Main findings of the Mapping on peer learning initiatives in public sector reform in development

To support the establishment of Peer-to-Peer Learning Alliances (P2P LA), the Effective Institutions Platform has commissioned a review of peer learning initiatives in public sector reform, on the basis of which a draft toolkit for the implementation of the EIP P2P LA has been developed.

The review has mapped out what is currently being done in the area of peer learning – especially in the public sector realm of development – and reflects on key challenges to ensure peer learning actively contributes to reform and development agendas. It aimed at gathering evidence on: (1) the presence of peer learning initiatives; (2) 'who' the peers engaged in learning are; (3) what tools have been employed to facilitate peer engagement and learning initiatives; (4) how engagement and learning goals have been achieved and assessed and (5) what common challenges are faced in making peer learning valuable.

The consultants who undertook the mapping, Matt Andrews (Harvard Kennedy School of Government) and Nick Manning (Independent Consultant, former Head of the Governance & Public Sector Management group, World Bank), reviewed 52 peer learning facilities related to public sector reform issues, interviewed and surveyed around 100 practitioners and analysed several brief case studies.

- The results of this analysis point to a growing enthusiasm for peer learning: on the supply side, there is an apparent growth in number and scope of peer engagement initiatives and there is also a growing demand side, with individual respondents contacted for this mapping exercise both reporting positively on peer learning and reflecting on the possibility that, in retrospect, they could have learned more from peer engagements than they did. The challenge is to ensure these are synergized and balanced most effectively.

- The analysis stresses that there are many different ideas about who the peers are and concludes that 'peers' are individuals and that the learning happens directly with them, not with their 'countries' or 'organizations'. Peer learning is essentially about individuals learning from each other whereas the sort of transformational change in public sector capacity envisaged by the SDGs for example is about scale. The challenge is to consider the feeding back the lessons of peer learning to the organizations in the design of peer learning initiatives.

- The review shows that peer learning on public sector reform is seldom achieved in a one-off event. Instead, it happens over time through repeated engagements (group meetings, knowledge products, training sessions, assessment products and more). Evidence also highlights that better-matched peers are expected to have more to share with each-other

and to be more open to building the trust needed. The challenge is to identify and match peers on the basis of more criteria than just their position and formal role.

The long-term personal relationships established through the peer learning facility were of great value. In addition to the technical support, peer learning was helpful in reviewing options for forming and operating the change team. (Hungary)

- The analysis stresses that the learning goals of peer learning were not always made explicit. However, the vast majority of the peer learners identified experiential knowledge sharing as the key gain of their experience. This kind of exchange fostered learning about 'softer' issues of reform, like building teams and managing political tensions and maintaining political support, and dealing with cultural challenges. The second most common form of learning gains by peer learners arose through formal knowledge sharing.

It helped me to learn about prioritizing change, identifying the immediate challenge amongst a long list of problems, and reflect on how to strike a balance between whole of government reforms and a narrower focus on specific reform adaptation. (Nigeria)

- The review on peer learning highlights that there were few tools in place to foster reflection on the lessons learned in these engagements and that more work is needed to measure the results of peer learning. There tends to be an emphasis on the early and somewhat logistical stages of the process while questions about whether the individual contacts sustained through the facilitated peer engagements led to practical peer learning, and whether the peer learning was subsequently applied to create change at scale were less explored.

- According to the consultants, peer learning can only be successful if all peers have the same willingness to learn, are fully engaged from the start, and enjoy authorization to engage fully in the peer learning process. They recognize that there are obviously many social, political and organizational factors that influence these issues. Against that background the review stresses the role of the facilitator who needs to engage commitment in peers and then foster committed connections over weeks, months, and even years.

The findings of the review, including the various ideas that emerged to address the challenges (the set-up of engagement phases, the use of peer contracts, etc.) have been taken into account in development of a draft toolkit for the EIP Peer-to-Peer Learning Alliances (P2P LA) which is currently under review.

The full mapping document can be downloaded here. If you have comments, please send them to the EIP Joint Secretariat at: effectiveinstitutions@oecd.org.