

A study of peer learning in the public sector

Experience, experiments and ideas to guide future practice

Part Two: Experiments

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Contents

Informal experiments to help address nagging questions	3
Experiments that help us learn.....	3
Experiment 1. Matching peers for effective peer learning.....	5
Experiment 2. Working with peers in-country to maximise learning and impact	12
Experiment 3. Different approaches to direct peer learning between countries	19
Experiment 4. What do peer learners want and what do they get?	24
Lessons from these experiments, and the need for more.....	31
Conclusions and next steps.....	34

Informal experiments to help address nagging questions

Experiments that help us learn

The last section provided a mapping of past (and current) experience with peer learning, based on a study of 52 organisations facilitating such learning, over 80 individuals who have been peers, and cases of peer learning in practice. The exercise culminated in the identification of a stylised peer learning process map. This summarised what we have learned about the process facilitators and learners typically follow from engagement through to learning at scale. We believe there is value in identifying the various stages identified in such process and thinking through the tools that can be used to pass through each stage and the risks at each stage.

Error! Reference source not found. summarised some of these ideas, but the discussion offers much more detail. Both the figure and supporting discussion have gaps, however, given a lack of evidence in the mapping exercise. These gaps raise vital questions about how to do peer learning, which were mentioned in concluding the last section.

The current section summarises four experiments we undertook to shed more light on these outstanding questions. The experiments were performed rapidly to contribute to the current study, and were thus informal in nature. This means that they should not be treated as seriously as a more formal, structured experiments aimed at testing the validity of specific theories or solutions. The informal experiments here were undertaken to add some ideas to the discussion and fill some gaps in the general map provided in the last section, not to test ideas or solutions:

- *The first involved examining different ways of matching peers from multiple countries who participated in a foundational learning event lasting ten days. The goal was to see how the different approaches to matching peers fostered interaction, knowledge generation, and sharing and exchange during this event. The lessons from this were intended to contribute to the knowledge about matching produced in the mapping.*

- *The second experiment involved trying different ways of structuring peer engagement across one government, over a five-month period, to see how different methods fostered interaction, knowledge generation, sharing and exchange, and even reflection, application and diffusion.* The goal was to add to the knowledge about diffusing lessons between learners, which was an area in which the mapping exercise raised more questions than answers.
- *The third study took the form of a natural experiment examining transnational learning on anticorruption reforms through peer engagement.* Different countries have used different approaches to such engagement, financed through technical assistance by donors. The variation allows one to examine differential impacts of these approaches, with particular attention to the way lessons transfer from one set of peers who have undergone an apparently successful experience in their country share to peers embarking on such experience in a different country. It shows that different approaches foster different types of knowledge transfer and diffusion.
- *The fourth study is also a natural experiment, focusing on what peer learners hoped for and what they actually got from formal peer review exercises.* It tackled questions about peer learning by engaging participants who had been involved in OECD Governance Reviews. These reviews assess public governance arrangements from an international comparative perspective and include a peer pressure and learning focus. A variety of questions can be asked when comparing the experiences of officials who have taken part in these peer reviews with those of their colleagues who were not involved in the engagement. The experiment examined the differences in the experiences of the two groups concerning: (i) Their understanding of what is meant by a 'peer'; (ii) Whether they have had sustained contact with a peer and the nature of that contact; and (iii) The benefit (or otherwise) from that peer contact including the practical lessons that were learned.

This section reflects on all four experiments in the order introduced. It concludes by reflecting on the way lessons from these experiments help fill gaps in the peer learning map, especially with regards to: (i) matching in the foundational stage (including through traditional

technical assistance mechanisms); (ii) methods to ensure sustained contact between individuals (and foster individual learning outcomes; and (iii) promote broad learning, and diffusion or learning, within one government (such that there are organisational, sectoral and even national impacts of the peer learning process). The conclusion also identifies additional types of experiments that might be useful to further illuminate ideas on what works (and why) with peer learning in public sector reform in development.

Experiment 1. Matching peers for effective peer learning

Questions about peer matching

Many individual learners are attracted to courses, meetings and events where they rub shoulders with people in similar jobs from different nations. Governments often support the participation of their people in such events because of the supposed gains from engaging with a diverse set of peers. Additionally, these events often involve directed engagement from lecturers and speakers on important topics. This teaching is sometimes seen to have value in itself and sometimes seen as promoting and facilitating the peer engagement and learning.

The events in question sometimes take the form of executive teaching courses, or annual workshops or meetings of professional bodies, or similar meetings. Most organisations that facilitate these meetings assess success by asking participants about how much they learned in the directed parts of the curriculum (asking, for instance, if participants learned anything about better accounting practices in a lecture) or even more basically how they would rate different parts of the curriculum (asking if lecture three should be given a 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5). Such evaluations focus provides little to no information about the learning from peers in the event, however. Even where course evaluations ask about group work, they seldom broach the question of whether peers learned from each other or how this happened or how this could be done better.

The failure to evaluate such issues is unfortunate, and is a lost opportunity to learn about ways of matching and organising peers for effective peer learning. Lessons are needed in this respect, given observations about the importance of matching and organising in the peer

learning process. The mapping in the previous section suggests the effectiveness of peer learning is largely contingent on who the peers are and how they are connected (the matching challenge) and how they are engaged (the organising challenge). They argue that peer learning results often depend on identifying ‘the right’ peers to engage with and involve, ensuring peers are effectively matched through initial or foundational events, getting peers fully engaged in the process (to give and take), and minimising logistical impediments to peer engagement. The more one can know about how to address these issues, the better.

Getting to know more

A semi-structured experiment was conducted to shed light on the issue of peer matching (ensuring peers are effectively matched through initial or foundational events). It followed a simple design: 55 development professionals from over 30 countries, were attending a ten day ‘foundational event’; The professionals were organised into ‘peer groups’ based on different criteria; The professionals were asked to meet with their groups regularly, and produce a product; The quality of engagement and the extent of peer learning in the final product were used to assess the effectiveness of the matching; Peers in the different groups were also asked about their interest in continuing communication with peers from their groups.

