e.g. Esping-Anderson, 1990) and path-dependency or path-shaping (e.g. Greener, 2005).

Fourth, further research on the way in which the same best practice (e.g. policy concepts, measures, programmes, institutional structures) can take root in different ways or have dissimilar effects in different settings would be instructive. This might for example draw on similar work that has examined how European concepts from other policy areas (e.g. spatial planning) have been adapted to suit regional and national contexts, and how these concepts were elaborated in policies and programmes at these levels (e.g. Shaw & Sykes, 2004; Waterhout & Stead, 2007).

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Notes

1. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) supports various projects in countries aspiring to join the European Union and replaces a series of European Union programmes and financial instruments (e.g. PHARE, ISPA, SAPARD).
2. Wolman & Page (2002) also discuss the lack of evaluation of best practice. They argue that both receivers and producers of best practices have virtually no means of assessing the validity of the information they receive, and that most do not even recognize this as a problem.