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**Innovative Social Policies for Inclusive and Resilient Labour Markets in Europe**

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Best practice report on policy learning infrastructures in innovative labour market policies

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**Abstract:**

This report synthesizes the findings of 11 country reports on policy learning in labour market and social policies that were conducted as part of WP5 of the INSPIRES project, which is funded by the 7th Framework Program of the EU-Commission (http://www.inspires-research.eu/). Notably, this report puts forward objectives of policy learning, discusses tools, processes and institutions of policy learning and presents the impacts of various tools and structures of the policy learning infrastructure for the actual policy learning process. The report defines three objectives of policy learning: evaluation and assessment of policy effectiveness, vision building and planning, and consensus building. In the 11 countries under consideration, the tools and processes of the policy learning, infrastructure can be classified into three broad groups: public bodies, expert councils, and parties, interest groups and the private sector. Finally, we develop four recommendations for policy learning: Firstly, learning processes should keep the balance between centralisation and plurality. Secondly, learning processes should be kept stable beyond the usual political business cycles. Thirdly, policy learning tools and infrastructures should be sufficiently independent from political influence or bias. Fourth, Policy learning tools and infrastructures should balance out mere effectiveness, evaluation and vision building.

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| **PP** | Restricted to other programme participants | |
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# Contenu

# 1. Introduction

Identifying best practices in the field of policy learning in an objective way is not a straightforward task. Different learning practices or tools may be evaluated differently by different actors, depending on their policy objectives. Should knowledge be concentrated in the hands of governmental department, so as to allow efficient problem-solving oriented policies? Or should it be widespread among interest groups, with the risk that knowledge is primarily being used for political reasons of single actors? Of course, it is impossible to answer these questions in an objective, scientifically valid way.

As a result, in this report we have decided to follow a rather different path. We first identify a number of objectives that may be pursued by policy learning processes in democratic politics. These objectives have been identified inductively on the basis of 11 national reports produced in the context of the INSPIRES project[1]. Policy learning infrastructures are then assessed in relation to how successful and/or promising they are in reaching these objectives.

What do we mean by policy learning infrastructure? The idea originates from the political science literature on policy learning which uses this notion in rather broad sense. We rely on Peter Hall's well known definition of policy learning as a 'deliberate attempt to adjust the goals and techniques of policy in response to past experience and new information' (Hall, 1993). Understood in this way, policy learning can occur in many different ways. For example, evaluation reports may show that a policy is not working as expected. Similarly, monitoring indicators may reveal that some interventions are not delivering the expected results. Policy-makers may react to this knowledge and try something else. Alternatively, research may highlight the emergence of a new problem, of which policy-makers were not aware. An additional route for policy learning may simply be the observation of other political units experimenting a new tool or policy that seems promising. Other political units may be other countries or sub-units in federal polities. Overall, one can argue that policy learning may follow many different routes. What characterizes the process is the fact that it refers to knowledge that is developed and/or acquired and that has some impact on policy-making, at least potentially.

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[1] INSPIRES countries are: Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK.

Against this background, the notion of policy learning infrastructure refers to institutions, rules, practices, actors and possible other structures that can participate to the policy learning process in democratic polities. For example, most countries have research units within their Ministries that oversee evaluation studies, monitor relevant indicators, and participate to policy planning efforts. Some countries have developed dedicated outfits that should act with more independence from the government, such as the Dutch "Scientific council for government policy" or the Swiss "Federal expert commissions". Outside the realm of the state, political parties and organized interests are also contributors to the policy learning infrastructure, by running research institutes or foundations. This is the case in Germany or in the UK. Finally, civil society actors, such as think tanks and NGOs can also be considered as part of the policy making infrastructure, to the extent that they produce and/or develop knowledge that is then brought to public attention in the context of policy debates. In addition, public and private universities and research institutes potentially contribute to policy learning overall.

It is clear that in a democratic polity, policy learning processes can be highly politicized exercises. Scientific knowledge is seldom neutral in relation to political and economic interests. As a result, knowledge is likely to become a weapon in political fights. In this respect, dispassionate debates on problems and solutions based on a common understanding of the problem and on an agreement with regard to the desirable outcome are probably the exception rather than the rule. For this reason, a policy learning infrastructure must be understood as a contested terrain. One qualitative element of a country's policy learning infrastructure, which may exist or not, are sufficient checks and balances as well as trusted 'impartial' sources of factual information so that in the political battle not 'anything goes'. In other words, if outright lies have a chance to be detected as lies and if the political culture excludes liars from influencing the debate, then the battleground in which knowledge is used as weapons becomes better defined.