The criteria used to organise the peer groups (and match individuals) were informed by those identified as important by peer learners in the mapping exercise described in the previous section. These included (a) the formal role of peers, (b) task (or policy) type, and (c) problems, challenges and struggles faced. No formal hypothesis was introduced as to how different groups would work, as this informal study was more about constructing future hypotheses than testing established ways of thinking.

The professionals were grouped based on their own identification of challenges and learning expectations in the event. Each ‘peer’ was asked (before they met) to identify at least three such challenges and expectations. These were then assessed by the author and ten groups were created (of five or six peers, considered a good size for team-based learning). The idea of starting matching processes with self-nominated data was intentional; peer learning

involves transfers between individuals (or sometimes groups) and must begin with some sense of the learning objectives of these learners (which turns the learner into a learning agent rather than a learning target). The following groups were created:

- *Common 'formal role' groups:* Senior civil servants and ministers concerned with service delivery; Mid-level managers concerned with service delivery; Senior female managers trying to lead reforms.
- *Common task (or policy) type groups:* Anticorruption; Economic growth (especially through economic zones); Financial sector policy reforms.
- *Common problems, challenges, and struggles groups:* Building teams for effective reform; Managing upwards with difficult political decision-makers; Getting other agencies/ministries on board with reform; Creating new entities to drive change.

The peers were given time to meet each day, as a group, with formalised requirements about what they should do and what kinds of products they should produce. These were sometimes rigid and sometimes more open, but ensured that the groups did meet and had a purpose in the meetings (taking away any potential for complicated logistics like the difficulty of arranging meeting times to undermine the exercise). Most of the activities centred on the peers introducing themselves and their challenges or discussing content from lectures they had all attended. These focal points were intended to ensure that all the peers could contribute, and that there was some common, non-threatening experience they could use to facilitate deeper discussion about more unique, personal experiences. The regularity of engagement was also intended (given how the earlier mapping indicated the value of peers meeting regularly, and how this regularity promoted trust between peers).

The group meetings culminated in an end product, which involved a presentation of what they had learned both in the classroom and from the peer interaction. As noted, the quality of this product was one way of assessing the impact of different matching criteria. Quality was assessed by examining the new peer-driven ideas in each example, the way the groups drew on their different experiences, and the interaction of peers in the presentation. The impact of the different matching modalities was also assessed progressively during the ten days, through participant observation in group meetings. Peers were also asked at the end of

the exercise about their desire to continue engaging with peers in their groups, given the learning that had already occurred and what they imagined might still be possible.

Emerging observations

All ten groups were largely intact throughout the ten-day period, with only three participants moving groups because they thought there was a better match elsewhere. After this minimal churning, all participants attended the majority of meetings and contributed to the final product. Such evidence suggests that the peer learning experience was sufficient for everyone to keep engaged. This is important to note because many peer learning initiatives and foundation events struggle to ensure this level of commitment and engagement: peers will often attend plenary events but use smaller group meetings to attend to other business, or will attend small group meetings but contribute only nominally. The positive engagement experienced here seems to have been a product of the design, which should be further analysed: having peer-influenced group identities, formal and regularised meeting times, specific expectations, and an end product may be vital to facilitate effective peer commitment and engagement in foundational events.

Beyond this, there were some important observations about the way peers were matched that suggest different strategies may be more useful in different situations and under different conditions.

The most effective peer learning tended to happen in the groups where peers had pre-identified the same problems (or type of problem). These problems focused mostly on softer issues in reform and change processes (like building teams, managing political interference, and garnering support from other agencies). The teams had to go through an initial process of distilling their own specific problems within each category and, when this was done, they generally found common ground for fruitful sharing and exchange. Final products reflected this clearly, with presentations reflecting on the various dimensions of each problem and examples of the various peer experiences, as well as examples of potential solutions (that also emerged from the peers' experiences). The details of these problems and the emergent ideas were not products of the lectures or plenary sessions but came purely from the peer discussions. A

number of the peers involved in these groups showed interesting in pairing up with another peer from whom they had learned in the ten days and whose country/workplace they wanted to visit.

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The groups that were matched according to formal position also produced positive learning results. The groups tended to structure themselves according to seniority and experience, and facilitated a vertical type of peer mentoring rather than the horizontal (equal) learning in the ‘problem’ groups. This meant, for example, that the older and more experienced members of each group dominated their groups and were seen as the most valuable source of lessons by other members. In the senior civil servant and ministers group, for instance, three participants who had been newly appointed looked to the other two more seasoned participants for lessons. Within the context of this structure, the peer exchange and learning seemed very valuable (especially for the younger peers). It appeared, interestingly, that the most effective learning opportunities also focused on problems in this group: learning happened more where group members could nominate common problems associated with the roles. This was reflected in the final presentations, where all three groups focused on a small number of commonly felt problems and shared ideas about why these problems persist and what could be done about them. In the group comprising female managers, for instance, the group discussed issues to do with taking tough decisions as a female manager, and difficulties with promotion and being taken seriously in male-dominated contexts. Some group members came away with practical ideas on how to improve their working environment to better play their roles and with a commitment from other peers to stay in contact and to advise on the implementation of these ideas.

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The groups focused on common tasks and policies were the least effective. Peers who were in these groups tended to get stuck on their individual experiences with the issues (like anti-corruption), and often failed to find common ground with respect to underlying philosophies and values. This meant that the group discussions were contentious and divisive, and peers were not encouraged to engage deeply. Final products tended to reflect this, with either one peer presenting his or her story (with others offering dissent or their own different stories) or with presentations that progressed one by one through the views of each member. This was tremendously interesting to observe, especially as many of the foundational events targeting peers tend to be task or policy of issue centred. Examples may be anticorruption workshops that bring people involved in such issues together, or public accounting meetings that gather those interested in such issues to discuss ‘what works’. Such focal points may be problematic to match peers in the learning process because they are too large for this type of learning and potentially divisive.

The observations suggest that peers from different contexts can be effectively matched in different ways. Matching according to tasks and policies and issues may be less effective than matching according to roles and problems, however. Even when the peers are matched according to roles, learning is best achieved by identifying and working through common problems.

