

# Policy implementation

## Is policy learning a myth or an imperative?

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### ABSTRACT

Cross-national experiences and policy design in a specific jurisdiction should theoretically influence policy learning and eventually policy outcomes. This article highlights the myths and imperatives of policy learning by addressing to what extent it contributes to real policy change. One such myth is that all incidents of policy implementation should foster policy learning and therefore improved service delivery. This article explores the debate around and value of policy learning. A common definition of policy learning may be possible, but details differ in every social context. Different kinds of learning are instrumental learning, social learning and political learning. The basis for learning includes aspects such as how conscious learning is, the object of learning, who learns, and the status of learning in policy literature. Policy change often does not result from learning, although it can occur because of learning. Learning due to failure in the process of policy learning often has more long-lasting effects than learning from successes. Different kinds of policy learning and a combination of them can contribute to meaningful policy change and improved service delivery. Policy change is proof of learning. What is learned is what is remembered, but how do governments and organisations deal with policy intelligence? Policy intelligence should be valued in a culture of policy learning. Organisational and intra-organisational learning could stimulate common learning in government and institutions alike.

### INTRODUCTION

In theory, policy implementation experiences should foster policy learning, in that the gradual evolution of policies should have a collective effect on policy

learning. Conversely, it remains an open question whether policy learning serves as a foundation for improving policy-making and policy implementation and therefore ultimately for improved service delivery. Hence, this article attempts to explore the debate surrounding policy learning and the value of policy learning. This article will also attempt to highlight the nature and incidents of policy learning.

It is not always easy to define success in service delivery. Similarly, consensus on what constitutes policy learning remains elusive. Often, an attempt is therefore made to agree about the general meaning of policy learning and then leave the details to be defined within a particular context. However, an understanding of policy learning is critical not only for policy research, but also for the conditions under which policy is implemented. The time has come for policy learning to foster improved policy design and inform the policy debate.

May (1992:332) discusses two ways in which policy learning can occur. The first is instrumental policy learning. This entails learning lessons about the viability of policy instruments or implementation designs. The second way is social policy learning, which entails learning lessons about the social construction of policy problems, the scope of policy or policy goals. In any policy change, these two forms of policy learning are not mutually exclusive. It is therefore evident that policy learning essentially means acquiring lessons about policy processes and prospects. It is also worthwhile to clarify the relationship between policy failure and learning.

## **The concept of learning**

The concept of learning is often studied in psychology, and the insights from psychology can, with a few *caveats*, be transferred to policy learning. In psychology, learning is defined as the revision of cognitions and beliefs as a result of the transformation or recording of information and interpretation (Hemerijck & Visser 2003:5). Under certain conditions, policy change can be imposed, but doing so does not guarantee that there will be any learning. Conversely, there may be no reform, but learning can nevertheless occur. According to Hemerijck and Visser (2003:6), there is no evidence to support the assumption that learning improves performance. This implies that merely acquiring skills does not necessarily contribute to service delivery in local government. Learners may even decide against reform because of what they have learnt; and policy-makers who learn lessons may be replaced before they can apply them (Hemerijck & Visser 2003:6).

The basis for understanding (policy) learning includes a grasp of aspects such as how conscious that learning is, what the object of learning is, who learns and what the status of learning in the policy literature is. The role of feedback in policy

learning and subsequent changes in social policy and behaviour are critical. The ability to learn requires looking at policy's impact in order for a policy to be redesigned (May 1992:333), but policy learning need not be directly linked to a specific policy – other policies and governments' experiences could be equally be important. It should be noted that the method of drawing lessons from other situations may be imperfect. The wrong conclusions could be reached or ideas can be adopted without understanding the particular context for which the policies were originally designed and in which they were implemented.

