# Effective Institutions Platform

Learning through interconnected systems: From engaging individuals as peers to engaging institutions and systems

Background

As part of its efforts to support peer-to-peer (P2P) approaches to facilitate institutional reform, the Effective Institutions Platform (EIP) organised a series of learning events to reflect on the key attributes of effective P2P partnerships and the role of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) in tracking and supporting this process.

An initial stocktaking of experiences among EIP Advisory Group members, captured in the report *Lessons Harvesting: Learning from P2P Engagements* (Ørnemark, 2020), identified three features of effective P2P approaches: (i) the importance of building *trust and mutuality*, (ii) the function of *learning through interconnected systems* and (iii) the need to *adapt P2P approaches for the diffusion of local learning*. Each topic was the subject of a learning event, the outcome of which is a series of learning notes that can be used as a reference tool by EIP members and partners to guide and enhance their approach to P2P partnerships.

This Learning Note seeks to explore the conditions under which connecting organisations via P2P learning contributes to problem solving and institutional change…
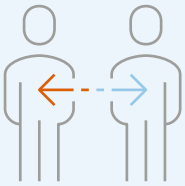
1. Introduction

This Learning Note seeks to explore the conditions under which connecting organisations via P2P learning contributes to problem solving and institutional change, and how monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) can be used to track and support this process.

The discussion is framed around four guiding questions:

(i) How can P2P partnerships go beyond the individual to enable organisational and collective learning?

(ii) How can institutional change and learning be sustained?

(iii) How can we monitor the strengthening of capabilities across different individual and organisational levels (i.e. the interconnected system) of operation?

(iv) Who tracks what in a multi-agency (and multi-level) P2P partnership and how are feedback and learning collated and communicated?

Monitoring how P2P learning can contribute to wider systems' change is difficult given the multiple internal and external actors and contextual factors involved. However, purposefully designed MEL approaches can add great value to this type of P2P engagement. Feedback and testimonials gathered from partners can help establish a firm knowledge base while the iterative nature of P2P partnerships can contribute to seeing patterns over time.

2. Enabling organisational learning: Connecting systems through P2P initiatives

The theory that underpins peer learning is that it is "potentially powerful in facilitating the transfer of tacit knowledge about the softer dimensions of change such as managing politics, inspiring teams, or building coalitions between individuals – and beyond, to organisations, sectors and nations" (Andrews and Manning, 2016). In clear contrast to traditional technical assistance programmes, a P2P approach to learning aims to accompany managers, staff, teams and organisations not only in their learning but also through their institutional change and development journeys. Yet little is known or documented about how this diffusion of learning happens internally. The key question remains of how P2P approaches to learning can sustain change at the individual, organisational, network or systems' level.

3. Key insights: How P2P approaches can successfully enable learning through interconnected systems

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LESSON 1: Understanding and focusing on the inner workings and external links of an organisation is key to enable institutional and systems change.
Institutional (or organisational) capability is typically understood to emerge from the interaction of an organisation's inner workings (see Box 1) and its ability to deliver on its mandate, in a given context. A P2P learning approach should contribute to the inner and external workings of an organisation in ways that connect individual competencies with organisational and systems capabilities.

The capabilities often sought by institutions, staff and practitioners include both technical skills and competencies, as well as behavioural and tacit capabilities, ideally grounded in a shared sense of mission, effective management, delegation, internal communication, learning and self-evaluation (Barma, Huybens and Vinuela, 2014).

Alongside an institution's inner workings, organisational capabilities are also shaped and influenced by exogenous or external factors, such as "historical pathways, political interests and incentives, social structures and norms" (Tilley et al., 2015). Leonard argues that the "political economy surrounding an organisation … mediated through its functions" is "the motivating force behind the adoption

of good management" and may account for why certain well-known managerial attributes are not "universally practiced" despite their well-known effectiveness (Leonard, 2008). In other words, it is ultimately the confluence of an organisation's inner workings and external factors that influence an institution's performance, and this in turn can have an impact on an organisation's legitimacy in the eyes of its constituents (citizens, political elites, partner entities)[1].