This report is structured as follows. First, we are going to present different objectives of policy learning. Secondly, we are going to outline the different tools and processes in the policy learning infrastructure. In the third part of the report, we will present possible effects of various elements of the policy learning infrastructure on actual learning practices.

## 2. Objectives of policy learning

The national reports produced in the context of the INSPIRES project have allowed us to identify a number of objectives that may be pursued by policy learning and supported by a policy learning infrastructure. In this section, we report on the most important ones.

### 2.1 Evaluation and assessment of policy effectiveness

This objective is by far the most often mentioned in the national reports, and can take different forms. Many countries have audit or evaluation units within the governmental machinery or at some distance from it.

Other countries tend to outsource evaluation research in specific policies. This is common in the UK, in Switzerland, in Germany, in the Netherlands among other countries. In the UK, systematic policy evaluation has taken up a big role, to the extent that it might obscure more fundamental analysis. "… evaluations conducted by the [British] civil service (or outsourced from it) are often rather limited in scope. Their remits tend to pertain to the efficiency or effectiveness of specific instruments, rather than examining or questioning the underlying rationale for policy decisions." (McEnhill et al., 2015: 58). In the Dutch case, social policy evaluations are often outsourced to private research institutes rather than to universities (Aa et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that evaluation within government units is not necessarily more critical or broader in its conclusions than the ones produced by private providers. To the contrary, university-based evaluations are more likely to result into more far reaching conclusions, either by the reports themselves or publications based on them.

Pilots are also a common practice to assess and evaluate policy effectiveness. Relevant policy innovations were piloted before being rolled out nationally in Belgium, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK. Other countries have had some experience with pilots, though on a less general scale. This is the case of Hungary, and Greece. The Greek report points out that recent innovations were virtually always adopted without pilots. This is partly due to the fact that the country has experienced a state of permanent urgency in the period under consideration, and that piloting requires a time frame that was incompatible with the country's situation. However, other factors may have played a role, as even pilots that were planned and for which EU funding had been secured were not carried out because of disagreements among the relevant national institutions[2].

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[2] This event refers to the program known as "Operational Program for the Development of Human Resources in Greece", (Papadopoulou et al., 2015: 41).

While piloting policies may seem a sensible approach, pilots are not always used as intended. In the UK, the NDYP pilot (New deal for young people) was rolled out nationally before the results of the final evaluation were available (McEnhill et al., 2015: 44). In Germany, the *MoZArT*-Pilots (*Modellprojekte zur verbesserten Zusammenarbeit von Arbeits- und Sozialämtern*) were declared insufficient and abandoned to the benefit of a bigger reform before the evaluation results had been made available (Champion, 2013).

The last observation suggests that pilots may also serve related objectives than the explicit one of assessing the effectiveness of a policy/intervention. Consensus building, or buying time, may be one of them, as argued below.

Assessment of policy effectiveness takes also place in a broader way, not so much by evaluating individual policy but by monitoring some relevant indicators, such as the long term unemployment rate, youth unemployment, etc... In this respect, the benchmarking of a country against other ones is useful process to identify areas where there might be some scope for improving policy effectiveness.

## 2.2. Vision building, planning

Policy learning can also be understood in broader terms and refer to a more forward looking and fundamental planning function. Looking beyond assessing the effectiveness of polices and interventions, this objective of policy learning processes encompasses contributions to public debates on the overall direction of policy. For example, since the 1990s we have witnessed in the vast majority of European countries, a reorientation of social and labor market policies towards activation, i.e. policies aiming at putting individuals back into jobs before paying benefits (Bonoli, 2013). This process has also been the result of policy learning, though on a more general level. Of course, like all human activities, policy learning is not immune to mechanisms of emulation and fashion following. These mechanisms may have played a role in the "activation turn" that has been taking place in Europe over the last twenty years or so.