One can argue that policy experiences therefore form the basis for policy learning. Trial-and-error seems to be a common strategy in policy learning. The well-known 'muddling through' described by Lindblom (1959) in May (1992:333) already suggested gradual evolution. Learning through systematic policy evaluation and experimentation is not the rule: Wildavsky (1979) and Lindblom (1959) in May (1992:333) both highlight the fact that policy implementation is an evolutionary process through trial-and-error. However, this evolutionary process is only possible if the feasibility of a policy is subjected to recurrent testing (May 1992:333). Nevertheless, policy experience through either trial-and-error or systematic assessment does not guarantee any learning. Learning only takes place when there is an improved understanding through lessons drawn from policy problems, objectives or interventions.

Policy learning can also be a broad concept applicable to the re-construction of policy problems and objectives. In some instances, learning refers to the assessment of political feasibility with regard to policy action and the political price to be paid for implementation.

It is also not clear exactly who learns from policy experiences. Is it the implementers of policy or is it the public that is subject to a particular policy? In this regard, May (1992:334) refers to 'policy agents'. Policy agents could also be the leaders of relevant organisations with a stake in the issues that comprise the policy domain.

## **Instrumental policy learning**

Instrumental policy learning entails gaining new understanding and achieving new behaviours regarding the viability of policy interventions or implementation design and practices (May 1992:335). The focus is therefore on implementation designs and learning that will lead to improved designs for the purposes of attaining existing policy goals. Learning from implementation practices should result in increased intelligence about and sophistication in policy implementation design.

Unfortunately, the evidence of policy adaptation and redesign does not necessarily constitute policy learning. It could therefore be argued that true

instrumental learning requires the documentation of increased understanding of policy implementation designs. Intentional instrumental learning can be stimulated by the introduction of learning tools such as evaluation, hearings and assessments of policy design and implementation (May 1992:337).

## **Social policy learning**

Social policy learning entails a new social construction of a policy by the policy stakeholders of a given policy domain. The focus falls on the policy problem, the scope of the policy or policy goals. It is important to realise that policy learning in this regard does not mean that individuals and organisations are necessarily becoming smarter. Social policy learning involves rethinking the policy domain and the fundamental aspects of the policy. Social reconstruction revolves around beliefs about the cause(s) and effect(s) of desired policy outcomes, perceptions of policy targets and beliefs about the fundamental aspects that underpin policies (May 1992:337). Social learning should not be confused with a mere change in policy – changes in a particular policy can also be ascribed to several other causes, such as budget problems or a symbolic undertaking designed to expand political constituencies (May 1992: 338).

## **The role of policy failure in learning**

It is useful to consider cases of policy failure as a resource for policy learning. The organisational learning literature emphasises that dissatisfaction with programme performance can serve as a stimulus to search for alternative ways to operate. This implies that instrumental policy learning is fostered by an organisation's attempts to close the performance gaps. The very same failure of instrumental policy learning can also stimulate causal reasoning about social policy learning (May 1992:341). Policy successes can also provide a strong basis for learning.

It is important to stress that the phenomenon of policy failure is neither simple nor certain. Success and failure are ambiguous concepts, often highly subjective and reflective of an individual's goals and perceptions of need, and perhaps even the person's psychological disposition towards life (Ingram and Mann 1980:12). It is human nature to believe that failure as a stimulus for change is more relevant for policy redesign than success. Policy failure should foster policy learning, but, in practice, acknowledging failure is not that easy. Government leaders may be unwilling to acknowledge failure. This reluctance is particularly strong in ideologically dominated administrations (May 1992:341).

Empirical research suggests that people learn more from failure than from success. Policy learning can therefore be stimulated by unusual events that can be interpreted as a crisis, policy failure or imminent danger. It sometimes takes major external shocks to change core beliefs, decision-making routines, and existing distributions of resources and capabilities (Hemerijck and Visser 2003:10).

Interestingly, when one compares countries with one another, one finds that similar crises or critical developments do not necessarily start major policy reforms in all the countries. Not all policy learning results from events. In some instances, individual people can trigger learning. Leadership succession can bring different sets of beliefs to the forefront; subsequent policy changes are then related to turnover rather than learning (Hemerijck and Visser 2003:10). Often, existing weaknesses are not analysed, unless a crisis arises or there is demonstrable repeated policy failure.

