# Effective Institutions Platform

Localised learning: Unleashing local capabilities through P2P learning

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 note explores some of the key features of P2P approaches that may be conducive to unleashing local capabilities and catalysing experimental problem solving, change and innovation.
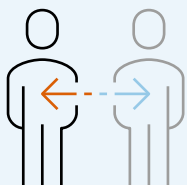
1. Introduction

In contrast to traditional capacity building and expert-driven technical assistance, P2P learning builds on the idea that peers learn directly from each other's experiences, with lessons being assessed and adapted to fit local contexts and circumstances. By comparing, contrasting and testing new ideas between peers as equals, rather than having solutions imposed from more powerful external partners, capabilities are not "infused" from the outside but are "unleashed" from within.

Unleashing rather than supplanting or substituting local capabilities – skills, knowledge, resources, social norms and priorities – can enhance the sustainability of change efforts by fostering ownership and aligning to locally defined agendas and incentives. This process can also improve performance and outcomes, including by avoiding over-ambitious or ill-fitted reforms that can weaken capabilities and do more harm than good. Unlocking the potential of existing institutions and capabilities (latent or active) can also boost the ownership and legitimacy of local leaders and stakeholders, which in turn may improve their accountability and responsiveness.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning play a role in tracking these localised change processes. If purposefully crafted, MEL in P2P partnerships can be used to introduce the right incentives to capture the tacit knowledge of localised learning[1]. This can include more explicitly recognising and cultivating endogenous skills in a given change process, while avoiding the risk of substituting, displacing or even weakening existing capabilities.

Starting with a brief overview of the trends and common characteristics of localised learning, this note explores some of the key features of P2P approaches that may be conducive to unleashing endogenous capabilities and catalysing experimental problem solving, change and innovation. This is followed by a consideration of how these processes can be better documented, guided and built upon using MEL.

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1. Tacit knowledge typically includes practical, experience-based, knowledge about how to do institutional reform, for example how to navigate politics or solve managerial and process issues. It is often hard to capture and share tacit practitioner knowledge using traditional capacity development methods, which has led to a growing interest in peer learning, where knowledge is shared directly between practitioners involved in reforms (Andrews and Manning, 2015).

2. What is localised learning?

According to the EIP's mapping of international initiatives that use P2P methods to support institutional development and reform, 25% of existing efforts identified "decentralisation and subnational government" as their main thematic focus (EIP, 2019). An estimated 70% of all municipalities have established linkages with municipalities in other parts of the world, many of which include various forms of peer learning and exchange (Birch, Wachter and Keating, 2015; UCLG, 2006).

Part of the reason why P2P learning has been so successful at the subnational level has to do with the broader agenda to localise development. The growth of subnational peer learning in development has been driven by several factors, including mega trends such as urbanisation and climate change, which are putting increased pressure on specific localities, such as cities, municipalities and regions. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda both emphasise localisation and the crucial role of local governments in achieving sustainable development objectives. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, localisation has gone from denoting the implementation of nationally set goals at the local level by subnational actors, to recognising the role of local governments as policy makers and change agents with crucial links to local communities[2]. Localisation is understood as a process of empowering local stakeholders, by premiering local priorities, needs and capabilities.

In addition to the changing roles of subnational governments, localisation is commonly associated with enhanced forms of local participation, historically supported through both community-based development and decentralisation interventions (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). The initiatives, partnerships and approaches developed to support localisation often emphasise the primacy of local context and the need to move away from traditional top-down models of capacity development and technical assistance[3]. Strategies are not imposed from the top but take into account local aspirations, endogenous conditions, skills and resources.

Given these trends, this note asks: What are the features of P2P learning that may support localisation and what are the mechanisms through which localised P2P partnerships can unlock and release endogenous skills and capabilities? The following section explores a few key attributes.

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2. See for example https://www.local2030.org/

3. The core principles of cooperation for the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) (a major facilitator of subnational peer learning), include: (i) equality and respect (ii) rejection of the donor-recipient paradigm (iii) reciprocity and (iv) solidarity (see UCLG, 2016).

1

3. Key attributes of P2P approaches conducive to localised learning

LESSON 1: Local problem solving and adaptation is intrinsic to P2P engagement.

The need to adapt external lessons to local contexts is often implicit in P2P learning. Rather than importing fixed solutions and best practice, peers learn directly from each other, and the lessons learned are assessed and adapted to fit local contexts and circumstances, including through collaborative problem-solving approaches. This model of P2P learning – which is underpinned by a recognition of the messy and locally contingent nature of public sector reform initiatives – is part of a wave of alternative approaches to support institutional reform that have emerged in recent years.