The policy learning infrastructure can contribute to this function objective of building a vision, and planning overall orientations of policy. The key actors in relation to this objective include probably less government departments and ministries and more political outfits, and academia. Envisioning new policies is a highly political task, and in this respect cannot be successfully carried out by civil servants, who are required to follow the directions decided by democratically elected politicians. In

other words, civil servants tend to operate in a context where they have less freedom and capacity to operate creatively, which would allow them to come up with innovative solutions. Although we need to note that the clandestine fore-runner of the Hartz Commission, the meetings organized by the Bertelsmann foundation, included high-ranking civil servants (Hassel and Schiller, 2010).

Vision building can as a result be understood as a more collective endeavor, to which many diverse actors participate, including political parties, academia, civil society, the social partners, and where government officials and hierarchical modes of governance have a more limited role. Independence from government is sought, for instance, in some existing institutions. These include the Dutch Scientific council of government policy (WRR) which is staffed by academics, or the Economic and Social councils (or committee) of Spain and Greece, which are multipartite outfits where the state is represented together with other key actors.

## 2.3. Consensus building

There are various ways in which policy learning can contribute to consensus building processes in democratic polities. Societal consensus may result from the repeated production of a given piece of knowledge, by actors belonging to different political camps and over time. A good example of this process is the notion that pension systems need to be reformed because of demographic ageing. In most countries, this notion appears in the public debate sometime in the 1990s, usually as a result of the publication of demographic projections showing the system will become unsustainable. Typically, a single report, regardless of its quality, is insufficient to generate a reformist dynamics capable of leading to actual policy change. In most cases, initial attempts at adapting pensions to an ageing society are fought by many actors, who dispute the need for such interventions. This is the typical situation in the early to mid-1990s in the field of pension policy. In the following years, more and more knowledge is generated on the impact of ageing on pension budgets, by a large variety of actors, including governments, the European Union, the OECD, think tanks, interest organizations and so forth.[3] At the same time, opponents of pension reform are unable to produce evidence that population ageing is not happening or that it will not impact severely on pension budgets. As a result, by the mid-late 2000s, a consensus emerges in most countries that pension reforms are indeed needed, and they are more easily adopted (Bonoli, 2000)

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[3] Private insurance companies are part of this: The lowering of German state pensions and the strengthening of a private complementary pillar was clearly influenced by the finance lobby. If the state had the money to subsidize Riester pensions, it could have used the same money to stabilize the pension funds. However, opening up a new financial market was a goal of its own.

In this respect, consensus building requires a pluralistic policy learning infrastructure, where actors of different political orientations and with a certain distance from the state can contribute to the process.

Consensus building can also take place as a result of more deliberate endeavors. This is sometimes the case with ad hoc commissions that are set up by governments with a view to elaborate reform proposals and include all the relevant interests. Sweden has a tradition of such commissions, known as "inquiry commission", which are typically composed of members representing employers, unions and other relevant interests, and must agree on some reform proposals. As a result, inquiry commissions seem particularly suited to develop reform proposals that will then be acceptable to a majority of relevant actors once they reach the political arena. In Switzerland "federal expert commissions" fulfill a similar function. They also provide a "testing ground" for policy ideas that are being considered by the government before being announced to the general public.

Consensus building is an important function of the policy learning infrastructure, especially in veto point dense polities, such as Switzerland or Germany in our sample. In these countries, a broad degree of consensus on a policy is needed in order to legislate; otherwise opponents can make use of the available veto points and prevent the adoption of unwanted legislation (Bonoli et al., 2015, Trein et al., 2015). Consensus building is also important in countries with strong organized interests, particularly unions. In our sample, this is the case in Sweden and Italy. In these countries, the trade unions are often de facto veto players, either because of their mobilizing capacity (Italy) or because their involvement in policy implementation (Sweden). As a result, their approval of or at least acquiescence to government policy is an essential precondition for success in the law making process.