Box 1.	### The inner workings of an institution

Several attributes of an institution's inner workings can influence or even dictate its potential capability.

Leadership, as one of the attributes of an institution's inner workings, can help to create and expand the space for change by:

- building acceptance through managing attention and meaning;

- enhancing ability by fostering new productive relationships and

- ensuring appropriate authority and accountability structures by empowering followers, delegating responsibility and communicating effectively (Andrews, McConnell and Wescott 2010: 8,14).

Barma, Huybens and Vinuela (2014) highlight that leadership only facilitates change when it is expressed through groups; and when the leadership unit goes beyond individuals to a "core group of senior technical staff and managers" who can both ensure the "continuity of institutional performance", and "maintain the institutional memory of their agencies".

Similarly, a shared sense of mission and effective management practices (e.g. adequate resources, employee autonomy, pay satisfaction, quality supervisor) are also seen as the ingredients for increased individual motivation; while learning and self-evaluation afford employees opportunities for participation, learning and change, which in turn can boost employee morale and motivation even when facing disappointing results.

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

- What attributes of an organisation's inner workings and external links does the P2P initiative aim to address (e.g. good leadership, effective management, popular trust etc.), and how can this lay the foundations for enabling interconnected systems change?

- How do we know when the effective foundations for inter-organisational P2P learning are established?

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1. Organisational legitimacy can be multi-faceted being normative, pragmatic (referred to above) or cognitive as developed by Derick W. Brinkerhoff in his paper, "Organisational legitimacy, capacity and capacity development", No 58A (2005).

● How can a P2P partnership be set up and designed to support organisational capabilities, such as a shared sense of vision or mission, delegation and internal communication?
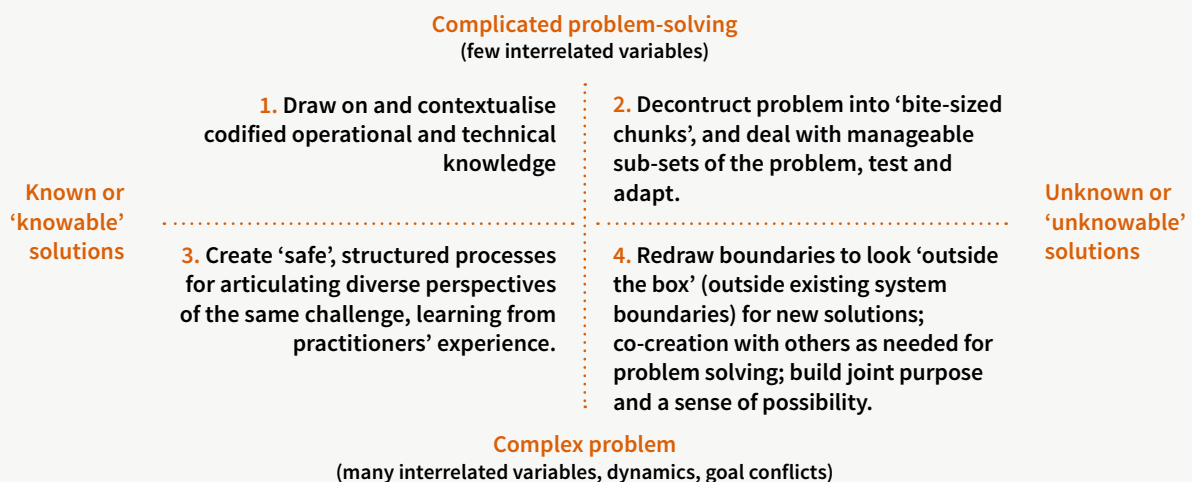
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LESSON 2: Individual learning through problem-driven iterative adaptation can produce durable interconnected systems change.