Sometimes referred to as the "second orthodoxy" (Teskey, 2017), this new set of ideas and practices are informed both by growing scepticism of the impact of traditional technical assistance (TA) as well as enhanced appreciation of the non-linear, complex and political nature of how change actually happens (King, 2020)[4]. These reflections, in turn, have catalysed a shift towards locally-led, context sensitive and politically informed approaches as manifest in various exploratory initiatives and communities of practice such as "doing development differently" (DDD), "thinking and working politically" (TWP) and "problem-driven iterative adaptation" (PDIA)[5]. Although representing diverse agendas, these approaches share a common interest in building a deeper understanding of and closer adaptation to local contexts, and in seeing development and institutional reform as essentially political processes[6].

Several features of P2P approaches can contribute to local problem solving and adaptation. For instance, formal institutionalised peer learning mechanisms can help to address local implementation challenges by diffusing knowledge and triggering innovation. Kenya's Maarifa Centre, a local country-led P2P-oriented knowledge sharing platform on devolution that is fully institutionalised as part of the Council of Governors[7], organises knowledge sharing and peer-learning activities, documents county development solutions and hosts resources on county service delivery performance (World Bank, 2019)[8].

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4. See also Booth (2012) and Bridges and Woolcock (2017).
5. See for example: Booth and Unsworth (2014); McCulloch and Piron (2019); Algoso and Hudson (2016); Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017) and Dasandi et al. (2019).
6. See for example Carothers and de Gramont (2013).
7. The Council of Governors represents Kenya's 47 counties.
8. See also www.maarifa.cog.go.ke/home

Embedding a peer learning mechanism within the national institutional architecture would typically require broad alignment with the interests and incentives for change as articulated by the country's underlying political settlement. The legitimacy derived from a shared understanding of the bigger challenge, such as that of managing devolution, may grant subnational governments sufficient authority and acceptance to experiment, to share, validate and adapt solutions to locally contingent problems. In Kenya, the Maarifa Centre has played an important role in catalysing and diffusing local innovations. The centre organises county innovation forums, a national peer learning summit on participatory budgeting and several other sectoral peer learning activities[9].

Similarly, the Melayani programme in Indonesia, a programme designed to strengthen local government capabilities, had considerable success in building local government capacity to address service delivery problems at the district level, partly by recommending that the central government provide opportunities for local government officials to share experiences of effective solutions across districts, for example through the establishment of a national forum or peer learning platform (McLaughlin, 2020).

Another area for further exploration in terms of unleashing local capabilities is if and how localised P2P learning may complement, inform, or be informed by, thinking and working politically and vice versa. Consider, for example, the extensive work undertaken by the Coalitions for Change Programme in the Philippines by the Asia Foundation, often cited as a successful example of thinking and working politically. A particular finding was that the programme tended to be most effective when working directly with local leaders, teams and individuals "extremely well versed in both the technical aspects and the political dynamics at play in the policy arenas in which they are working" (Sidel and Faustino, 2019). Such "development entrepreneurs", situated within or outside the bureaucracy, often drive reform by taking risks and acting as "positive deviants" (Sidel and Faustino, 2019). Importantly, they may seek out allies or peers elsewhere to get new ideas and innovate in their own context, while maintaining autonomy and room for manoeuvre within the national context.

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9. The Maarifa Centre won several awards in 2018 for its work in promoting innovative peer learning, including the Kenya Public Service Innovation and Excellence Awards, and an International Innovation Award in Indonesia (see World Bank, 2019).

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

● Localised learning often starts with local communities or reformers self-organising to solve local problems. How can such practices be documented and linked to formal P2P learning processes?

● To what extent and how can P2P learning approaches both capture and unleash local problem-solving capabilities to support institutional change and reform?

● How can localised P2P learning complement and enhance "thinking and working politically", "doing development differently" and similar alternative approaches?

2

LESSON 2: Identifying and utilising positive change processes and local capabilities can ensure more durable and effective institutional reforms.

In contrast to conventional models of technical assistance – identifying needs or gaps and importing best practices to fill them – localised learning emphasises the benefits of harnessing capabilities and solutions that already exist locally. But where do new ideas and novel practices come from, and how can they be identified and leveraged? One way is to look for cases of positive deviance.

