

Best Practices in Public Management: A Critical Assessment

A Working Paper for the Best Practices in Public Management Project¹

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Governments and both private and public sector organizations, if they are interested in reform, change and improvement, are constantly in search of “best practices,” that is, what seems to work and produce successful results. One definition of best practice is “processes and activities that have been shown in practice to be the most effective, efficient, democratic or whatever other goal intended by the processes and activities” (de Vries, 2010: 315). Bretschneider et al. argue that a best practice “implies that it is best when compared to any alternative course of action and that it is a practice designed to achieve some deliberative end” (2005: 309). On the face of it, it makes perfect sense to search for exemplars and to adopt the best of them in order to make improvements along whatever parameter is deemed important. Most people can cook a reasonable meal, but they also rely on cookbooks, and increasingly those written by “celebrity chefs.”

Best practices in the public sector, however, pose a paradox. While it seems reasonable to copy or adapt the best in order to improve, it is not clear what the “best” actually is, how the process of adaptation occurs and why (beyond the hypothesis of good intentions), and whether best practices are demand driven (by countries looking for answers), supply driven (e.g., by international agencies), or both. Moreover, what little analytical work exists that has examined best practices is generally skeptical about both the existence of those practices and the ease by which they can be transferred. Even organizations that have been in the best practice game for several decades (e.g., the World Bank and the OECD), have backed away from using the term – they now prefer “good practice” or some similar euphemism. And yet they continue to provide advice and exemplars, even if under different terminology. Indeed, the importance of “borrowing”

the best has, if anything, been heightened recently with various crises in public sectors around the world. So we have the paradox that all the processes and organizational behaviours surrounding best practices continue, but the phenomenon itself dare not speak its name.

This paper aims to re-open the analytical discussion of best practices – as students of public management, we cannot ignore them and their associated processes – and introduce a new methodology for examining what passes for best practices in the public management field. The first part of the paper reviews the best practice literature, drawing out the main critiques but pushing beyond those critiques to a more satisfactory understanding of what best practices are. The second part briefly describes a research project that has begun to compile best practices in public management *as recommended by international agencies*. To our knowledge, this approach has never been taken before. We do not naively assume that if an organization recommends something as a best practice that it is indeed “best.” We simply take these self-referential statements as data. In principle, this methodology will allow us to compile a (publicly accessible) database of a large sample of the things that have been recommended as best practices at the global level over the past decade. The third section examines a subset of best practices that have been harvested for the database, allowing both a portrait of what a best practice is, and what the content (consistent or contradictory) of those best practices are.

Best Practices: Analytical Issues

Governments have been borrowing (or stealing) management ideas and practices for a long time, whether those ideas and practices were termed “best practice” or something else. It should be noted that “best practice” in this sense does not have to mean the most democratic or effective from the citizen’s point of view – it could be a more efficient police force, military, or prison system. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are strong incentives for governments to borrow the best military and defence practices and technologies (including hardware as well as organization). This is because defence of state territory is primordial for any government – without strong defence capabilities, the state itself is perpetually under threat. As well, the performance indicators for an effective military are clear and straightforward: one either wins battles or loses them. Outcome or performance measures in other areas of public management are often more difficult to determine, and this is one of the key problems with best practice research, which we address below. In routine areas of public administration, like tax collection or processing immigrants, outcome measures are somewhat easier. They are more difficult in areas like anti-corruption or budgeting and financial management, since the causal chains are longer and more complicated by other factors.

The modern usage of the term best practice seems clearly associated with liberal-democratic states that are borrowing management and policy practices to make themselves more efficient, more effective, or reflect some agreed ethical principle (e.g., transparency or accountability). The origins of the term are murky, and as we said, practically speaking governments were borrowing and sharing management practices

through the postwar period as well as long before (Westney, 1987). However, the sparse literature on the subject seems to agree that the impetus for using both the term as well as the paradigm (which we discuss in a moment) that came with the introduction of new public management (NPM). (The literature on NPM is voluminous, and the term and the movement are well-known, so we need not go into detail here, but only cite the standard sources: (Aucoin, 1995; Barzelay, 2001; Barzelay & Armajani, 1992; Christensen & Laegreid, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2011; Hood & Peters, 2004; Lane, 2000; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004)).