Successful P2P learning works best when jointly solving a "good problem", co-creating solutions and working through networks. Building institutional capability at different levels of an organisation and across a network of entities occurs through a process of individual learning and by enabling practices that produce institutional performance and change in a problem-driven, iterative and adaptive (PDIA) way (Thomas, 2020). The importance of individual learning is highlighted by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) whose data shows that 70% of all learning in local governments happens through individual experience, compared to 10% through capacity development and 20% through P2P learning.[2]

The emphasis on solving a "good problem" is key in this process. A "good problem" may be defined as such if it cannot be ignored and matters to key change agents, can be broken down into multiple causal elements and can be addressed by real, sequenced and strategic responses (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2020). Of course, some problems will not readily fit that mould and may not be easily broken down into neat causal elements, particularly in what the Cynefin framework (Figure 1)[3] defines as the

Figure 1: **The Cynefin Framework for problem solving**

Complicated problem-solving
(few interrelated variables)

Known or 'knowable' solutions

1. Draw on and contextualise codified operational and technical knowledge

2. Deconstruct problem into 'bite-sized chunks', and deal with manageable sub-sets of the problem, test and adapt.

Unknown or 'unknowable' solutions

3. Create 'safe', structured processes for articulating diverse perspectives of the same challenge, learning from practitioners' experience.

4. Redraw boundaries to look 'outside the box' (outside existing system boundaries) for new solutions; co-creation with others as needed for problem solving; build joint purpose and a sense of possibility.

Complex problem
(many interrelated variables, dynamics, goal conflicts)

Source: C. Ørnemark (2019), EIP MEL Inception Report

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2. Presentation at EIP Learning Event, 11 February 2021. UCLG is a global network of cities and local, regional, and metropolitan governments and their associations.

3. The Cynefin framework is a tool developed by Dave Snowden in 1999 as an aid to decision making.

"domain of chaotic contexts". This domain exists in many development contexts, where the relationship between "cause and effect are impossible to determine because they shift constantly". Such cases must be addressed by reducing uncertainty and transforming the situation from chaos to complexity (Snowden and Boone, 2007).

Solving complex development challenges from a problem-oriented perspective (using methodologies such as PDIA) as opposed to applying pre-designed solutions (which risks producing isomorphic mimicry[4]) presents several advantages. It allows reformers to focus on locally defined and specific problems, and enables iterative improvements, which are thus more conducive to producing interconnected systems change and learning. Tackling a clearly identified problem also forces would-be reformers to ask questions about ways to address it and promotes a search that might provide or contribute to an alternative solution (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017).

A key part of the process involves problem identification followed by a process that categorises different aspects of the problem – what is complicated (but knowable/possible to learn) and what is unknown and in need of further peer learning, experimentation, and learning by doing. On a practical level, the Ishikawa diagram (also known as the fishbone diagram)[5] and the "Five Whys technique" can be helpful in this regard.[6] These tools allow the user to deconstruct the larger problem into several smaller problems which facilitates finding "small solutions to the problem's many causal dimensions" (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017: 153).

Once a meta-problem's causal dimensions are identified, PDIA encourages experimental iterations with multiple possible solutions being identified and put into action with learning emerging through an experimentation process in which these solutions are tested and adapted. Potential solutions emerge through engagement with other stakeholders, by learning from positive deviance case studies[7] as well as from existing practice, latent practice and external best practice (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017: 177). Capabilities for interconnected system change are therefore built both by finding potential solutions to a problem and through the iterative nature of the process itself.

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4. Isomorphic mimicry refers to the tendency of governments to mimic other governments' successes, replicating processes, systems and even products of the 'best practice' examples. See https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198747482.001.0001/acprof-9780198747482-chapter-3 for greater detail.

5. Several websites propose free graphic design templates to create an online fishbone diagram, e.g. https://www.canva.com/graphs/fishbone-diagrams/. For copyright reasons, the link to the general website is provided here and not for a finalised fishbone diagram.

6. More information on the Five Whys Technique as well as a template can be found via this link https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/27641/five-whys-technique.pdf

7. Positive deviance relates to ideas that are already being acted upon in the change context and that yield positive results but are not the norm.

Box 2. | **The authorising environment**

The authorising environment can be broken down into what Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017) refer to as the three As (authority, acceptance and ability). Authority refers to the support needed to effect reform or policy change while acceptance relates to the extent to which those who will be affected by reform or policy change accept the need for change and its implications. Ability focuses on the practical side of reform or policy change (i.e. need for time, money and skills).