## **The actors of policy learning**

The theoretical debates about who the actors in the policy process are relates to the subjects of learning. The range of actors varies from social to state actors. In the first instance, actors learn in the state institutions where they are involved with policy processes and implementation. A second possibility for learning is the actors in societies that create the conditions to which state officials must respond. In the third instance, one finds that state officials and societal actors are in constant and life-long interaction, which includes learning (Bennett & Howlett 1992:278). Service delivery could therefore be both the cause and the effect of policy learning. In addition, learning may also pertain to group learning and organisational learning. Learning is therefore an activity that takes place at both the individual and organisational levels.

Policy learning is only evident after the diagnosis of societal problems and the consequent build-up of intelligence. Social scientists have an impressive collective capacity to think intelligently and with some sophistication about the problems of long-term government learning, but it is not possible to know in advance to know whether an organisation or individual will diagnose the problem, just as a physician cannot diagnose the causes of illness and problems of the next patient in advance (Etheredge 1979:61).

## **The object of learning**

The concept of learning, intentional or unintentional, is difficult to grasp; and the object of learning is equally ambiguous. Most definitions of the policy

process include conflict resolution. Learning and what is learned in the policy itself is inherent in the policy process. Learning is not only about how policy is done by government, but also how it was done (Bennett & Howlett 1992:283). A comparison between policy learning and cognitive development psychology implies that there should be intelligent growth in government (Etheredge 1981:76).

There are three objective indicators of learning: first, increased capacity for differentiation; second, increased capacity for organisational and hierarchical integration; and, third, increased capacity for reflective thought. Policy learning is not a self-driven and neutral process. Policy learning depends on what universities teach, on what voters want to believe, on what interest groups say, on agendas in the media, on the views of critics, on the mood of the times (the *Zeitgeist*), and on conceptual and methodological innovations from university research (Bennett & Howlett 1992:283). Policy-oriented learning is therefore an ongoing process of (re)search and adaptation motivated by the desire to realise core policy beliefs.

## The results of learning

Policy change can occur because of learning. According to Bennett and Howlett (1992:285), two common types of policy learning can occur. There are the incremental type of policy learning and the trial-and-error process of policy innovation. The first type of learning only alters in the face of new social concerns and a solution is reached by reasoning through established policies. In the second type of learning, the actions of policy-makers are more uncertain. Past lessons are studied and then inform contemporary choices (Bennett & Howlett 1992:286). The nature of a policy problem can determine the kind of learning that takes place. Poorly defined policy problems create little opportunity for study and learning. Policy learning for the most part occurs when it is about the techniques of implementation. The core values of policy are not subject to so much change because of policy learning. Figure 1 depicts three types of learning identified and their relationship to policy change.

The term 'policy learning' can present different complex processes of learning. Figure 1 shows Bennett and Howlett's (1992:289) proposition regarding different kinds of policy learning. In fact, real policy can also be a combination of the different kinds of learning. It may be impossible to observe policy learning without policy change. Therefore, we may only know that learning has taken place because policy change is taking place. What is learned is what is remembered, but this should always be seen in a particular context of political interest and power (Bennett and Howlett 1992:291).

**Figure 1** Three types of learning and policy change

Learning type	Who learns	Learns what	To what effect
Government learning	State officials	Process-related	Organizational change
Lesson-drawing	Policy networks	Instruments	Programme change
Social learning	Policy communities	Ideas	Paradigm shift