Though NPM was complicated, at least in the Anglo-democracies, it had a heavy dose of almost evangelical fervour about transferring allegedly more efficient and effective management practices from the private sector to the public sector, principally in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The forward to a book lauding NPM as a new paradigm baldly stated that “Public management ideas are generally imports from the world of business” (Barzelay & Armajani, 1992: viii-ix). Several analyses of the best practices movement refer to the iconic Osborne and Gaebler book *Reinventing Government* (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993). The subtitle referred to transformation in the public sector through an “entrepreneurial spirit.” As Löffler puts it: “The New Public Management (NPM) of the 1980s and 1990s was accompanied by the rise to ascendancy of “best-practice” case analysis. This form of storytelling was the chief means by which public management innovations were evaluated and spread among OECD member countries. Best-practice case study continues to prevail even in the post-NPM era” (Löffler, 2000: 191).

Overman and Boyd (1994) provide one of the best early analyses of what they call “best practice research.” Their focus is not so much best practices themselves, but the roots

and characteristics of what at the time seemed a new direction in public management research, indeed, an orientation towards social science-styled research in the public management or public administration area. There seemed to be several roots, one of which was the “postbureaucratic” paradigm of NPM and the celebration of private sector practices as standards for a more efficient public sector. Tied to this, interestingly, was a renewed appreciation of the importance of the practical knowledge of senior public sector executives, of the buried wisdom in different cases of reform and effective management. Overman and Boyd identify Chase and Reveal’s 1983 book, *How to Manage in the Public Sector* (Chase & Reveal, 1983), as the “quintessential contemporary statement of practical wisdom in public management” (Overman & Boyd, 1994: 70). Bardach said something similar only a few years later: “practitioner lore is abundant” (Bardach, 1987: 189). According to Overman and Boyd, despite some misgivings about the robustness of research that examined single cases of bureaucratic derring-do, best practice research “religiously follows a doctrine of practitioner primacy” (1994: 71). Sometime in this period an academic policy community allegedly coalesced around NPM, the local knowledge and wisdom of practitioners, and a determination to circulate and promote best practices. “The policy community of public management researchers began at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government where scholars looking enviously at the business school understood both research and reform to be tied to real cases of management practice and deliberating senior executives” (Overman & Boyd, 1994: 74).

Overman and Boyd define best practice as “the selective observation of a set of exemplars across different contexts in order to derive more generalizable principles and

theories of management” (Overman & Boyd, 1994: 69). Best practice research is essentially the search, primarily through case studies, narratives of complex causal paths, and tapping the knowledge of practitioners, of best management practices in the public sector.

Overman and Boyd identify five characteristics of best practices research in public management (1994: 69-74):

1. It is pragmatic. It wants to find what works, and works best.
2. It is practice-driven, with an emphasis on practical wisdom. Overman and Boyd identify this as the most important characteristic.
3. It is innovative and entrepreneurial, and sees an organic link to best practice. If something is “best” then it must be innovative.
4. It is positive and prescriptive, avoiding negative analysis (what might be called “worst practice”) in favour of possibility and change.
5. It is commercial and user-friendly, drawing a great deal of inspiration from the private management literature (which tends to rely on messy case studies rather than traditional scientific method), and favouring knowledge application.

Writing in 1994, Overman and Boyd were relatively complimentary of best practices research in the public management field. To a degree, this was due to the prevalence of this style of research in other fields. They pointed out that this type of research had commercial value in the private sector. Even at that time, the audit and

consulting firm Arthur Andersen³ maintained a knowledge base of the world's best business practices that it could draw upon in its consulting work. As we noted, in the private sector and in private sector management research, there is a greater premium on the lived lessons of practice than on theory. Indeed, theory is often disparaged as a distraction from the messy, complicated, dynamic world of business and management (Mintzberg, 1994, 2005; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998). But there are many other respectable fields that rely on best practices research:

