

# Towards Mutual Learning with the Rising Powers

Mutual learning is emerging as a new way of talking about the ‘how’ of development cooperation, particularly in contexts of rapid change, with countries increasingly recognising that they have much to learn from each other’s experience. Achieving the promise of universal development within the ambitious and complex framework of the Global Goals agreed in 2015 will require much more systematic and strategic efforts to learn from and share the development policy innovations of rising powers such as China and Brazil. This should include exploring opportunities for other countries to engage with the rising powers’ experiences through more structured processes of mutual learning.

Until recently, international development policy has mostly drawn on experiences from Europe and North America as models for the organisation of the health and social sectors. However, policy analysts are now becoming more interested in identifying and learning from potentially important innovations in rapidly developing middle-income countries, at the same time as these countries are themselves increasingly interested in learning from each other’s experiences.

## Mutual learning starts at home

Rising powers such as Brazil, India and China have achieved major advances in supporting economic and social development in their less-developed regions and in creating health and social protection systems in response to the rapid changes they are undergoing. However, there are gaps in the evidence on this, and understanding these experiences better could ensure that the right lessons from these advances are incorporated into international processes of mutual learning. Research undertaken by the Mutual Learning initiative of the Centre for Rising Powers and Global Development (CRPD) looks at examples of multidirectional learning and exchange that draw on policy innovations from China and Brazil, in order to improve understanding of how such innovations emerge and travel.

These two countries have effectively managed rapid change whilst fostering broadly positive developmental outcomes through real-time learning and adaptation of policy responses to development challenges, particularly in the health and social sectors. The circulation of policy innovations between more- and less-developed regions of these countries has generated important lessons on the role of context in shaping the transferability of initiatives. This process of adapting policies for implementation in different contexts in turn provides a valuable starting point for mutual learning at the international level. Efforts to codify these experiences are underpinned by the understanding that ‘successful’ policies are the result of complex, often unstructured and messy political processes and what might be called trial-and-error policymaking.

## Learning from the development of Western China

The Western Development Strategy (WDS) programme is infrequently cited in the literature on development successes in the era of the Millennium Development Goals (2000–15), and yet the WDS was by far the largest national programme of investment for development during that period.

Announced in 1999 and launched in 2000 as the *Xibu Da Kaifa*, the WDS accounted for total investment

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equivalent to 1.4 per cent of China's national gross domestic product in the period between 2001 and 2005. To deliver it, the government established national planning and management systems designed to ensure the resources were used well, while implementation was mostly devolved to local government levels. A large proportion of the investment was in infrastructure, including facilities for health and other social services.

Over time it became clear that investment should not be limited to physical infrastructure. It was also important to help local governments create systems to ensure that facilities were used well to provide access to effective and affordable services. This meant developing systems for financing services, facilities management and delivery of basic services. The government encouraged local authorities to experiment with innovative approaches for health system organisation, the results of which contributed to the design of major national health reforms. This local to national learning included a significant element of smaller-scale practical and procedural innovations.

### **Learning from Brazil's achievement of universal health coverage**

Brazil is lauded for its commitment to universal healthcare as a right for all citizens, which was enshrined in the 1988 Constitution after a long struggle by health reformers known as *sanitaristas*.

Healthcare is provided through the *Sistema Único de Saúde* (Unified Health System – SUS), a publicly funded, national health service. Its design includes participatory governance mechanisms which involve service user representatives in its management through Health Councils at different levels of the system; as well as in setting policy priorities through large-scale health conferences involving hundreds of thousands of citizens.

This mass participation helped maintain the high level of political commitment to which most observers have attributed Brazil's success in rapidly achieving universal coverage of primary health-care services through the flagship Family Health Strategy (*Estratégia de Saúde da Família*, or ESF). Less attention has been paid to how the ESF was effectively scaled up in a complex context in which responsibility for service delivery is largely devolved to Brazil's 5,570 municipalities, some with a significant track-record as innovators, while others have low levels of technical

capacity and high levels of corruption. The ESF derived from local innovations in the first phase of decentralisation, which were then brought together in a national programme.

Following a slow and uncertain start, the scaling-up process accelerated after a carefully designed incentive structure was put in place to ensure that central government transfers were used to support the expansion of the ESF. Municipalities were encouraged by the offer of increased resources, and were then held accountable for delivering the programme both by the technical monitoring mechanisms of the Ministry of Health and by local populations mobilised through the participatory governance institutions. As a result of its success in scaling up the ESF, Brazil is seen as a successful case study for managing the fragmentation which is often prevalent in decentralised systems, as well as ensuring the right incentives for the continued political support of this primary health-care model.

### **Learning from national case studies to inform international processes**

Such case studies have the potential to be used as the basis for further mutual learning between countries, particularly as work begins on setting up and implementing frameworks for the new Global Goals.

China's Western Development Strategy road-tested projects that are similar to many of those that are likely to be financed by institutions like the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS' New Development Bank (NDB). China's experience of adaptive policy learning approaches is a valuable potential source of support for successful implementation of AIIB and NDB investment strategies. Lessons about what worked in strengthening local implementation capacity for the Family Health Strategy informed the development of Brazil's innovative 'structuring cooperation' approach to supporting health system development internationally. Brazil's experience of developing not only a technical design for effective primary care but also a political strategy for rapid scaling-up in a context characterised by highly variable levels of local capacity and commitment is very relevant to the efforts to achieve Universal Health Coverage that are considered a key element of the Global Goals.