However, the readiness for change and solving deconstructed problems remains largely dependent on the nature of the authorising environment (see Box 2). The authorising environment needs to ensure the buy-in of policy makers in key positions of power and broader support among those involved in the reform process itself to enable institutional change. For example, the Collaborative Africa Budget Reform Initiative (CABRI)[8] realised that they needed to use a dual approach to change which involved facilitating policy-level dialogues (thereby opening up political space) and connecting those working at a more technical level across African Ministries of Finance. Ensuring stakeholder support with functional teams that have a specific mandate to search for solutions and are willing to dedicate time to the problem-solving process is also key to the success of the PDIA methodology (e.g. meeting two to three times per week as opposed to once).

The involvement of peer partners' respective networks (otherwise known as "networked affiliations") can further ensure that institutional change is viable, legitimate and relevant. Networked affiliations that unite a wide range of internal and external stakeholders can help the process of institutional change as the problem-solving exercise can "provide a rallying point for coordinating distributed agents who might otherwise clash in the change process" (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017: 141-142). It can also serve to secure further buy-in, foster a culture of learning and innovation through the sharing of tools and approaches and ensure the sustainability of institutional change. The PDIA process can also give rise to strategic coalitions that are bound together specifically with the aim of solving common problems.

The importance of networked affiliations can be illustrated by the passing of the Local Self-Government Finance Law in Albania. As part of the reform process, the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MoFE) worked with the Network of Associations

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8. CABRI is an intergovernmental organisation that provides a platform for peer learning between African Ministries of Finance, Budgeting and Planning.

of Local Authorities of South East Europe (NALAS) to establish a network of formal and informal affiliations and peer learning exchanges. This collaboration increased capacity and skills within the MoFE and among local governments, and boosted ownership of the new legal framework, in turn facilitating implementation. Local government revenue increased by 42% since the passage of the law.[9]

Working through networked affiliations can also help improve the sustainability of P2P learning initiatives, as illustrated by a UCLG-led South-South city-to-city cooperation between local government associations in Mozambique and Brazil. The project focused on technical issues related to urban planning, cadastre development and participatory budgeting in 14 cities. Wide stakeholder engagement and the linking of systems and networks within and between the two countries resulted in successful reforms in several cities, created lasting trust between the actors involved and strengthened national associations. The project also created a legacy of continued relations (regardless of political changes at local level) and dialogue between the cities.[10]

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

● What type of P2P learning and partnership configuration (e.g. peer-based knowledge platform, matching or twinning arrangement) is best suited to address the problem at hand?

● How can the P2P partnership and learning process contribute to the joint identification of a "good problem"?

● Through what strategies can P2P learning, by connecting a diverse set of stakeholders (i.e. networked affiliations) to learn in formal and informal ways, facilitate institutional change?

● How can P2P approaches support the creation and functioning of productive networks that open up new opportunities in the change space for the P2P institutions involved?

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9.   Presentation at EIP Learning Event, 11 February 2021.

10. Presentation at EIP Learning Event, 11 February 2021.

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LESSON 3: Apply a systems lens to monitoring, evaluation and learning to monitor core capabilities at different levels of operation and how they interlink.