It is therefore not surprising to see that many of these same fields (e.g., medicine, management, computer science, and law) are concerned with how to improve actual performance through identification and codification of something typically referred to as a "best practice." Though overly simplistic, the logical appeal of a "best practice" is profound, particularly when individuals and organizations operate in competitive and hostile environments. (Bretschneider et al., 2005: 307)

A decade later, best practices research was getting a boost from information technology. Bardach, in an introduction to a special collection of journal articles, noted that a "relatively new aid in the translation process is the compendium, or database, of "best practice" (BP) in some policy area, e.g., gaining compliance with environmental laws or facilitating the movement from welfare to work. Such compendia are multiplying rapidly, due mainly to the availability of the Internet as a method of reaching large, diverse, and

³ Ironically, the firm was found guilty (later overturned) in 2002 of criminal charges in its auditing of Enron, and was bought out. Its consulting and outsourcing arm became Accenture, now a global management consulting firm.

far-flung groups of potential users” (Bardach, 2003: 661). Another boost, and well in-line with best practice research methodology, has been the proliferation of awards for innovative management and best practices in the public sector. Awards can become substitutes for trying to research actual practice. If indeed best practices are “hidden” from researchers and other practitioners because they are “on the ground” and localized, one way of exposing and sharing them is to entice practitioners to publicize their successes by competing for awards. As Holzer et al. point out, the “widespread use of quality improvement approaches, however, is promoted by quality award practices as they disseminate best practice exemplars” (Holzer, Charbonneau, & Kim, 2009: 411-412). They estimate that some 25 quality award programs have been established internationally since 1991. Unsurprisingly, quality awards had their origins in the private sector, most notably and early with the Deming Prize in Japan, established in 1951. By the 1980s (coincidental with the surge of interest in public management best practices) quality award programs migrated to the public sector. There are now a host of awards sponsored by international agencies (e.g., the UN, the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management, and the European Union), and well as national governments and professional associations (Bovaird & Löffler, 2009; Radnor, 2009).

Despite the strength of the best practices movement in public management research (accompanied by the surge in interest of NPM), there has been substantial criticism, primarily on methodological grounds. Lynn Jr. provided the first sustained attack on best practices research in the context of the development of the new discipline of policy analysis in the United States. Bemoaning the loss of balance between “science and

art” he complained that management research was now “grounded in and resonant with the vocabulary, perceptions, and preoccupations of practitioners” (Lynn Jr., 1994: 232). The search for best practices in the service of the needs of public sector executives had hardened, in his view, into a “virtual orthodoxy.” The problem was that a focus on anecdote, practical examples, and cases would drive out more sophisticated theory as well as the application of more rigorous scientific method. In commenting on Lynn Jr.’s article, Bardach agreed with the methodological limitations of best practice research, but rejected the explanation that this was due to researchers simply pandering to practitioners. “The goal of “best practice” research – namely, widening the range of solutions to problems – is simply too important to defer, even though the supporting methodology has been frustratingly slow to develop” (Bardach, 1994: 260).

Other critiques have focused on various methodological challenges in both identifying and analyzing best practices. The inductivism of best practice research generally offends those, like Lynn Jr., who would prefer a more rigorous, deductive and theory driven approach in studying public management. A key problem, of course, is the identification of some practice as “best.” At the simplest level, this can be attacked as pure subjectivism – “best” is in the eye of the beholder. But at a more substantive level, the issue of identification of a best practice is more complicated. For one thing, if a practice really is “best,” then by definition it should be rare, and outlier. If that is true, then gathering “data from a large sample in order to control for unsystematic variation may therefore be difficult” (Bardach, 1994: 266). For another, the idea of “best” is clearly

comparative – some practice is ranked best in relation to other, supposedly comparable, practices.