Positive deviance is based on the observation that in most communities or organisations there are individuals, groups or units whose uncommon behaviours or strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to similar resources and facing similar challenges (Pascale, Sternin and Sternin, 2010)[10]. In the domain of public sector reform, for example, manifestations of positive deviance have often been observed as "pockets of effectiveness" or "islands of excellence" in government organisations (Leonard, 2010). The positive deviance approach aims to identify those effective individuals, groups, ideas or practices, to understand how they differ from others and to learn if and how they could be replicated by peers elsewhere. In doing so, the approach capitalises on people's existing assets and capabilities, rather than their lacks and limitations, to solve development problems (Green, 2016).

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10. See also https://positivedeviance.org/.

Taking such an approach requires peers to look for positive deviants, or "outliers who succeed against the odds" (Pascale, Sternin and Sternin, 2010). Once a case of positive deviance has been identified, specific questions can be asked about what worked and why, which can serve to reveal the features that could be shared, replicated or adapted, for example through P2P learning approaches, to solve similar problems elsewhere.

Cases of positive deviance can be identified through many different sources. The Maarifa Centre, for example, scans a host of material for evidence of what works, including project reports and evaluations, citizen testimonies, research and surveys, and experiences of specific innovators. The subsequent transfer of promising practices between local authorities happens through both formal and informal peer learning settings. Kwale County in Kenya, for example, was inspired by neighbouring Mombasa County to set up a recovery centre for victims of gender-based violence. The original model implemented in Mombasa was documented by the Maarifa Centre and, through a combination of formal and informal networking and peer learning, was replicated in Kwale[11].

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

- How can P2P learning partnerships best identify and utilise durable and effective local change processes to unleash rather than replace local capabilities?

- Which methods and sources are available to track, replicate and scale up these positive experiences elsewhere? How can such experiences be documented, packaged and shared to maximise utility to peers facing similar problems elsewhere?

- What questions should be asked to probe and encourage further learning from positive change processes happening locally?

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11. Presentation by Rosemary Njaramba, Kenya Council of Governors, at EIP Learning Event on "Localised Learning: Unleashing Local Capabilities through P2P Learning", 26 May 2021.

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LESSON 3: Leadership, tacit knowledge and local agency build public sector capabilities.

There is strong evidence that developing and sustaining organisational capabilities, and effecting developmental change more broadly, depends on effective leadership. Leadership matters to drive and sustain public sector capabilities (Tilley et al., 2015), to improve service provision (Northover, 2021), and to form coalitions and create the legitimacy needed to drive reform (Nazneen, 2019).

Leaders can exist at any level – community, local, regional, national, formal or informal (King, 2020). They can be bureaucrats, politicians, activists, citizens, farmers or managers. Andrews (2016) highlights the function of different forms of leadership for the purpose of P2P approaches, noting that they each have their own attributes. "Agents in positions of formal power can authorize a new change process, for instance, and yet agents located in more peripheral social positions are required to provide the creative ideas that inform change experiments and the knowledge about what implementation challenges lie ahead". As with agency in general, the power and influence of leadership increases as it becomes more collective, as support is mobilised and coalitions are formed[12].

The contingent nature of institutional reform also highlights the importance of tacit knowledge among local agents and leaders in building public sector capabilities[13]. Andrews and Manning (2015) highlights the virtues of P2P approaches in enabling tacit knowledge around managing politics, inspiring local teams and actors, and building coalitions[14]. In Ghana, for example, the innovations that worked to enhance bureaucratic effectiveness were driven by "local agents with deep lived experience of both the local environment and large formal organisations" (McDonnell, 2020). The main implication for development practice, writes McDonnell, may be to "empower local agents to learn from what has worked elsewhere", not as a way to conform to best practice, but "as mental fodder to consider, allowing local agents more discretion to creatively borrow, repurpose, combine, or eschew what has worked elsewhere guided by their local habitus" (McDonnell, 2020).

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12. See for example Hudson and Leftwich (2014) on "disaggregating agency" and how it impacts development change.

13. McDonnell, for instance, in her study of pockets of bureaucratic effectiveness within Ghana's public sector finds that, contrary to the assertions of many capacity building efforts, bureaucratic performance and the cultivation of a bureaucratic ethos is directly tied to and dependent on "the tacit knowledge of doing bureaucracy" (McDonnell, 2020).

14. There is increasing recognition within the literature that this type of non-technical knowledge is key to fostering local leadership, an insight related to the political (rather than purely managerial) nature of leadership (Roche and Denney, 2019). Tacit knowledge invokes the practical experiences of managing the everyday politics of change: navigating the authorising environment and building change space (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2017), forming networks and shaping coalitions to bring various leadership functions together, and negotiating with potential allies and rivals (Roche and Denney, 2019).