Traditional MEL tools and practices are often designed to focus on outputs, immediate results, and on the outcomes of stand-alone projects within a designated organisation. These results are then typically taken as a proxy for the overall capability and performance of an institution.
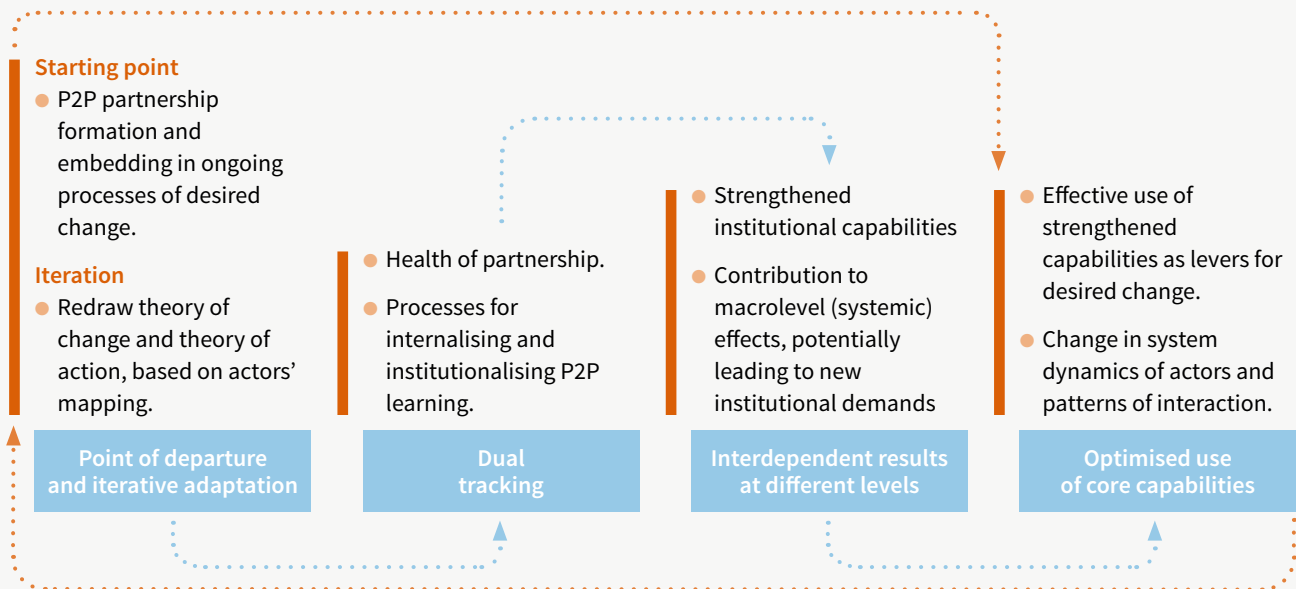
Conversely, applying a systems lens to MEL practices means that peer learning organisations track how they expand their institutional capabilities (anticipated and unanticipated) in addition to the outputs and outcomes they produce. This requires going beyond the individual learner to consider how different levels interact and interconnect so that the P2P process can be used as leverage to enable lasting institutional change. A useful distinction can be made between individuals, organisations and systems with individuals building competency, organisations building capability[11] and systems building capacity (Tilley et al., 2015: 3,4).

The focus on capabilities can help track how new insights and influences from peers are being continuously put into practice, used, and adapted (or disregarded) by different partners engaged in the P2P exchange, rather than just focusing on the end results of the perceived "learning" organisation. For example, Government Partnerships International's[12] (GPI) monitoring system focuses on how capabilities, motivation and opportunities among partners lead to behavioural change, and how this affects the overall design of the theory of change (ToC) that the partnership seeks to achieve (in terms of actual outcomes). This practice is complemented by the use of an actor-based change framework (ABC-F), which maps the system of actor groups associated with the agreed problem to solve. ToCs are iteratively reviewed and re-drawn based on partner inputs (thereby becoming useful ToCs or UToCs). The UToC and ABC-F then have a symbiotic relationship, so that change in one flows into the other. Figure 2 depicts the iterative loops in MEL of P2P partnerships, based on the EIP Lessons Harvesting report (Ornemark, 2020: 25).

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11. The term "capability" can be understood as "the power or ability of an organisation to perform its mandate, and the development of capacity to be a process whereby the organisation or institution improves its ability to perform" (Tilley et al., 2015: 1).

12. GPI is part of the UK Government's Stabilisation Unit that works across several UK Government agencies.

Figure 2: **Iterative loops for monitoring, evaluation and learning in P2P engagements**

Starting point
- P2P partnership formation and embedding in ongoing processes of desired change.

Iteration
- Redraw theory of change and theory of action, based on actors' mapping.

Point of departure and iterative adaptation

- Health of partnership.
- Processes for internalising and institutionalising P2P learning.

