Policy Transfer in International Development: Whose Security in Central America?

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Abstract:

Citizen security policy in Central America provides an excellent case for examination of 'policy transfer.' Policy transfer, or the process by which knowledge about policies or programs in one place is used in another place, has been the subject of a considerable literature over the past few decades (Benson & Jordan, 2011; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Evans & Barakat, 2012). The trend of transferring policy has only accelerated with increased regionalization and globalization. Understanding the role of policy transfer in international development is important for donors, program implementers, and researchers in order to capitalize on potential efficiencies and to avoid the pitfalls charted in its history.

Keywords: Latin America; policy transfer; security

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Introduction

The idea that strong social cohesion among neighbors results in less crime is the central tenet of 'citizen security' (Arriagada, 2001). Understood as such, citizen security policy in Central America is based on the theory of social disorganization that was prevalent in the United States in the second half of the 20th century (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Citizen security therefore provides an excellent case study of policy transfer.

Policy transfer, or the process by which knowledge about policies or programs in one place is used in another place, has been the object of considerable literature over the past few decades (Benson & Jordan, 2011; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Evans & Barakat, 2012). The trend of policy transfer itself has accelerated with increased regionalization and globalization (Benson & Jordan, 2011; Drezner, 2001; Evans & Davies, 1999). Understanding the role of policy transfer in international development is especially important for donors, program implementers, and researchers. As the cases below demonstrate, a better understanding of policy transfer would help those working in development be more efficient by avoiding redundant research and development of effective processes and less costly programs. It would also help avoid pitfalls such as failing to properly account for local context when transferring a policy from a more developed to less developed country.

The first examinations of policy transfer primarily revealed voluntary 'lesson drawing' from state to state in the United States, and the convergence of policies across the European Union (Benson & Jordan, 2011). By the end of the 20th century, the neoliberal economic prescriptions of the Washington Consensus represented a different model of policy transfer from powerful states and transnational organizations to developing economies (Evans, 2009). The resulting distinctions in these transfer processes led to a typology that helps us better understand the benefits and risks of policy transfer through an examination of motivation, degree, and level of transfer as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Policy Transfer Typology*

Category	Less Risk	More Risk	High Risk
Motivation	Voluntary	Convergence	Coercive
Degree	Inspiration	Emulation/Synthesis	Copy
Level	Local	State	International

As demonstrated below, many citizen security policies fall in the far right column, which, I posit, leads to heightened risk of policy failure.

Learning from Central America

The Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD) is currently involved in research to evaluate and strengthen citizen security programs in Central America. These lessons are a result of NDIGD's involvement in this research in the region, and do not represent an evaluation of a specific program or group of programs. They are offered to improve future transfers of development programs and policies.

Motivation matters

Citizen security in Central America fits in the coercive motivation category given the financial "carrots and sticks" offered to transfer policies. Together, the World Bank, United Nations, and the United States provided over $600 million in citizen security assistance to Central America from 2009-2011 (Villamar, Beltrán, & González, 2011). In return, both the World Bank and United Nations called for a citizen security approach based on strengthening social cohesion (UNDP, 2009b; The World Bank, 2011). Programs funded by the United States required direct participation by neighbors in the policymaking process in order to "generate trust and cohesion between local actors" (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2010, p. 14).

In El Salvador, for example, several municipal citizen security policies act on the prescribed strong cohesion of neighbors to reduce crime and violence. The policies seek to "strengthen the participation of civil society in the prevention of violence" (A.M. Mejicanos, 2013, n.p.) through "increased cohesion, social responsibility, and levels of coexistence among local actors" (A.M. Santa Tecla, 2010, n.p.). Similar policies implemented in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere were based on disorganization theory prior to its transfer to Central America (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). There is little empirical evidence, however, to demonstrate the impact of programs and policies based on social disorganization in the United States, and where data do exist, little or no impact has been found (Harcourt & Ludwig, 2006; Klein, 1995; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). Policymakers should be especially cautious to determine motive when accepting prescriptions, and they should seek data showing that policies or theories to be transferred do actually work.