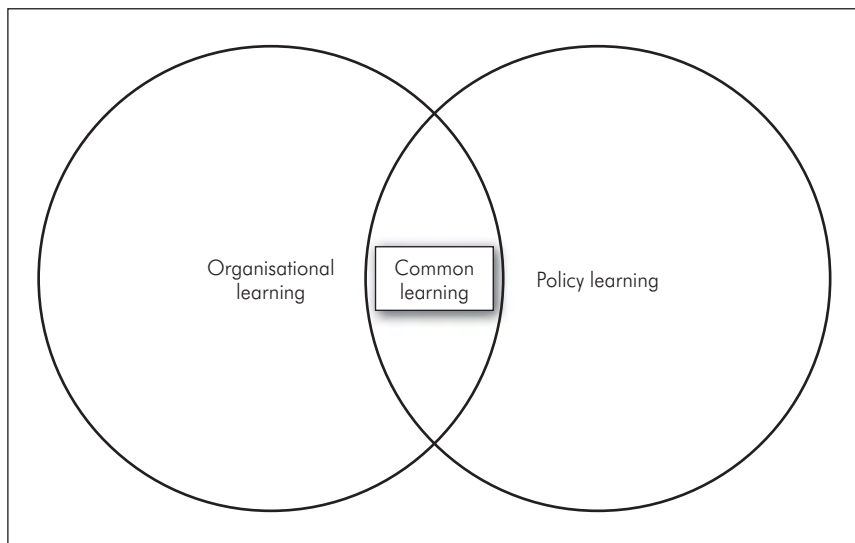
Source: Bennett and Howlett (1992:289)

## Organisational learning and policy learning

Organisational learning and policy learning are related, which suggests that the literature on organisational learning is also relevant to policy learning. All the experiences built up over time create recurring opportunities for individuals involved in policy learning to learn. In any organisation where individuals are pursuing a common goal, policy learning is also possible. Individuals in organisations are capable of learning from committing errors. Figure 2 indicates the commonalities between organisational learning and policy learning.

Thus far, empirical research on institutions has failed to develop a usable model of institutional arrangements that either promote or inhibit policy learning. Interestingly, studies on organisational learning tend to focus on

**Figure 2** Overlap between organisational learning and policy learning

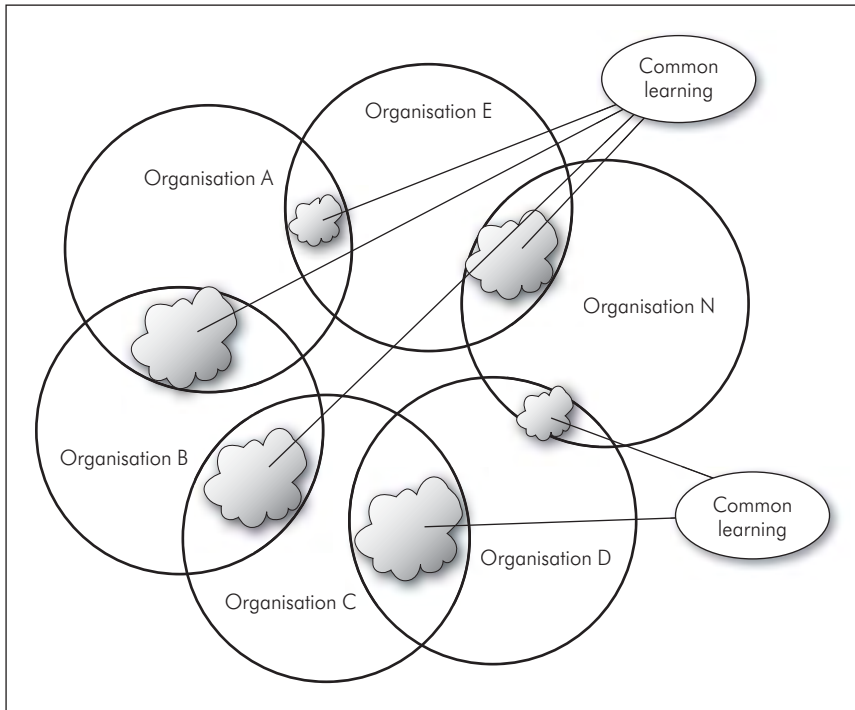


Source: Adapted from Busenberg (2001:175)

institutional arrangements that serve to promote (or constrain) organisational learning (Busenberg 2001:175). Organisational learning can be promoted through organisational structures (learning mechanisms) and values and customs (a learning culture) that support the learning process. According to Busenberg (2001:176), the literature on policy learning also identifies policy networks, the impact of political events and policy change, and the evolution of policy over time as important factors in the process. Policy networks therefore refer to a collection of organisations and actions across organisations. It is critical to note that policy learning normally evolves over a period of a decade or more (Busenberg 2001:716). In Figure 3, the common learning possibilities in policy networks are depicted.