## 3. Tools, processes and institutions

There are different types of learning tools, processes and institutions in European political economies. Mainly, we can distinguish three main groups of elements that make up the learning infrastructure: Public bodies, expert councils, as well as partisan, interest group and civil society related actors. In each of these categories, there are some groups or institutions that are rather independent from political interests, whereas others are clearly under the influence of actors with a strong political

agenda. In the following, we are going to explain the different categories of learning infrastructures and discuss the independence of their members from political influence.[4]

## 3.1 Public bodies

The first category of learning infrastructure elements entails public bodies. Notably, these are ministries, independent agencies, parliamentary groups and bodies as well as subnational governments, i.e. members of a federation or municipal governments. The first group are ministries at the national level, for example the national ministry for labor. According to the national reports, ministries are not only important political actors, but can also provide information that is relevant for policy learning. For example, in Italy, the national ministries also serve as experts in their relevant policy field, for example the ministry of labor provides important expertise regarding employment policies. In Slovenia, it is also the ministry of labor that is the most significant expert in terms of expertise on labor market issues. Another example is Switzerland, where the national ministries create expertise. Moreover, under the umbrella of the ministry of labor, there are subordinated administrative agencies that create knowledge relevant for policy learning. For example, the national employment office in Hungary. These agencies are independent units, but under the directive of the national ministry. Consequently, they are often very well-funded, but also subject to political influence by the ministry and the government. This entails that the national ministry can abolish or change these units in case it is dissatisfied with their services or considers that they are not needed anymore. This happened for example with the National Labor Office in Hungary, which was abolished in 2015 (Lengyel et al., 2015: 61-62).

Amongst the public bodies, there are a number of institutions that are charged with executive functions, but do not directly report to the government. For example the Federal Employment Office, in Germany is an independent body of public law that is charged with the implementation of the national unemployment insurance. One of its tasks is the enquiry of national labor market data. Although it is formally under jurisdictional oversight of the national ministry for labor, it acts rather independently. A similar example is the Spanish public employment observatory (State) (Martínez-Molina et al., 2015: 34). Another example is the Lowpay commission in the UK. It is an advisory non-departmental public body that is sponsored by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and that advises the national government on the adaptation of the minimum wage. Although it is

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[4] Another element of the policy learning infrastructure are institutionalized surveys (panel surveys or repeated cross-sectional surveys) which were not created for a specific purpose and which are available to the research community at no or little cost. This has four advantages: 1. The questions in these surveys were not constructed with a specific political purpose in mind; so the findings should be less biased. 2. You have not only a snapshot but a long-term view. 3. Findings can be tested and criticized by other researchers. Insofar as variables relevant to a specific question can be found in any of these surveys, answers can be found much quicker and at much lower cost than in the case that you have to start a new survey of its own for each new question that comes up.

under the umbrella of a governmental department, it is relatively independent from political influence. In Germany, the IAB (Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung) is an example of this kind of organization. It is a large research unit, which is formally part of the Federal Employment Agency, but acts more independently than the agency, due to its ties with the academic community. Its research tasks go far beyond the collection of administrative labour market data, for example, the IAB runs several important national surveys among employers and the population (Jansen and Knuth, 2015).

A second group of public bodies that are relevant for policy learning are parliamentary research services and committees. In order to deal with complex and complicated problems, modern parliaments work in committees. Usually, these committees comprise of members from all parties represented in parliament and aim to come up with a proposal that can find majority in the national parliament. Although their function is mainly political, they are part of the policy learning infrastructure, since parliamentarians familiarize themselves with a problem, research results and possible solutions. Notably, the British and the Greek report mentioned parliamentary committees to be important parts of the policy learning infrastructure in their countries. Another way of how parliamentary bodies may influence on policy learning is via parliamentary research services. Some parliaments, such as the federal German parliament have scientific services, which all members of parliament can use in order to request information. Thereby researchers are collecting relevant information regarding a certain problem and inform the MPs about the ongoing debate on the topic as well as possible policy options. Using this information allows Members of Parliament to learn in a problem solving manner. However, it is likely that the information and research results from the scientific services of the federal parliament are being used also in political way, in order to maintain or support a certain political position. What is more, these researchers do mostly 'desk research' (including juridical expertise) and do not have the capacity of collecting original empirical data.