The experiment is obviously limited (it involved little more than a foundational engagement, did not formalise opening hypotheses, or involve formal assessments). As a result, these findings should not be considered conclusive and should be further tested as hypotheses in other work. Future work should also reflect on potential matching criteria that were not used in this semi-structured experiment. Most notably, it will be interesting to see if peer learning is effectively facilitated by matching peers based on where they come from or according to overlaps in context. Learning may be strongest where participants from neighbouring countries

or countries with similar colonial traditions are put together, for instance. This would be because problems faced in similar contexts may be similar. It is likely that this kind of matching would still require the staging that seemed to work well here, however, where peers nominate their own learning objectives as the basis of matching. It is also likely that such groups would see the most effective learning after identifying common problems, which seem vital to facilitating the engagement and sharing needed in peer learning initiatives.

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Experiment 2. Working with peers in-country to maximise learning and impact

Questions about peer learning outcomes and impact

A limit of one-off peer learning events—like the foundational event just discussed—is that the peers involved are usually individuals and their learning tends not to diffuse back to their organisation. The individuals may learn about a new way to organise at such events, for instance, and may even use this new way on return to her country—but she does not necessarily share the learning with other managers. This means that the peer learning gains are isolated and have limited impact in terms of action and diffusion in the learner’s context.

Most peer learning initiatives ostensibly aim to go beyond such individual learner gains, however. These initiatives intend that organisations and even countries will undergo change because of the learning, and perform better as a result. This requires serious thought about how peer learning can foster action and diffusion—to influence actual behaviour at scale.

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Mapping in the previous section suggests, for instance, that facilitators should help peers to ‘share forward’, ensure that home organisations are open to learning, and provide systematic feedback about the utility of the learning. They provide specific ideas for doing this, including offering peer learning opportunities within countries where groups of individuals are gathered to learn with and from each other. These initiatives can be tied to peer learning initiatives in which smaller groups of individuals in the country learn from peers outside the country. In this way, the small group learns from external peers and brings this learning to broader groups of insider peers. There is huge value in knowing how to do such networked peer

learning—with backward and forward linkages that foster the sourcing and diffusion of new ideas.

Getting to know more

A semi-structured experiment was conducted to shed light on the issue of diffusing peer learning (ensuring lessons are broadly applied and lead to action). It followed a simple design. Three small teams were tasked with preparing foreign direct investment projects in a specific country (as identified by their Ministers). They were engaged in a multi-year peer learning initiative with professionals who had worked in similar roles in other countries. After six months of learning in their small teams, these individuals were brought together with other professionals from their country to diffuse lessons learned and turn these lessons into action. The full group of 25 individuals was engaged in a five-month process of directed instruction and applied peer learning to foster this diffusion and action. The process saw all 25 individuals working in five teams for this period. They attended one and a half day lecture events every month, and then worked on specific products in-between. The process centred on the production—by the five teams, in the five months—of a project document designed to attract foreign direct investment. The peer learning impact was evidenced through the quality of the engagement and of the final product, as well as the connections that were made through this process.

There were a number of intentional aspects in this design. First, it was intended to involve a set of peers who had learned new things from outside peers as well as comparable professionals who were not involved learning from outside peers (essentially to see if the first group would share their lessons with the latter group). Second, it involved a focused set of activities in which all peers would engage together (given the mapping conclusion that peer learning is most effectively achieved and diffused through action-oriented tasks). Third, it was undertaken over time, through a repeated set of regular activities (given the view that peer learning requires time to build trust, engage with problems, and work through these problems). Fourth, it was anchored in a ‘course’ that met regularly and offered directed learning (through lectures) that tied to the peer-learning activities (given the mapping finding that peers may be

more likely to commit to long-term engagements if they are also offered a more conventional learning product—like a course certificate and directed lectures by outsiders). Finally, it was tied directly to the jobs of the peers, so that they worked within their actual environment (and thus had the chance of reflecting on lessons in real time and applying lessons in real time as well).

The initiative was not structured to test any particular hypothesis about these or other design issues. As with the experiment above, the goal was rather to see how this kind of intervention works and to raise observations that could help practitioners do this work and academics develop hypotheses for future evaluation. The fact that this work was on-the-job made it imperative to get formal approval for each peer's involvement from political and bureaucratic authorisers. The facilitators engaged with these authorisers in advance to get such support and approval, which was tied to the promise of a product after five months. The peer teams had to get this approval as well, as a first step of the process. They did this by creating a project proposal for their work, detailing the time it would take, writing up a ministerial order granting them authorisation, and then obtaining the minister's signature on such. The goal of this was to ensure that the teams were all working together early on and would learn immediately how to get permission to do such work.

Emerging observations

As with the earlier initiative, this experiment yielded a high level of participation that was sustained for five months. Only three peers dropped out in this period and another two were added, such that the original enrolment numbers were maintained until the end. These peers were heavily engaged in work within the classroom (in the monthly engagements) and outside of the classroom (in ongoing engagements within teams). This suggests that the general model is more effective than many similar initiatives, where participation is often extremely difficult to sustain.

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Beyond this, there are important observations about generating peer learning in broader groups, diffusing lessons and fostering action based on new lessons. The first observation is that diffusion of lessons tends to happen only after individuals develop some trust and camaraderie. This was apparent from the fact that learning across teams tended to take some time. The five teams sat separately in most meetings, especially early on, and tended to work apart from each other. They saw their work products as highly distinct and thus did not pay much attention to other teams’ work. This was partly because many of the members did not know each other (which was surprising and may not be the case in all governments). It was also because the different teams were not used to working across organisational boundaries and did not necessarily see members of other teams as peers from whom they could learn or with whom they should share.

This situation changed after two months of meetings, where the different teams had to share their progress with each other. They were asked to identify the degree to which they had completed set tasks, what they had managed to achieve, and what problems they encountered. Whilst they all started by claiming almost complete performance, they also identified problems they had encountered. Here they found some common problems across teams: difficulties in obtaining information, or in getting other ministries to participate in the exercise, and more. These problems became a vital entry point to deeper engagement within and across teams, which led to multi-team discussions about certain problems and even potential solutions to such. These discussions fostered more trusting interactions over time.