Policy learning is limited by contextual boundaries. The policy literature suggests a number of variables, such as the characteristics of the issue in question, the distribution of political authority, the natural, economic, and technical resources available to support policy actions, the institutional structures of governments active in the domain, and the value structures

**Figure 3** Policy networks and policy learning



Source: Adapted from Busenberg (2001:176)



of the cultures active in the domain (Busenberg 2001:177). Policy impacts (learning opportunities for policy learning) are therefore shaped by institutional arrangements and by contextual variables that can change over time. A shift can occur, for example, when governments change and the changeover also involves new policy proposals. The changes initiated by the new South African government that was elected during 2009 are a clear example of this.

## **Policy innovation as a driver for learning**

Policy innovation is a separate field of study and research. Over the last few decades, policy innovation research has expanded considerably. An important driver for policy innovation is policy learning. In this section, the emphasis is therefore on the role of policy learning in policy innovation and change. According to Meytelka and Smith (2002:1468), policy theory and policy are co-evolving. This is a process of interactive learning.

In the current challenging economic climate, learning is often seen as a response to a more or less critical problem. In this particular context, learning requires time and consists of reappraisals and modifications in an evolutionary process. We need to know what real policy knowledge is in order to be able to achieve policy learning and policy innovation. Our knowledge about optimal public policies for highly successful societies is very limited. One needs to accept that optimal policies for most of today's problems have not yet been found.

If policy innovation is regarded as the first application of new policies, then policy learning can be reduced to a process of mere trial-and-error. If the same policy is tried out in different countries simultaneously then mutual learning takes place. By the same token, failed policies should be avoided (Kerber and Eckardt 2007:229). The ability to exploit external knowledge is a critical component of policy innovation. One can argue that the ability to evaluate and use outside knowledge is largely a function of the level of prior related knowledge (Cohen and Levinthal 1990:128). If innovation is limited, the question arises how much can one learn from the experiences of others.

## **Learning from experiences**

It is possible that lessons learnt from the experiences of others have led to a host of new policies and regulations around the world. People often learn from failed experiments, but these failures may be offset by successes in other countries. These kinds of learning mainly involve social learning. The results can be observed in policy outcomes, but it remains difficult to test real policy learning empirically (Meseguer 2005:69). The challenge of empirical testing of

policy learning has been partly ascribed to the difficulty in making the concept of learning operational. In the literature on policy learning, all sorts of notions for learning are suggested, but Bennett and Howlett (1992:288) claim that learning is over-theorised and under-applied. However, this criticism does not take make learning as a phenomenon any less intriguing in any discussion on policy change.

Learning in every country is a voluntary act. Learning implies a change in beliefs in the light of the experiences of others (Meseguer 2005:72). In the final instance, politicians should be persuaded by the experiences of others. Governments faced with the risk of making new policy decisions may find it relatively simple and inexpensive to gain new information by observing the results of particular policies elsewhere.

The question always remains whether one can really learn from the lessons learnt in other countries. Nevertheless, it seems that it is easier to draw lessons from similar policies between countries than to learn from a comparison of different policies in the same country. If a lesson is positive, a policy that works can be transferred with suitable adaptations. If a lesson is negative, observers can learn what to avoid from noting the mistakes of others (Rose 1991:4). Drawing lessons from others can save time and effort. Policies are judged in relation to past performance and in anticipation of their future consequences. Borrowing from other policies should not be done blindly, or even condemned blindly. The success of a policy is, after all, affected by its particular context and the possible generic attributes of the policy in question (Rose 1991:4). In this regard, it is useful to remember that organisations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank regularly deal with the issues of 152 nations around the globe, and they make available information on this experience in the form of advice (Rose 1991:5).