Then, there is another group of public bodies in the policy learning infrastructure that are completely independent from the national government. These are above all the central banks, which provide independent statistical information and are supposed to act according to economic problem pressures and be independent from political influences. Independent central banks ought to update their beliefs based on problem solving approaches rather than political agendas. Consequently, they are institutions of independent policy learning. Technically, the same should be true for other offices that are charged with the provision of information or the supervision of public finances. For example the Swedish national audit office is charged with controlling government finances. It is independent from the national government and under the oversight of the national parliament. Similarly,

statistical offices are an important element of the policy learning infrastructure, which is – at least in theory – independent from the influence of the national government. National statistical offices have the task to provide accurate statistical information on social, economic, environmental etc. matters that can be used by researchers, policymakers and other actors in the political arena. Under normal circumstances, national statistical offices should be immune to political interests. However, it can happen that governments attempt to influence the work and the data output of national statistical offices. A prominent case of this is the Greek National Statistical Office (ELSTAT), which has been subject to political influence on its leadership.

Two other public bodies of the policy learning infrastructure are subnational governments and universities. Both are very different from one another, but they are similar in the sense that they are, to a certain extent, rather independent from the national government.[5] Subnational governments in federal states have a far reaching autonomy from the national government. If they enjoy considerable authority in a certain policy field, i.e. in Switzerland, they can serve as a test ground for innovative policy solutions, which later on might be implemented in the rest of the country, or in other constituent units of the federation. Universities are independent research institutions, self-governed, but publicly financed. Basically, they are the most independent from political interests among the public bodies of the policy learning infrastructure.

## 3.2 Expert councils

The second major category in the learning infrastructure entails expert councils. These are located at the intersection of the public and the private sphere. In fact, they are commissions that are either permanent or not, which are composed of experts on a certain topic. However, the members of these commissions are not employed to work in the commission. Some of them might be under public employment, for example in a university, whereas others could be members of interest groups, i.e. unions or employer organizations.

Examples for expert councils are temporary commissions, which have been created with the purpose to find solutions to a problem. A popular example for this type of learning infrastructure are the commissions that were set up to solve the problem that has been caused by aging populations for retirement funds. In several countries expert commissions dealt with this issue, for example the Rürup or the Herzog commissions in Germany, or the Belgian pension reform commission (Jansen and Knuth, 2015, Struyven and Pollet, 2015: 11) as well as the Bakker Commission in the Netherlands

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[5] Of course, fiscal and political autonomy of municipalities and subnational governments in federal countries vary across countries (Hueglin and Fenna, 2006).

(Aa et al., 2015: 39-40). These commissions consisted of experts from different parties, as well as members of the main interest groups and social partners. The goal of these commissions is twofold. On the one hand, they aim at finding solutions to a pressing problem, i.e. sustainability of finances of the pension funds. On the other hand, they have also a consensus finding mission, in the sense that they aim at finding solutions that are also politically feasible in the sense that all main stakeholders agree to them. Different examples for these commissions are the Swedish temporary inquiry commission, the Biagi commission in Italy, as well as the Greek ad-hoc commissions (Papadopoulou et al., 2015: 33).

Apart from the mentioned temporary commissions, permanent expert commissions play an important role for policy learning in many countries. Examples for this are the Greek Tripartite Bodies (OAED + NILHR), which assemble members of government and social partners in order to deal with labor market problems. Another example is the Dutch Scientific Council (WRR) that consists of 5-11 professors that are appointed and do research that is mandated by the national government. The reports are published, i.e. reports on labor market issues. Although this research is government financed, the members of the scientific council remain independent professors. Other countries do also have temporary expert commissions. For example, Switzerland has a number of permanent expert commissions, such as the Federal Commission on Racism (EKR) or the Federal Commission on Immunization (EKIF). These are independent, but permanent commissions, which advise government and other actors on how to deal with certain problems, based on expertise. In the domains of social policy, there are also permanent councils, for example the Spanish Youth Council, which deals with questions regarding youth unemployment.

## 3.3 Parties, interest groups and the private sector

A third category of the policy learning infrastructure are institutions and organizations that are related to political parties, interest groups and the civil society. This group is the most heterogeneous, both in terms of varieties of their legal status as well as regarding the political independence of the members.

To begin with, political parties can be an important part of the policy learning infrastructure in a country. For example, in Germany, all the main political parties are linked to foundations, which finance research projects and provide stipends to Ph.D. students. What is more, they provide the political parties with information regarding certain policy problems and suggest solutions. Examples for this are Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, which is linked to the CDU, or the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung that has connections with the SPD (Jansen and Knuth, 2015). Similarly in the UK, research related to

political parties is an important part of the policy learning infrastructure. However, other than the German parties, which are linked to foundations, the main political parties in Britain outsource their research to private think tanks on the basis of contracts (McEnhill et al., 2015: 56).