The second observation is that diffusion of lessons tends to happen when individuals and groups face similar challenges and see the opportunity to share. As with the earlier experiment, common problems seem to be vital instigators of peer sharing and engagement. This makes sense theoretically, where problems are often viewed as powerful tools to generate cooperation (even amongst parties who otherwise disagree, as one sees in many political

coalitions). It seems that problems bring peers together when these peers do not otherwise engage because they see opportunities to share the problem and perhaps to learn about overcoming such.

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A third observation is that peers who have learned from outsiders try multiple ways of sharing the lessons they have learned, which are not all equally effective. The small group of peers that had engaged with external peers before the five-month course emerged as important contributors to the initiative. They offered lessons from experience when other teams identified problems that they had already engaged with. For example, when other teams encountered difficulties in accessing information needed to construct FDI projects that the small group had already encountered, the small group members shared the strategy that helped them overcome such problems. Interestingly, other members did not always take this experience—or these suggestions—seriously. This was especially the case when the lessons came from more junior bureaucrats. More senior officials would simply say they were wrong and discount their contribution. The small group who had learned from outside peers sometimes resorted to asking the outside peers to participate in the large group sessions and endorse the solutions, or offer the solutions independently. This tended to be a more effective way of sharing the lessons and ensuring they were not unduly ignored or rejected. Overall, it was interesting to see how hard it is for peers who have learned lessons from outsiders to bring those lessons to a larger group of insiders. It seems that junior peers may be more open to learning from outsiders but less legitimate in the eyes of insiders, which creates a catch-22 situation for those who believe in peer learning (those who are going to learn the most may be the least capable of fostering diffusion). This said, even these peers can find methods of fostering diffusion (like bringing the external peer into larger groups or referring to external research that validates the lessons).

A fourth observation is that diffusion happens most effectively when peers can be matched—through problems or profession. Over time, there was significant learning between peers in the five groups. As discussed, this learning was most often facilitated by the identification of common problems. Where three groups identified that they had bad data on land ownership, for instance, they appointed some members to work together with representatives from other teams to solve the problems. This created smaller groups that learned from and with each other over the five months. Another ‘matching’ factor was profession. A group of lawyers emerged across the five teams (with representatives from most of the teams) to identify common legal challenges faced by the teams. This group started working with an external peer to think through various challenges, including coordination of new legislation and the need for harmonisation with international standards. This smaller cohort plans to continue learning together after the course, given the many learning opportunities and needs they have identified.

“Repeated, transparent and good-natured competition between peer groups can foster learning, diffusion and action.”

A fifth observation is that repeated, transparent and good-natured competition between peer groups can foster learning, diffusion and action. All of the groups completed the five month initiative and produced products that were better than those commonly produced in the government. The products came through a process of hard work by peers, where they learned technical lessons and procedural lessons. Many of these lessons were either emergent from the peer interaction itself or developed out of the interaction of peers around other learning (where peers learned about the importance of thinking like an investor in class, for instance, they would add substance to the lesson by engaging with peers who had previously interacted with investors). It is important to note that the five teams competed, in good nature, consistently in this process. The competition seemed to make all teams aware of the different ideas and strategies adopted by different teams, and it was obvious to see how many of these were incorporated into the various final products.

This seems to be a reflection of peer pressure - a component of successful peer learning. The peer pressure is considered vital in many benchmarking initiatives (used by the OECD, for instance). Peers participating in these initiatives are assessed according to a common method, and their results are compared with others. The idea is that peers with low scores will be challenged to assess why they perform poorly, learn from better performers, and improve their performance. The mapping suggested that these kinds of mechanisms work best when the peers engage alongside each other, to see in real-time who performs best and learn what makes the difference. They note an example of this in the R4D-TAP program on transparency, where organisations self-evaluated, compared results, discussed why results were different, and decided on ways to do better. This form of competitive pressure seems to have been effective in fostering diffusion of lessons, and could be a useful tool for facilitators trying to promote diffusion and action of peer lessons.

Experiment 3. Different approaches to direct peer learning between countries

Probably the most common approach to fostering peer learning in development, and in the public sector reform domain, involves matching peers from a ‘successful’ context with those from an aspiring reform context. This is a favoured way for donors to provide technical assistance. For instance, organisations like the International Monetary Fund have used many retired Australian and New Zealand budget experts to advise developing countries on their reforms. The Australian and New Zealand peers were chosen because their countries seemed to have adopted the right reforms, and the fact that they were involved in these reforms suggested that they had lessons to offer.

This kind of initiative embeds many implicit assumptions about how peer learning works: About how ‘matching’ can be done, what processes foster learning, when lessons diffuse, and more. These assumptions are often implicit and passive in donor projects and technical assistance initiatives. This is one reason such initiatives have been criticised in a large literature on best practice versus best-fit reform, the limits of solution driven reform, and more (as cited in the introduction to this study). This literature tends to critique the idea that ideas can effectively travel between countries, especially from rich countries to poor, without major adaptation and adjustment (where the new ideas are shaped to fit the political and practical realities of the new contexts and where aspects of the contexts are shaped to fit the values implied in the new practices).

On the face of it, one wonders how peer learning could facilitate and support such adaptation. Any lessons to this effect would certainly be useful in structuring the way international support is provided to countries undergoing reforms.

Getting to know more

There are many opportunities to learn from the vast number of public sector reform engagements in developing countries. Different interventions employ different modalities to foster change. These sometimes take the form of natural experiments, where two similar countries adopt similar reforms in different ways with different results. Comparing the two experiences allows an essential view into the impact of different approaches.

Anticorruption reforms in Malawi and Botswana offer just such a natural experiment, where the focus is on how peers engage in reforms (as facilitated by traditional donor technical assistance projects). Both countries started adopting anticorruption reforms in the early 1990s and both countries chose to centre their reforms on the creation of an anticorruption commission. This ‘solution’ came from the same source in both cases; the best practice example of Hong Kong. Prominent peers from Hong Kong—who had designed, introduced and led reforms since the 1970s—were involved in both cases (and in other countries, including Indonesia).