Degrees vary, and results may vary by degree

Citizen security ranges from programs and policies inspired by the concept of social disorganization, to policy copy and hard transfer of specific programs. The inspiration behind citizen security policies includes such general recommendations as reversing the "breakdown of traditional social networks" (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2009a, p. 11), strengthening social ties (UNDP, 2009b, p. 2), controlling rapid, disorderly urbanization (UNDP, 2009c; World Bank, 2011), promoting active and diverse citizen participation (USAID, 2010; UNDP, 2013), and rehabilitating and encouraging the use of public space (UNDP, 2013).

Policy copies (i.e. word-for-word reproductions) and hard transfers (i.e. legislation and regulation using exogenous models) are prevalent as well (Stone, 2012). In Honduras, for example, a program to identify high-risk youth for secondary gang prevention utilizes assessments and therapies copied directly from the City of Los Angeles. The tool used to measure risk in Los Angeles was put into use in Honduras without examining the differences in context between the two locations that might affect its feasibility. Meanwhile, across the region, local governments are engaged in the beautification of neighborhoods through community cleanups, graffiti removal, and park rehabilitation to provide inviting spaces for neighbors to enjoy together, just as proponents of urban renewal attempted in the United States.

Scholars of policy transfer caution that without proper prior evaluation, acculturation, and validation, policy transfer via copy faces greater risk of failure than policies that are merely inspired by experience elsewhere. This is because policy copy focuses on structure while the focus in policy inspiration is effect (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Evans & Barakat, 2012; Wolman,

1992). Copied policies, programs and tools, such as the tool in Honduras and the beautification programs in the region, may be more expedient and efficient, but in the end, they may not be effective and cannot sustain any outcomes and impacts.

International level, local risk

Citizen security policy transfer occurs primarily at the international level, from one country to another. While some amount of transfer is now taking place between countries in Central America, transfer has occurred mainly from more developed to less developed countries. Sub-national institutions such as municipal governments in Central America act as transfer agents to attract international donors. When international donors engage local governments directly to transfer policy, coercive motivation is exacerbated by an uneven power dynamic. For example, municipal citizen security policies in El Salvador seek to strengthen cohesion through the use of participatory security councils and through community activities and programs that bring communities together (A.M. Mejicanos, 2013; A.M. Santa Tecla, 2012). This ignores the fact that these areas often already enjoy high levels of cohesion after years of banding together to meet their own needs (Walton, 2016). Local actors who know their communities best are often usurped by international 'best practices' given their need for resources, and policy transfer risk increases when this local context is de-emphasized (Stone, 2012).

Policy Implications

The case of citizen security policy transfer in Central America highlights the need for trade-offs in public policy and program implementation. The efficiency of copying a policy from one time and place to another must be balanced with an analysis of the potential utility of that policy in the local context. This case also demonstrates the continuing need for some amount of research, analysis, and validation even when policies are deemed transferrable. When policies are coercive, copied, and transferred internationally, an analysis of the effect in the original environment should be determined first. Otherwise, at best, we risk replicating programs with no real utility or applicability in the local context. At worst, we risk replicating programs that could do harm by not focusing our attention on local needs and solutions.

To mitigate these risks, policymakers, planners and scholars would be wise to borrow methods in which local context is at the core of decision-making. For example, systems and design thinking focus on implementing environment and social circumstances of a product, program or policy to gain "a thorough understanding… of what people want and need" (Brown, 2008, p. 86). Methodological insights for policy transfer from systems and design thinking include rapid evaluation of extant data and direct observation of policy impact, open-minded needs analyses in the policy-adopting communities, and the use of endogenous knowledge to understand local context in program design and policy recommendations. The incorporation of these practices in policy transfer would help balance the need for efficiency and utility in international development. These practices may also help achieve important development goals – goals like security for Central Americans.

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