In addition to political parties, interest groups and social partners do also run their own research infrastructure. For example, again in Germany, the trade union umbrella organization is closely related to a research foundation, the Hans-Böckler Stiftung, which has its own research units and commissions outside research on social and labor market problems. Another example is Sweden, where the national employers' organization provides research, which has been referred to by political parties during reform processes.

Eventually, there is the private sector of research organizations, which are technically completely independent from public influence. Nonetheless, they depend on demands and contracts by public actors. These organizations comprise of institutes that are independent from party influence, for example in the UK or in Belgium. An example from Germany would be Bertelsmann Foundation. These organizations are either for profit companies that depend on contract research. In this case, they are highly dependent on governments and public bodies as well as political parties, which might outsource their research demands to them. On the other hand, if these private actors are foundations having their own funds, they are less dependent on contract research. Academics are de facto very independent, however this independence is largely founded on ethical grounds. De iure, it is the state, i.e. national or subnational parliaments that approve university funding, and often governmental departments have a say in the occupation of vacant positions. However, it is rather unlikely that they interfere directly into the research agendas.

## 4. Differences and impact of policy learning infrastructures

Following the mentioned tools and processes of policy learning, we can distinguish a number of ways in how the policy learning infrastructures impact on policy learning practices. Notably, we found four dimensions, of variation regarding the policy learning practices that either have positive or negative impacts for policy learning.

1. **Centralization vs. pluralism:** The first dimension opposes centralization and pluralism in the policy learning practices. Centralized learning processes entail that the learning infrastructure concentrates policy learning concerning a specific issue around a very limited number of tools and processes of the policy-learning infrastructure. For example, if policy

learning occurs around the national ministry and in some related and subordinated bodies only, without taking into account competing processes, such as independently organized research. Another example for centralized policy learning processes is if learning is only based on the contribution of research that is related to a partisan organization. This could happen for example, if a campaigning party promises reforms to voters, and once in power, the party implements a reform only based on learning from its own research institutions. The consequences of centralized learning are that solutions can be found quickly and effectively. However, there is a risk that the proposed reforms are based too much on the policy learning processes and tools that are related to a single political actor, i.e. a national ministry, a political party, or a think tank that is related to a certain interest group. This bears the risk that a reform can be implemented quickly, but also that a new government will undo a reform, simply because it did not agree to it. On the other hand, policy learning can be a very pluralized process. This means that learning regarding a certain problem can happen in many different tools and processes. For example, policy learning regarding a certain issue can occur in several public bodies, expert councils, and organizations of political parties as well as independent think tanks at the same time. Pluralized processes of policy learning have the advantage that the number of perspectives on a problem is widened considerably, which can entail a more profound analysis and problem solving than when learning is very centralized. However, such processes of policy learning risk to result into a cacophony of different research contributions that do not allow for an effective synthesis. Then it is very hard for decision-makers to come to the formulation of a coherent solution.

- *Recommendation 1:* Policy learning tools and processes should keep the balance between centrality and plurality of policy learning. Problem solving should take into account as many different views as possible, however without loosing sight of a coherent conclusion.

2. **Stability vs. discontinuity:** The second dimension entails dyad of stability and discontinuity of policy learning. This means that policy learning processes and tools regarding a certain problem can either be stable and continuous, or change frequently. Both elements have advantages and disadvantages for policy learning. Stability in the policy learning infrastructure means that, regarding a certain problem, the type and number of involved learning processes and tools does not change, neither does the hierarchy amongst them if there is one. If we construct an example, learning concerning pension reforms could always be based on temporary expert councils only. In effect, stability and continuity of policy learning infrastructures should be positive for a learning process, because it creates enough