The Malawi and Botswana commissions have had very different levels of impact and (what one might call) success. The Malawi commission has enjoyed quite limited success, with few prosecutions emerging from many complaints (Andrews, 2013a). Most observers bemoan the political interference that has undermined its operations, and point to government’s failures to fund the commission or ensure its full operational strength. In contrast, the Botswana commission is considered a success (indicated, for instance, in the fact that it is the subject of a case study by Princeton’s *Innovations for Successful Societies* program). It has played an important role fostering the adoption of internal control systems in many ministries, has pursued a larger than normal number of successful prosecutions, and is generally respected and supported by politicians, civil society and the bureaucracy. Indeed, many observers refer to Botswana as the Hong Kong of Africa when talking about anticorruption agencies.

The fact that these two cases have so many similarities but a very different conclusion is fascinating. One wonders if there were differences in the way reforms were adopted. In particular, one wonders if there were differences in the way peer learning happened in the process. This question was addressed in a two-case analysis, using the process tracing method (Collier, 2011). This method involves examining documentary evidence to see who was involved at what point in each reform, doing what, and with what effect. The number of sources for this study is exhaustive and hence references are not provided here (but they are available from the authors on request). The focus here is not to tell the full story but rather to reflect on the engagement of external and internal peers in this story.

Emerging observations

The Botswana commission emerged from a period in which high-level government officials responded to major corruption crises in the country. These crises were wide ranging (in areas as different as education and land) and threatened the stability of the state. They led the government to start asking about ways of curbing corruption. The Hong Kong example was well known at the time, and government officials were sent to Hong Kong to learn about how the reform emerged and matured. This visit made a lot of sense, especially because officials in Botswana saw many things in common between their small English speaking ex-British colony and Hong Kong (with a similar heritage, at least in those narrow respects). When they visited Hong Kong, however, they were struck by the many differences in the island city's context and in the narrative about how the Hong Kong commission emerged. In essence, Hong Kong's authorities were responding to corruption in the police force, not in a wide variety of delivery agencies.

Faced with this observation, the Botswana authorities decided to adopt the general idea of an anticorruption authority. They asked some 'peers' who had helped develop the Hong Kong agency to advise in this regard, but not as short-term consultants. Instead, they would be part of the management team for the first few years and help to shape the ideas from Hong Kong to the realities of Botswana. They would work alongside local Botswana 'peers' in this process, where the local peers would help to explain contextual realities. Over time, the goal was to have these local peers take control of the agency.

This approach to peer learning seems to have been pivotal to the success of the agency in Botswana. The permanent and long-term engagement of peers from Hong Kong allowed them to build strong relationships with peers in Botswana and facilitated a transfer and adaptation of lessons. This meant that the Botswana commission ultimately looked quite different to that in Hong Kong; even though it embedded some crucial lessons. The peer learning approach ensured it was not just the replication of a best practice, but accommodated more of a best-fit reform.

This contrasted significantly with the experience in Malawi. Anti-corruption emerged on the agenda in the lead up to the 1994 election. It is unclear if corruption was something that

any of the new political parties would have put on the agenda if donors had not insisted on it. The major problems most local observers identified centred on service delivery failure and major political power struggles. It is also unclear if the Malawi authorities would have chosen to adopt a commission modelled after the Hong Kong model if this was not the advised choice of donors.

Officials from Malawi did engage with peers in Hong Kong (and in Botswana) but there is no evidence that they looked at how the Hong Kong commission emerged or whether the Hong Kong context was like that in Malawi. The 'peers' from Hong Kong (and other western countries) worked as short-term consultants hired by international organisations, and tended to focus on writing papers. They were centrally involved in designing much of the legislation that gave birth to the anticorruption commission and wrote some evaluation papers in early years of the commission.

It is impossible to say definitively whether the different peer engagement in Malawi and Botswana had a causal impact on the different impacts of the two countries' anticorruption initiatives. This said, one can observe key differences in the way peer engagement and learning happened, and it is not unreasonable to conclude that these differences had something to do with the results:

- External 'peers' were engaged by the government directly in Botswana, whereas they were introduced by donors in Malawi.
- External 'peers' were engaged to solve a particular set of problems in Botswana, whereas the problems seemed less agreed upon in Malawi.
- External 'peers' were engaged as long term staff members to work alongside local peers in Botswana, whereas they were short-term consultants with limited engagement with local peers in Malawi.
- External 'peers' were engaged in the actual and active work of doing reform in Botswana, alongside local peers, whereas they were only engaged to offer ideas and written products in Malawi.

This short analysis suggests at least a few important lessons for using external peers from best practice contexts to foster fitted public sector reforms in development. For instance,

these peers should be engaged over longer-terms and to help with actual implementation of reforms. Further, they should be engaged to address specific problems and not to introduce general solutions. Finally, they should always be paired with local peers from whom they can learn and with whom they can share lessons. It is the peer-to-peer learning between external and internal peers that yields effective reform (rather than the one-way advice from an external peer to passive internal reformers).

“A few important lessons for using external peers from best practice contexts to foster fitted public sector reforms in development: 1. These peers should be engaged over longer-terms and to help with actual implementation of reforms; 2. They should be engaged to address specific problems and not to introduce general solutions; 3. They should always be paired with local peers from whom they can learn and with whom they can share lessons”

Experiment 4. What do peer learners want and what do they get?

The Malawi and Botswana cases underscore an important principle of peer learning: Individual learners are key to any peer learning initiative. These are the primary participants in peer learning engagement. They are the ones who engage, learn and then diffuse lessons (or not). This makes it vital to understand who they are, what they think about effective learning, and more. These questions are especially relevant for organisations that have been sponsoring peer engagements and learning for many years but have arguably yet to ask if these are fostering learning. One such example is the OECD Governance Review process.

OECD Governance Reviews assess public governance arrangements from an international comparative perspective. They review countries' ability to deliver on government objectives and preparedness to meet current and future challenges by comparing the country with current and emerging practices and experiences in similar OECD settings. The reviews focus on the subject country's public administration, with a particular focus on coordination within the administration, the relationships between levels of government and with citizens and businesses, innovation and quality of public service delivery. They also consider progress in e-government. They entail an extensive review of the operations of public administration in the subject country and a series of interviews with public officials at the state and sub-national levels.