Lessons are always drawn, consciously or unconsciously, from our own past or from the experience of our predecessors in a job. Everyone involved with public policy can unconsciously draw lessons across time and space. Drawing lessons is more than an evaluation of a programme in its context; it is also applying judgement about doing the same thing elsewhere. Lessons constitute what is learned (Rose 1991:7). Interestingly, the policy literature focuses more on how policymakers learn than on the lessons drawn from learning themselves. Applying judgement on the transferability of a particular policy from one place to another is a special feature of drawing lessons from elsewhere. Drawing lessons from the experiences of another government should not be regarded as innovation (which refers to a completely novel programme). Lessons drawn from the past or from other countries should be treated with a great deal of circumspection. Analogies should not assume that the problems facing policymakers are recurrent (Rose 1991:9).

The ongoing search for lessons to learn should not be a matter of idle curiosity for policymakers – they should remember the maxim ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. In their life span, most programmes tend to reach a point where dissatisfaction disrupts routine. Ignoring the problem is normally the first reaction in dealing with dissatisfaction, but dissatisfaction emphasises what not to do, so that soon the *status quo* is no longer an option (Rose 1991:10). This dissatisfaction then becomes an impetus for searching for satisfaction across time and space: the quest for lessons to learn from elsewhere begins. The decision about whether or not to draw on a particular lesson learnt elsewhere always has two different features: Is it practical? Is it desirable? The issue of desirability is the domain of the elected officials; the determination of what is possible is the primary concern of career officials and experts (Rose 1991:24).

## **The challenge of government to learn from its own experiences**

If it is indeed possible to learn from the experiences of others, in this age of rapid societal change, governments too should treasure the possibility of life-long policy learning. It is high time that even governments set aside time for learning, or else it may become a case of ‘the more we know, the less we use’ (Leicester 2007:173).

We as citizens of a global society live in conditions of unprecedented and boundless complexity, rapid change and interconnectedness. Recent phenomena such as global warming and the global economic meltdown are only two examples of such global issues. In this ever-changing world, we are at times strangers in our own land. The imperative for learning is therefore obvious. This also applies to policy learning and service delivery. Global changes affect local societal problems in ways that are messy and difficult to define. The problematic circumstances of uncertainty pose real challenges for policy learning and policy-makers. This may perhaps be the reason for the tendency to opt for social engineering rather than societal learning.

Policy has a life of its own and depends on societal changes that necessitate policy changes, and therefore make policy-making an unstructured process. Policy learning should therefore be a continuous process. Perhaps it is time to start identifying the enabling conditions for learning amongst policy-makers in government (Leicester 2007:178). The admission of uncertainty in today’s world is an invitation to policy learning.

Reflection is an essential part of policy learning. At the moment, there is a constant demand for service delivery, increasing the pressure on all the role players. Under such conditions, one wonders if there is any time to reflect. Thus, the high demand for service delivery could constrain policy learning. In this regard, Leicester (2007:179) refers to performance anxiety within government as

a barrier to learning: we normally do not learn well when we are under stress or afraid. Interestingly, policy implementation and service delivery are both linear processes. By contrast, policy learning is cyclical and iterative. The linear model moves from implementation to service delivery, but then one also needs time for reflection (Leicester 2007:180).

Major reforms are often unpopular. Hence, large-scale reforms are extremely difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, they still occur. The question is then where learning opportunity arise. It seems that in major reforms, the learning could result from reflection after the implementation of the reform, when the outcomes of the reform process become clear (Hemerijck and Visser *et al.*, 2003:2).