This thinking converges with experiences from the Coalitions for Change work undertaken by the Asia Foundation in the Philippines, in which the drivers of local change typically do not want to be told what to do (expert-driven TA), neither are they ready to just apply what has been identified as best practice elsewhere without national and local adaptation. Rather, they will seek out other allies and peers to find new ideas and innovate while maintaining some autonomy and room for manoeuvre in the national context (Sidel and Faustino, 2019).

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

● What types of P2P partnerships are best suited for empowering local leaders at different levels and with different functions in the change process?

● How can P2P engagements be designed, facilitated and documented to encourage the exchange and transfer of tacit knowledge?

● What tools and methods can partners use to guide and track the learning process (and document results) without limiting the autonomy, ownership and experimentation of local reformers and leaders?

4 LESSON 4: Comparing, contrasting and contesting locally-derived experiences.

When localised, P2P learning can trigger innovation and problem solving by helping local leaders diffuse knowledge, and compare and contrast experiences, priorities and solutions. WaterAid Cambodia's Civic Champions Leadership Development Programme, for example, set up a P2P learning mechanism for local leaders at district level to allow them to take stock and compare progress in addressing challenges of sanitation coverage. As a result, the progress in some districts incentivised leaders in neighbouring districts to act, by showing that prioritising better service delivery was not only possible but also preferable to the status quo of inadequate coverage. Regular P2P stocktakes helped local leaders showcase progress and buy-in from the necessary constituencies (Northover, 2021).

Similar effects were observed in the World Bank's Village Innovation Programme in Indonesia. The Village Innovation Exchanges, a P2P learning platform at district and sub-district level, provided a forum for central and local governments to share village development priorities, which in turn stimulated innovation among village leaders and community members. The World Bank found that the forums encouraged "healthy inter-village competition" by enabling villages to learn from one another and compare their performance (World Bank, 2020).

The Village Innovation Exchange Forums were found to be most effective when innovations were compared with other innovations within their relative proximity. Local leaders were less likely to compare their performance with "national showcase villages" (World Bank, 2020). The programme also recognised the challenge, common to P2P learning, of comparing and contrasting innovations across contexts with diverse needs and socio-economic conditions. The forums therefore applied a clustering methodology to match villages at similar levels of development.

A P2P approach may serve to kindle and sustain the motivation of local leaders upon which effective leadership relies. Research by the Development Leadership Programme suggests that local leadership depends in part on motivated individuals able to act collectively to build political will and affect change (Hudson et al., 2018). In other words, peer support within teams and organisational units matters for generating and sustaining intrinsic motivation among public sector workers. Such motivation often constitutes an important factor in improving performance at the individual and unit level (McDonnell, 2020; Tendler, 1997). It has also been observed that the same mechanisms may apply to *peers that are not part of the same team* but face similar challenges or share a sense of general purpose[15].

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

- How can P2P support be purposefully designed as a mechanism not only for knowledge transfer but also for triggering intrinsic motivation?

- How can this type of peer support be designed to facilitate the specific knowledge, inspiration and skills needed for the emergence of local leadership?

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LESSON 5: Monitoring, evaluation and learning can assist in recognising and unlocking endogenous capabilities.

Using P2P approaches and partnerships to unleash local capabilities poses several challenges for the monitoring, evaluation and learning practices adopted. While MEL is usually associated mostly with its accountability and transparency function, using it as a learning process is equally important but requires flexible tools and approaches to capture both anticipated and unanticipated results. Without these, there is a risk that a too rigid results framework, or even an initially developed theory of change (if not regularly tested, updated and used as a basis for dialogue among peers), becomes a straitjacket that suppresses innovation and experimentation

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15. Honig (2020) finds this is the case with district-level government workers in Thailand (preliminary research findings presented at the EIP 2020 Annual Meeting). See also Honig and Gulrajani (2018).

rather than unleashing it. Adopting a very narrow results framework may result in overlooking the more meaningful institutional capabilities that are developed and used as part of the P2P process.

Many of the tools traditionally used in results-based management (RBM) have their origins in management and control processes, using a transactional mindset and focusing mostly on end results as a proxy for effective delivery. Over the last couple of decades, however, exploratory and learning-oriented MEL approaches have emerged and are increasingly used. These typically seek to capture and learn from both anticipated and unanticipated changes, paying attention to positive deviants and outlier results which can be indicative of new and significant ways of working (e.g. by shifting embedded ways of "thinking and doing" in an institution). These approaches[16] are often used by the problem-driven iterative adaptation, thinking and working politically and adaptive management communities referred to above and are equally pertinent when it comes to MEL for P2P learning.