These Reviews represent a natural experiment allowing comparisons between the experiences of officials who have taken part in these peer reviews with those of their colleagues who were not involved in the engagement. The experiment concerns the differences in the experiences of the two groups, concerning: (i) Their understanding of what is meant by a "peer"; (ii) Whether they have had sustained contact with a peer and the nature of that contact; and (iii) The benefit (or otherwise) from that peer contact (including practical lessons that were learned).

Getting to know more

In collaboration with the OECD GOV Directorate, 20 officials central to the following Governance Reviews were contacted:

Colombia: Implementing Good Governance (2013)

Estonia and Finland: Fostering Strategic Capacity across Governments and Digital Services across Borders (2015)

Greece: Reform of Social Welfare Programmes (2013)

Hungary: Towards a Strategic State Approach (2015)

Slovenia: Towards a Strategic and Efficient State (2012)

Spain: From Administrative Reform to Continuous Improvement (2014)

Poland: Implementing Strategic-State Capability (2013)

Those officials were asked to identify colleagues working on similar issues who had not been involved in the peer review. 16 such senior officials were identified in this way.

A questionnaire (available from the authors) was sent to the 20 officials directly involved in the reviews. A slightly different questionnaire (also available from the authors) was sent to the 16 officials not directly involved. Respondents were reassured that the survey did not seek to evaluate the public governance reviews. The response is at 50% for the first group and 75% for the second group (amounting to 11 officials who had been involved in a Governance Review and 11 from the control group who had not been involved in such a Review). These groups will be referred to below as “Review Participants” and “Control Group”.

A draft report of the report was subsequently sent to the 6 officials from the “Review Participants” group and the 4 officials from the “Control Group” who had indicated that they were interested in discussing the findings further. This draft reflects their further comments.

The Review Participants and the Control Group were similar in their level of seniority as shown in job positions and in length of time in post. Typical Review Participants’ positions included Strategy Director in the Office of Government, Under Secretary in the Ministry of the Presidency and Advisor to the Minister in the Ministry of Labour. The median time in post was 24 months. The positions of respondents in the Control Group included Senior Adviser in the Ministry of Finance, Director of Personnel in the Policy Office for the Government as Employer and Advisor to the Deputy Director in the National Planning Department. Their median time in post was 36 months.

The conclusions from 22 survey responses are inevitably impressionistic, but the large number of comments and the narrative provided by the respondents provides insights into the perceptions of these staff.

Emerging observations

The specific involvement of the Review Participants group in the Governance Reviews was primarily in the preparatory phase, including responding to OECD questionnaires (7/11) and in the in-country consultations carried out during the review (8/11). Only 3 were involved in drafting the report and only 2 were involved in presenting the review at the OECD committee. The narrative description of the tasks involved included assisting in drafting the Terms of Reference for the review, participation in discussion with other national and OECD experts during review missions, commenting on drafts and presentations. One respondent had drafted a part of the Governance Review.

General understanding of who is a peer

In the context of the Governance Reviews, the OECD primarily define a peer as a government official in a country (usually but not exclusively an OECD member-state) *other than the country under review* who has faced or is facing policy or governance challenges similar to those faced by the government under review. They conclude that the exposure to international peers subsequently enhances relationships with domestic peers as officials seek to break out of their organisational silos in reviewing peer comments.¹

The survey took a deliberately agnostic view on what is meant by a peer and offered no guidance about whether peers were to be defined as international or domestic. Nearly all of the respondents from both groups (10/11 in both cases) defined peers, inter alia, as “colleagues doing a similar job to mine but in other organisations in other countries”.

The references to the OECD Governance Reviews in the questionnaire may have contributed to this reaction as these exercises are widely seen as involving international comparisons. Whether this was the result of the survey design or not, the result is that the

¹ Email correspondence with Adam Knelman Ostry, Project Manager, Governance Reviews and Partnerships Division, OECD

survey results did not confirm the OECD view – the results neither suggested that Governance Reviews distinctively encouraged participants to look to other countries for peer exchanges or that they encouraged participants subsequently to look to their national colleagues for advice in the face of the international comparison.

The differences between the groups emerged more clearly in relation to the type of work undertaken by or the organisational position of those they considered to be peers. Review Participants consistently saw peers in terms of their work, specifically someone “facing similar challenges” or “having already encountered and solved successfully problems similar to my own”.² This is completely consistent with earlier research. The mapping exercise indicated that while officials seeking to learn from peers might define a peer as someone who works in a similar organisation or with similar professional responsibilities, the officials were generally adamant that a peer must be selected on the basis that they face similar problems and challenges and with common goals and tasks. This is also consistent with the literature noting that these kinds of similarities promote trust and a feeling of comfort and equality among peer learners, allowing for more trust and hence more effective transfer of tacit knowledge between peers (Adam et al., 2011; Griffiths et al., 1995; Heavey, 2006; Tosey, 1999).

The Control Group, however, saw peers in more position-based terms, with less emphasis on practical problem-solving: “A peer is a colleague working in the same field of expertise”, “people working on the same subject or organisation in different countries... working in the same organisation as you are, with similar subjects...people on the same career level in the same sector” and “colleagues... holding similar positions or having similar scope of responsibilities...”

Did the Governance Reviews lead to sustained peer contacts?

Eight out of eleven review participants reported that the review led to their having contact with a peer, defined as above, who they would not otherwise have had contact with and which lasted at least 3 months beyond the completion of the draft public governance review.

² These and subsequent quotes from the responses have been lightly edited for clarity.

However, nine out of eleven in the Control Group also reported that they had had contact with a peer, defined as above, with the contact lasting at least 3 months. By definition, these peer contacts had not come from a Governance Review.

These high proportions reporting peer contacts is consistent with the 90% of the 84 respondents surveyed in the mapping who answered 'yes' when asked if they had been involved in a peer learning engagement. The majority of respondents in both groups maintained contact with the peers for several months at least (6/11 for the Review Group and 7/11 for the Control Group). Both groups relied a lot on phone and email to maintain contact with these peers.