## **Evidence, evaluation and expertise in the policy process**

It is imperative that governments should regard policy-making and policy implementation as a continuous process, and not as a series of one-off initiatives. The use of evidence and research need to be improved to create a better understanding of societal problems. The use of pilot schemes to test innovations should be an important part of policy learning and policy innovation in the future. All policies and programmes should be clearly specified and evaluated. Lessons about success or failure should be acted upon (Bullock, Mountford & Stanley 2001:49).

In South Africa, there is a Government-wide Monitoring and Evaluation System (GWM&ES) intended to establish a uniform system of monitoring and evaluation across the spheres of government, as well as the voluntary sectors. This system could be seen as an imperative for policy learning that will yield improvements in future public policy outcomes. Although the monitoring and evaluation started out as individual performance management, there is now a conscious effort to subject policies and programmes to strict monitoring and evaluation (Cloete 2009:298). The GWM&ES in South Africa is an emerging system and therefore currently holds the potential of being both an imperative and a myth in policy learning. The myth lies in the belief that the current GWM&ES will ensure policy learning and improved policies in the future. Nevertheless, the power of such a myth could provide the momentum for instituting a fully developed monitoring and evaluation system.

## **The role of myth**

The notions the learning society and policy learning have no current empirical validity. One can, for reasons already mentioned in this article, doubt that policy learning can be practically developed as a construct in the foreseeable future. The question is whether this myth still has practical value.

A functional perspective (Hughes & Tight 1995:301) of the learning society myth would argue that its purpose is to maintain a false consciousness of learning. This view suggests that opportunities are available for individuals and policy-makers for development. The myth therefore blames powerless members of the community for their (failure) to get on (Hughes & Tight 1995:301). This kind of myth extends its life across generations. The role of the learning society myth is to provide a convenient rationale for the current and future policies of different power groups within society. The myth as such has little or no impact on the nature, content or implementation of policies. Changed policies often give the impression to outsiders that things are improving. The power of a myth should not be underestimated. It has power because many in society believe that the myth is achievable, and they also see it as an answer to challenging economic and social problems.

## **CONCLUSION**

Policy learning is still a somehow vague concept, but learning remains an imperative for successful outcomes. The unwillingness of implementers sometimes to acknowledge failures can easily reduce learning to a myth.

There has been an impressive increase in intelligent discussion of issues in policy learning since the topic was first raised in the late 1950s and 1960s. Useful integration of the wealth of theories and models of policy learning with the practice has yet to be achieved. Service delivery can indeed benefit from policy learning, but it is still an open question whether policy learning has made any substantial contribution towards successful outcomes. Academics simply do not have the time to codify government's experience and therefore create the possibility for learning. Academics have too many other responsibilities to even consider such a codifying exercise. Practitioners are fully occupied with the implementation of programmes. The key would then be to assist government institutions with their training in order to build their own intelligence and databases. Data for the purposes of policy learning will also need a repository and a structure for policy intelligence needs to be developed.

On average, the training and induction of new political office bearers takes about two years. If there is no institution containing the executive branch responsible for policy learning, performance will fall short on capacity – Plato's age-old concern about who can be trusted to have good judgement on important issues is still valid.

The challenge of overload applies to researchers and practitioners alike. Researchers do not have the capacity to keep track of policy learning. Practitioners face a growing bureaucracy or government overload. In the end,

it seems that, often, all they are concerned with is merely surviving. Ideology continues to play a significant role in policy decisions.

The development of a professional diagnostic capability for social problems will probably increase the ability for policy learning. Improved service delivery is, in part, a function of both increasingly accurate factual knowledge and the usefulness of increased intelligence and sophistication. In order to de-mystify the whole policy learning concept, further research in a combination of different social science disciplines is needed to explore and generate more incisive questions (and answers) on the role of cognition, framing, crises, learning cycles, international pressure and models of best practice for modern states. Ideally governments should learn ahead about what might lead to policy failure. Learning ahead requires resources, experiments and foresight. These conditions are rarely met by governments. Learning from best practices is a viable option, but the absence of experience means that such vicarious learning often remains shallow and merely suggests quick fix solutions.

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