Both cases illustrate how greater attention to the realpolitik of negotiating delivery and to the sometimes messy and incremental nature

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of the learning processes involved could yield lessons that are as important as the technical design of the interventions for countries that are contemplating learning from China or Brazil.

### Challenges in identifying relevant experiences from other countries

Policymakers and policy analysts in rising power countries face several challenges in identifying lessons from experiences that are relevant to other contexts and making them widely available.

There are good reasons for this:

- These experiences are relatively recent and there is little systematic evidence of the factors that have contributed to successes and failures
- The theories and frameworks commonly used to analyse development experiences largely arise from the intellectual traditions of advanced market economies in North America and Europe, and may not adequately reflect new practices and understandings
- Social policy analysts in the rising powers have tended to focus their work on support for the implementation of rapid reforms and have only recently begun to undertake systematic studies of their reform experiences as a contribution to global knowledge. They also have relatively little experience with identifying the lessons from the experiences of their country that are relevant to other contexts
- The lack of detailed understanding in other countries of the economic, social and cultural realities of the rising powers makes it particularly difficult to communicate across national and cultural boundaries.

The institutional arrangements needed to facilitate the translation of national policy learning into mutual learning at the international level are still evolving. However, new spaces for international learning have emerged in the last decade.

### Opportunities for mutual learning

Multilateral and bilateral actors such as the World Bank, the United Nations and the German, Japanese and UK governments (as well as philanthropic organisations such as the Rockefeller and Gates Foundations) have become increasingly active in this field. They have partnered with rising power countries to promote joint ventures such as the International Poverty Reduction Centre in China, and the United Nations Development

Programme's International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and RIO+ World Centre for Sustainable Development in Brazil. They have also convened their own programmes such as the Joint Learning Network for Universal Health Coverage (first funded by the Rockefeller Foundation). In addition, some traditional donor governments have encouraged their domestic agencies to invest in international knowledge exchange through initiatives such as the UK's NICE International.

In parallel, rising powers have established a rapidly evolving set of mechanisms for collaboration and exchange of experience, and see the creation of institutions such as the BRICS' New Development Bank as a strategic opportunity for mutual learning as well as for investment and influence. Given their remit to invest in both rising powers and poorer countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the NDB and other new institutions such as the AIIB and China's Silk Road Fund should provide significant opportunities for mutual learning across contexts.

At the same time, the rising powers and other developing countries have a longstanding commitment to South-South Cooperation (SSC), a United Nations-supported approach which, since the 1970s, has emphasised Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (TCDC) as a mechanism to promote knowledge exchange. Initiatives such as the Network of Southern Think Tanks (NeST), launched in 2014, are now engaged in efforts to codify diverse SSC policies and practices in order to facilitate monitoring as well as learning. China and Brazil both have major SSC programmes which emphasise mutual learning, and are evolving their own distinctive approaches.

The IDS Mutual Learning research initiative has been exploring different existing approaches to policy learning and exchange. Initial findings suggest that the outcomes of mutual learning initiatives are conditioned by three sets of factors.

1. **Technical:** Relevance of the content of the mutual learning process to both parties' development priorities, the strength of the evidence base on the contextual conditions which shaped success domestically, and the nature of these conditions in the partner country.
2. **Political:** Even technically sound initiatives often struggle if they take insufficient account of political factors, including the

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importance of deeply held political principles for many actors involved in SSC and the negative effects of power imbalances, whether between Northern and Southern actors or between rising powers and poorer developing countries.

3. **Cultural:** Culture can play an important role in facilitating exchange, for example through a shared language; or hindering it, for example through the influence of stereotypical views of the other party, which means that methodologies for effective intercultural communication and for promoting more dialogical and reflective kinds of learning have much to contribute.

Attention should also be paid to the institutional structures and processes in place, how these influence the solutions people come to, and what the implications are for learning. Mutual learning works better when the technical content is a good fit but also when the actors involved have appropriate methodological support and can take time to understand the process shaping what gets shared and how. The political, technical and cultural aspects are intertwined, and combining them effectively can ensure the atmosphere of mutual respect that is a precondition for mutual learning.

## Policy implications

What can be done to accelerate mutual learning informed by the important development experiences of rising power countries?

- Policy and research communities in the rising powers would benefit from reviewing what has worked well and why, identifying lessons learned using a more systematic approach focusing on the role of political economy and adaptation processes, in addition to technical design. This will contribute to the ongoing management of change in their own countries, as well as to global learning about managing social policy and health system change.
- Greater recognition is needed of the value of opportunities for policy actors in the rising powers to exchange experiences and research findings between countries, explore solutions to common problems and contribute to global understandings about options for social policy and health system development in contexts of rapid change.
- Policy actors in low and middle-income countries would also benefit from opportunities to learn more about the rising powers and test the local applicability of lessons from their experiences, as already takes place in the context of South-South Development Cooperation.
- Global actors involved in promoting mutual learning need to respect the diversity in experiences of development that may be relevant in different contexts, avoiding the imposition of hierarchies of knowledge and ensuring appropriate methodologies are used to build inter-cultural communication.
- Policy actors and analysts from countries like the UK and other developed countries (i.e. members of the OECD) who are familiar with international development experiences can also contribute to more effective sharing of experiences from both their own domestic learning as well as that of the rising powers, drawing on the lessons from several decades of attempts to support policy transfer for the development of health and social sectors.



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## Credits

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