There are however some differences between the two groups in the nature of these peer contacts. First, as noted above, they are defining peers somewhat differently. The Review Participants were defining them in terms of people confronting similar problems while the Control Group were seeing peers more formally in terms of officials in similar positions. Second, the peers for the Review Group were less likely to be in the same organisation than those for the Control Group (2/11 vs. 5/11). In essence, and unsurprisingly, the Review Group respondents were noting that the peers who they interacted with came from further afield – from a broader range of countries and organisations within their own country. Likely as a consequence, the Review Group respondents interacted with peers relatively infrequently (7/11 were in contact with the peers monthly or less frequently) while only 4/11 of the Control Group had such infrequent contact.

Finally, the Review Group respondents rarely worked together with the peers on a specific task (1/11). Presumably they had been put in contact with each other during the Governance Review but had no other joint activity. In contrast, most (6/11) of the Control Group respondents had worked on a shared task – including “twinning projects”, “collaboration on policy implementation”, “international grant project” and “preparation of draft law”. All those respondents found this joint activity very valuable.

What was gained from the peer contact?

Both groups found their peer contacts valuable. However, while the Review Group respondents tended to make general points about the contact having broadened their perspective (“found out about different views, tested and elaborated own views”, “broadening my professional horizons” and “clarifying the concept of a future reform”), the Control Group emphasised more immediate benefits (“both of us had our own strengths which benefited a common project”, “improved prioritisation techniques for daily tasks and strategic decisions” and “I learned a lot of tricks to get stuff done very quickly”).

Overall

It bears repeating that 22 respondents provides little more than a glimpse into issues which are complicated and, in many ways, intensely personal. How we learn at work and whom we learn from are topics which are closely related to questions of trust and willingness to identify areas for professional development.

The differences between these two groups of respondents – those who participated in a Governance Review and a matching control group that did not – are not to do with the importance or prevalence of peer learning in the public sector. That can seemingly be taken for granted. The differences between the groups highlight the trade-off between breadth and depth of exchanges with peers and the degree to which those interactions helped solve immediate problems (Table 1).

Table 1: Trade-offs in the peer contacts in experiment 4

	What they wanted from “peers”	How they interacted with peers	What they got out of the peer interaction
Review Group	Review Group respondents consistently saw peers as someone who can help them address pressing challenges as they have a track record of working on similar issues. <i>They wanted to team up with</i>	The Review Group respondents rarely worked together with the peers on a specific task. They drew their peers from outside of their own organisation and their own country making contact with	<i>Review Group respondents felt that the peer contact broadened their perspective.</i>

	<i>others focused on “problem-solving”.</i>	<i>peers more logistically difficult. They interacted less often and about broader topics.</i>	
Control Group	Control Group saw peers as opportunities for discussions framed more in terms of “what people in our sort of organisation need to focus on”. <i>They wanted to “keep current with approaches in the field”.</i>	Control Group respondents worked on a shared task with their peers. Those peers tended to come from the same country and often the same organisation, making contact easier. <i>They interacted more often and about more specific problems.</i>	<i>Control Group respondents noted more immediate benefits from the peer contacts concerning techniques for daily tasks.</i>

In sum, the Review Group and the Control Group got a lot out of their peer contacts. But they each got something that they were not expecting. The Review Group respondents wanted practical problem-solving but tended to get broad strategy advice. The Control Group respondents wanted to keep abreast of the field, but got more support with practical problem-solving. However, both groups of respondents were very satisfied with what they got.

The somewhat nuanced message from this is perhaps that the OECD Governance Reviews have an opportunity to build on the broad range of contacts that their participants make – and to devise some mechanisms for more structured facilitation of the peer contacts that the reviews lead to. The nature of the peer contacts emerging from these reviews is that they are more geographically and organisationally dispersed. Sustaining peer contacts under these conditions can come at the expense of the practical focus of the collaboration.

Leaving aside the significant question of how it would be resourced, the specific opportunity is for the OECD Governance Reviews to be accompanied by some light mechanism for facilitating continuing peer contacts, and given that the staff are likely highly motivated by the Review, very particularly to focus on sharing and exchange of practical problem solving ideas rather than more general discussions of current trends in public sector reform.

Lessons from these experiments, and the need for more

The four informal experiments were undertaken to shed light on nagging gaps in our understanding of peer learning for public sector reform in development. These related to the following areas in the peer learning process map: (i) matching in the foundational stage (including through traditional technical assistance mechanisms); (ii) methods to ensure sustained contact between individuals (and foster individual learning outcomes; and (iii) promote broad learning, and diffusion or learning, within one government (such that there are organisational, sectoral and even national impacts of the peer learning process). The experiments provide the following lessons in each area.

Matching peers in foundational engagements

The most effective peer learning tended to happen in the groups where peers had pre-identified the same type of problem – but distilling out a functional problem requires considerable time and attention (experiment 1). Matching on the basis of formal position can produce positive learning results and can lead to peer mentoring based on experience as well as sharing approaches for responding to common problems (experiment 1). Matching on the basis of common tasks and policies seems least effective (experiment 1). Matching is so significant that success (or conversely failure) affects all steps along the way to results at scale. Successful matching can be achieved by focusing on shared problems or on professional responsibilities (experiment 2).

Ensuring sustained contact between peers

Sharing lessons tends to happen only after individuals develop some trust and camaraderie (experiment 2). Time matters: Over time, the barriers and inhibitions of working across organisational boundaries can diminish – and the process of further refining the functional problem and reviewing progress made in ameliorating it can intensify (experiment 2). The

perceived legitimacy of knowledge offered to peers affects their willingness to take it seriously, particularly when the insights are seen to come from more junior officials. The challenge is to find a way around the catch-22 situation where those who are going to learn the most may be the least capable of fostering diffusion (experiment 2). When learning across countries, peers should be engaged over the longer-term and should be asked to help with reform implementation not just with reform design or objectives (experiment 3). It is mutuality of learning between peers that yields effective reform rather than the one-way advice from an external peer to passive internal reformers (experiment 3). Formal peer reviews can lead to broad strategy advice rather than the practical problem-solving which peers seek unless they are accompanied by some mechanisms for maintaining contact after the review is complete (experiment 4).