The choice of approach and tool will always depend on the type of problem to be addressed among peers, the type of P2P partnership in question[17], and other contextual circumstances. However, by consistently introducing a focus on how capabilities are strengthened, institutionalised and used, national and subnational reformers have a way to exert local leadership and demonstrate what works in their respective settings. Such capabilities can include how problem-solving skills are activated and triggered in relation to a bigger reform agenda (through concrete examples of their use), and the number and types of adaptations undertaken using local resources and knowledge. By default, this puts a greater emphasis on how local knowledge is valued and used, especially if tracked over time, and puts local leadership in charge of the change agenda.

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

- What type of MEL tools are needed to capture both anticipated and unanticipated changes, to better document and guide P2P partnerships?

- How can MEL frameworks be purposefully co-created (with local partners) to integrate the flexibility and feedback loops needed to capture endogenous ideas and innovations, as well as their use and replication locally?

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16. They include different approaches such as "strategy testing" (Asia Foundation), replacing LogFrames with SearchFrames in PDIA (www.buildingstatecapacity.com) and "outcome mapping" and "outcome harvesting".

17. See the *Lessons Harvesting: Learning from P2P Engagements* report (Ørnemark, 2020) for an initial typology of P2P partnerships.

● What consultation/participatory processes are needed to ensure meaningful co-creation, who should be involved, and who should be responsible for what?

6

LESSON 6: Intermediaries can help facilitate and document learning and experimentation

EIP members' monitoring and evaluation (M&E) documentation illustrates how P2P partnerships, when successful, can trigger unanticipated experimentation and spin-off effects by having peers share and validate lessons from similar contexts. Local knowledge – including knowledge of social and political norms or drivers – and what may be feasible from a political standpoint, can also be triggered and better utilised through P2P learning and validation. Yet, these examples of local innovation are rarely systematically captured, especially since many such innovations are not foreseen from the outset, but rather emerge through P2P initiatives.

Neutral intermediaries in charge of process facilitation, who have a deep understanding of the national context can help to capture and synthesise these unanticipated results, using MEL approaches. Despite being a short-term initiative (6 months, small budget), the Centre for Economic Governance (CEG) in Kenya, for example, found that they could play a productive role as a neutral, local facilitator of P2P engagements between subnational county officials, given that they knew the local context well when it came to the local governance reform landscape in Kenya. Their track record in the field of economic governance and the fact they were a non-state actor facilitating interactions between local governance officials further reinforced their credibility as an external actor.

Similarly, LOGIN Asia paid attention to local adaptation and intercultural under-standing between peers as equals by facilitating a number of exchange visits between The Hunger Project (THP), India, and the Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW). The two organisations were carefully selected and matched by LOGIN to strengthen the newly established BNEW in Bhutan to promote women's political participation. A deep understanding and emotional connection came from the fact that they were similar organisations working on similar issues, with LOGIN Asia playing a connecting and brokering role. Although BNEW was identified as the "recipient" of knowledge, and THP as the resource organisation (with a tested methodology and working processes already in place), the relationship was learning oriented and not hierarchical in nature.

In both examples (CEG and LOGIN), change stories from participating institutions were regularly collected by the facilitating intermediary to gauge progress. LOGIN also developed a framework which sought to more explicitly track the value added by the peer partnership in relation to desired end results. More in-depth change stories were also recorded to track the qualitative aspects of the partnership, including unanticipated effects and examples of local adaptation.

Whereas a central intermediary can help with synthesising and validating emergent learning, as well as facilitating dialogue around it, getting the full picture nevertheless relies upon the active involvement of peer-to-peer partners in tracking and sharing progress with others on a regular basis. Building a structured process around how peer learning was used, or how it triggered new thinking and doing within their own institutions may require developing tailored tracking tools for peer partners to use in their own working environments. Each meeting could then begin with an exchange on what each peer institution has done differently since the last time. This may help to build a repository of lessons and examples over time. Government Partnerships International (GPI), also provided tailored training for participating institutions on how to strengthen their existing organisational MEL practices as part of the P2P process. In other words, although GPI continued to play a central role in gathering lessons and comparing the participating partners' self-assessment scores as a basis for continued dialogue around progress, each organisation also actively contributed to the process of information gathering for their joint MEL framework, thus strengthening their own MEL practices as a result.

Key questions for P2P practitioners to explore:

- What kinds of intermediaries are best suited to unleashing local capabilities in different types of P2P partnerships, i.e. peer-based knowledge platforms, twinning arrangements, etc.?

- How can a P2P engagement effectively balance the role of an intermediary as a facilitator with an approach that enables peer to peer partners to own and steer their own process?

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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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