time for doing research, verify findings and create sustainable solutions. On the other hand, too much stability in the policy learning process might be problematic. This should be particularly the case if stable learning processes come along with an inflexibility to find new solutions. For example, the learning infrastructure suggests always the same solution, although it is obvious that it is not feasible to solve a certain problem sustainably. What is more, they may only update the same data series, without exploring alternative evidence from other sources. This has also to do with the initial investment of effort needed to try something new in terms of data analysis. In these cases, it would be necessary to take a fresh look at a problem, but it does not happen, for example for political reasons, i.e. because political interests penetrate the policy-learning infrastructure too much. The other side of this dyad is discontinuity of policy learning. This means that the learning processes and tools, which are being used in the policy process, change frequently. An example for this is if with every change of government the policy-learning infrastructure changes also and the contents of policy learning along with it. This can be highly problematic, if these dynamics come along with a loss of prior knowledge or the stop of research projects that are currently running. In a worst case scenario, a new government closes pilots that have just started and sets up different ones that are staffed by researchers that are close to the governing party and therefore are more likely to produce the results that are more in line with political interests of government. However, at times, discontinuity might have positive effects; if existing research programs, for example those run by the administration itself, do not yield innovative solutions. In such a case, it might be important to break with existing procedures and include new – or other – learning tools and processes.

- ***Recommendation 2:*** The second recommendation is that policy learning processes have to have a certain stability and continuity that goes beyond the usual political business cycles. Otherwise, there is a risk that too many political interests are capturing innovations and knowledge to a too large extent.

3. **Independence vs politicization:** The third dimension on which the functioning of policy learning infrastructures varies are independence of policy learning infrastructures, tools and learning processes as well as their capturing by political interests. This problem has already been mentioned in the previous section, where we introduced the different types of policy learning processes and tools. Independence in the policy learning infrastructure means that the tools that are being used to generate policy-relevant knowledge without the influence of political interests. For example, independent knowledge production entails that the research or information that is being used in the policy formulation process has been made without a

specific political agenda in mind. Ideally, information would come from independent researchers, which have enough resources to do their work without being constrained by the state, partisan or special interests. Reports that suggests solutions to important public problems should be balanced and focused on problem solving rather than serving the interests of specific groups. On the other hand, policy learning tools and processes can be highly politicized. The country reports showed that governing parties might attempt to influence policy learning by just referring to research that has been produced by foundations or think tanks that are close to their own positions. Such practices are particularly problematic, if there are no other learning tools that balance some of the possibly biased research. Politicization is even more problematic, if independent public bodies or expert councils are politically biased, such as a national statistical office, or a temporary expert commission. However, even independent experts can be politicized and bias their research results according to political interest, such as it happened regarding tobacco smoke and global warming (Oreskes and Conway, 2010).

- ***Recommendation 3:*** Policy learning tools and infrastructures should be sufficiently independent from political influence or bias.

4. **Effectiveness evaluation vs. vision building:** The fourth dimension, on which policy learning tools and infrastructures vary, concerns the differences between effectiveness evaluation and vision building. Effectiveness evaluation refers to the evaluations of public policies, which aims at finding out whether the implementation of a specific policy instruments has yielded the desired results. Such practices are common in many countries. What usually happens is that after a reform has been implemented, researchers assess whether it has been effective, what needs to be adapted and whether programs should be prolonged. Whereas such practices are useful, they do not necessarily result into the development of a vision, based on the assessment of existing instruments. Mostly, there are a number of evaluation reports, which are however not well connected to one another in the sense that they provide a common vision for further reforms. Vision building refers to a learning process with a more long term goal in mind. Thereby, policy makers would not only assess existing instruments in a retrospective manner, but also try to learn prospectively in a more general manner. For example to create a handbook of best practices from various kinds of policy experiences. However, something like this is problematic to be implemented. Firstly, today's policy making is highly complex and therefore it is difficult to draw lessons across several policy fields. What is more, evaluations of different policies are done by experts from different fields, which have often a hard time to effectively communicate with one another.

Secondly, vision-building is also a political act as such, as it comes along with prioritizing one goal over another. Yet modern policies often have a number of conflicting goals and aims, which need to be balanced out effectively. Yet, as long as policymakers need to compete for votes from the same electorate, they will always provide different visions, because otherwise they cannot separate their positions effectively from the ones of their competitors. In terms of policy learning, political competition necessarily comes along with different interpretations of the same research and the politicization of new ideas and knowledge.

- ***Recommendation 4:*** Policy learning tools and infrastructures should balance out mere effectiveness evaluation and vision building.

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