Diffusing learning from peers to their organisations

Lessons can be diffused from individuals to groups, especially if the groups are tackling problems that the individuals have learned about (experiment 2). Working in groups helps to diffuse lessons; even if individuals were the first point of contact with peer learning, they can diffuse lessons back into a group setting (experiment 2). Individuals who have benefited from peer learning can diffuse the lessons if they have an active vehicle to use in engaging back into their organisations (like an applied, joint-production activity) (experiment 2). Diffusion of lessons into groups requires explicit authorisation from political and administrative heads (who open up the time and opportunity for diffusion) (experiment 2). Repeated, transparent and good-natured competition between groups can foster learning, diffusion and action (experiment 2).

We need more experiments

There are many additional questions we could still ask in respect of peer learning in development. What foundational engagements build better trust than others? What engagement mechanisms foster constant interaction at the most efficient rate? What kinds of learning do peers most effectively share? What kind of political authorisation is required to

foster effective peer learning? We believe that every peer learning initiative offers the opportunity of an experiment with one of these—or many other—questions about peer learning. These experiments are sorely needed to push forward the knowledge we have about peer learning in the context of public sector reform in development.

There are various kinds of experiments one might consider:

- [Structured experiments](#): where there is willingness to test different models for testing alternative methods devised by the researchers for maximising the opportunity within peer engagements to engender practical peer learning;
- [Open-ended experiments](#): for peer engagements which provide less opportunity for experiments devised by the researchers but where the brokers are interested in running their own experiments to achieve practical peer learning which leads to results at scale; and
- [Natural experiments](#): where there has been a historical series of brokered peer engagements and the individual peer learning experiences of those involved could be compared with other colleagues who were not a direct part of the overall engagement.

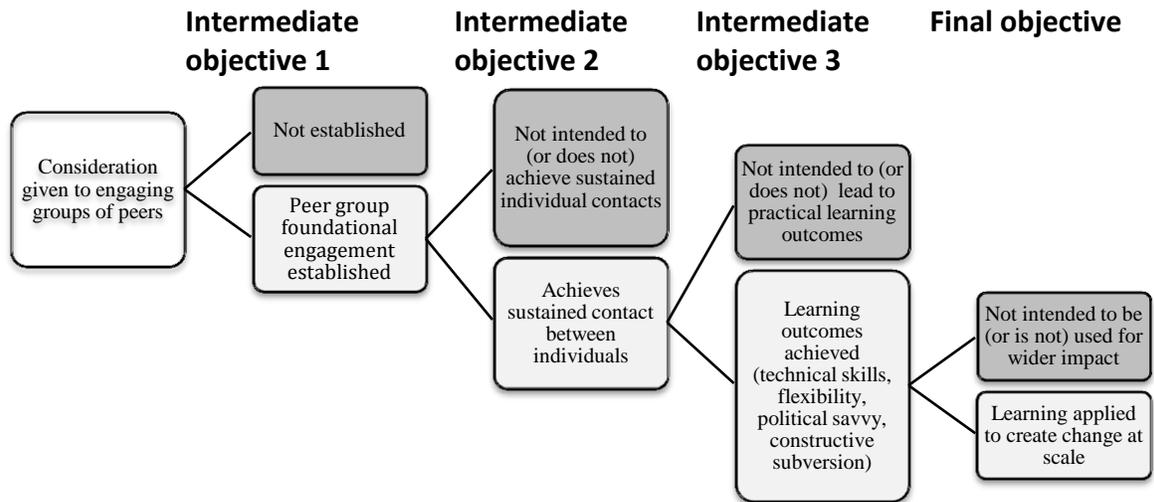
Conclusions and next steps

This study set out to provide a systematic overview of peer learning activities in the public sector reform arena in peer learning to date. A first section mapped out past (and current) experience in doing peer learning in this reform arena, and culminated in a practical view on what the peer learning process commonly looks like, what we know might work, and what gaps we have from our maps. A second section reported on various informal experiments undertaken to provide better information in the areas where our mapping exercise produced gaps. It culminated with a revised view of the peer learning process and with summary ideas that practitioners can use when acting. Figure 15 provides a revised version of the peer learning process map, given findings in these experiments and further work (in Annexes 5,6,7 and 8) that aimed to identify specific tools that might be used in each stage of the process—especially to mitigate risks.

The process map is not complete or final, and should not be read as such. It is a living reflection of what we see in the process mapping done in this study. The mapping needs much more exploration and analysis, however, to cover the territory completely. The map is also not intended as a prescriptive tool—or mechanism that peers and peer learning facilitators can use with certainty to engage in this kind of initiative. It is, rather, a guide or compass that can be used to help those navigating the space ensure they are building on the best knowledge we have to date. In this respect, the study feeds into a second document of questions (and ideas) for those wanting to facilitate or participate in peer learning engagements. We believe that the mapping exercise points to the importance of many questions and of some ideas, which are included in that document.

We hope that you are motivated and inspired to engage in this area and that you will help contribute to the lore and knowledge of peer learning in public sector reform in development in future.

Figure 15: A final peer learning process map



	Intermediate objective 1	Intermediate objective 2	Intermediate objective 3	Final objective
Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposeful matching • Group meetings • Common assessment product • External/peer knowledge products • Training sessions • Expert peer review • Single/multi peer self-assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paired engagements • Online networking • Peer produced knowledge products • Site visits • Joint peer activities • Community publications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer produced products • Site visits • Joint activities • Community publications • Single/multi peer reflection • Good-natured competition • Defining learning objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals from the same organisation learning as a group* • Ensuring organisational mandates provided to individual learners* • Report back sessions* • Domestic communities of practice to feed lessons forward*
Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Magic bullet” thinking – “it’s peer engagement, so must be peer learning, so must be good” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hitting formal target but missing the politically-smart point 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standard reform solutions are promulgated via peer learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak evaluation of the peer learning engagement • Learning outcomes not focused on results at scale
Possible tools to assist in mitigating the risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured assessment of the overall purpose of the engagement • Scoping the demand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercises to help establish commitment and trust within the peer learning community • Activities for maintaining momentum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using research evidence • Tools for meaningful and inclusive conversations • Including formal training within peer activities • Approaches to evaluate learning objectives • Tools to develop reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing links between the peer learning and the home context • Strategising through a “theory of change” • Activities to help in building negotiation skills • Developing coalition-building skills • Approaches for evaluating the overall peer learning initiative