Dual tracking

- Strengthened institutional capabilities
- Contribution to macrolevel (systemic) effects, potentially leading to new institutional demands

Interdependent results at different levels

- Effective use of strengthened capabilities as levers for desired change.
- Change in system dynamics of actors and patterns of interaction.

Optimised use of core capabilities

Source: Ørnemark, C. (2020), "Lessons Harvesting: Learning from P2P Engagements", Effective Institutions Platform, https://www.effectiveinstitutions.org/media/EIP_Lessons_Harvesting_Final_Version.pdf.

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

- How can the P2P process be tracked and lessons documented to illustrate how new insights and patterns affect and change organisational capabilities?
- How can MEL be designed and implemented differently, in the foundation phase, to facilitate the collation of inputs from different partners along the way?

4

LESSON 4: Clearly decide who tracks what in P2P learning initiatives.
Given that multiple actors are needed for systemic shifts to take root, it is important to clearly decide who tracks what in P2P learning initiatives and at what level of interaction. It also needs to be established who is responsible for periodically compiling or collating that information for collective learning. One partner (typically the facilitator) can play a central role in gathering and synthesising monitoring information from across the partnership. However, involving others in the actual information gathering and analysis is important to reinforce a sense of joint purpose and distributed ownership across partners.

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

- How does the format and facilitation of the P2P engagement, particularly in the foundation phase, influence the extent to which peer partners might benefit from the MEL process?

- Who is responsible for what in the MEL process; what are the roles and responsibilities of the partners?

- What can be done and what kinds of investments are needed (in terms of tools, approaches, and mentoring) to fulfil these functions, and make it easier for partners to be part of an ongoing MEL process?

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LESSON 5: Pinpoint and test assumptions for how new skills and behaviour have been institutionalised.

To identify how a P2P approach to learning has contributed to organisational change, it is helpful to consider how this occurs in terms of institutionalised mechanisms, attitudes and habits. Old attitudes and habits can either be *replaced* with new ones after a process of "unlearning" which requires explicitly identifying and addressing old ways or attitudes, or *adapted* by merging with new skills or insights. New ideas can also be *adopted* to fill a perceived void or gap, or *addressed* by bringing in new knowledge and expertise from an outside "expert source that does not necessarily change internal knowing and doing" (Ørnemark, 2020:22).

Facilitated learning self-assessments along with other types of "harvesting" of change stories can illustrate the different organisational capabilities being strengthened. These self-assessments can be tailored to an institution's operating context by considering the internal workings and culture of an organisation (by engaging in self-reflection and critique) as well as its external operating environment (Ørnemark, 2020:22). For example, GPI noted that staff in institutions and governmental organisations that have a highly compliance-driven culture may be more fearful of being penalised for highlighting current weaknesses in their institutional systems.

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

- Have new practices been adopted (for example in terms of policy making, external communications and engagement, or inter-agency collaboration)? Have previous ways of working been adapted or replaced? Or have specific aspects of a problem been addressed through a process of unlearning? How does this contribute to strengthening organisational capabilities?

- Are new patterns of knowing and doing being maintained and supported internally or has there been a relapse to previous working habits? How does this contribute to strengthening organisational capabilities?

- To what extent have these specific changes collectively driven the overall change process forward?

4. References

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5. Further reading

MEL as "system navigation". For example, see Dan Honig's *Navigation by Judgment*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

Michael Quin Patton's Developmental Evaluation, "Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use" (2020), and "Principles-focused Evaluation" (2018).

Effective Institutions Platform

The Effective Institutions Platform (EIP) is an alliance of over 60 countries and organisations that support country-led and evidence-based policy dialogue, knowledge sharing and peer learning on public sector management and institutional reform. The purpose of the EIP is to contribute to the achievement of SDG16 and to advance the aid effectiveness agenda by serving as a global knowledge hub on peer-to-peer (P2P) learning approaches, and alternative and innovative approaches to public sector reform and institutional development. The EIP Secretariat is hosted by the Development Co-operation Directorate of the OECD.

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