Comparability across actions and outcome is important to the identification process, as well as to context. Does it make sense to include hospitals, schools, manufacturing firms, and government agencies together as a single group of organizations while searching for a best practice; or, should they be segmented, and if so, what is the basis for forming the different groups? A second important issue that arises from our definition is how to characterize the linkage between the action and the outcome. This is essentially the problem of specifying a cause/effect relationship between the practice and the outcome. From a social science perspective, we know that understanding cause/effect relationships is complex and difficult. Findings are especially subject to errors in specification. (Bretschneider et al., 2005: 309-310; emphasis in original)

Bretschneider et al. suggest a methodology to determine comparability through the use of regression analysis to identify “extreme” (“best”) cases. They admit that the applicability of the approach is limited, but nonetheless offer a checklist of design issues for those attempting to sort “good” from “bad.” Among them are questions on the completeness or representativeness of the sample (cautioning against random sampling, since this cannot guarantee a “best” outcome); the comparability of the organization units in the sample; and the causal links between inputs and outputs (ensuring that the “best practice” actually produces results).

The nagging problem of identification and comparison comes up regularly in other critiques of best practice research. Löffler highlights the problem of weighting of assessment instruments in determining a best practice:

To compare the performance of different organizations, their resources and results must be measured with the same yardstick. But an overall evaluation also requires those resources and results to be weighed or balanced. Yet, it is obvious the same weights cannot be used in all organizations. Customer service is less important to the delivery of services like garbage collection than to services like health care, for example. Thus, an overall score may not be a valid measure of organizational performance. High-performance organizational dimension may be given greater weight than deserved in reality. Likewise, a yardstick measure may convey a false image of organizational reality if it relies on an easily measurable indicator. For instance, hospital performance measurement continues to concentrate on average waiting time even though other intangible aspects of healthcare quality such as privacy, nursing care, and food service are more important to patients. (Löffler, 2000: 194)

Löffler identifies some other problems with the methodology. One is that what is considered best varies over time. A case in point is the waning popularity of NPM. Best practices can go out of style and harden into bad practices if they do not adapt to changing circumstances. Sometimes best practices can go out of fashion, and then enjoy a revival (e.g., public consultations). She also points out that critiques that certain countries or

organizations have not adopted best practices may be misled by historical and spatial context. There are often functional equivalents to given best practices, and researchers need to “map institutions before declaring one specific organization form or management method best practice” (Löffler, 2000: 197). Despite their receptivity to best practices research, Overman and Boyd anticipated many of Löffler’s criticisms, with a few additional ones. They argued, for example, that best practice researchers actually did not respect all practitioners equally; they had a bias to “certain groups of managers who are the in-crowd of political reformers and organizational advocates for change” (Overman & Boyd, 1994: 76). They also highlighted the comparability issues, but from another angle: the accumulation of practice advice. They claimed that best practice research is so anecdotal (focused on single cases) that it cannot develop a corpus of principles, and moreover, the pressure for reform was so strong that there was more interest in implementing the latest best practice than in assessing the real results of the more recent, previous reform.

These critiques focus on methodological challenges in what we might term the “input” side of best practices: how to identify, analyze, compare, and accumulate them. However, as we noted, the best practice movement was explicitly dedicated to gathering outstanding instances and principles of public management so that they could be borrowed or implemented by other governments or organizations. Their orientation was practice or action-oriented research that would induce improvements across the board. This raises problems on the “output” side. By output we mean the challenges that arise in transferring or adopting best practices from one jurisdiction to another. Again, the

challenges are fairly obvious at one level, but raise complicated issues. Let's assume that a true best practice has been identified in the human resource management field in jurisdiction X. It clearly works in that jurisdiction, and it produces verifiable and superior results. Now let's assume that jurisdiction Y has noted this best practice, and wishes to implement it. There are at least seven questions to be posed about this process of adoption or transfer:

1. How and why was the best practice "noticed" by jurisdiction Y?
2. Are there other agents or actors that are "supplying" policy ideas for transfer (e.g., international governmental organizations)?
3. How dependent is the best practice on the institutional and cultural context in jurisdiction X? In other words, best practices cannot be considered as stand-alone mechanisms, separated from their context. How much of that context explains both the adoption and the success of the best practice in jurisdiction X?
4. Will all of the best practice be transferred, or only parts?
5. Will whatever is transferred or adopted be amended, translated or localized? How will it be adapted?
6. Once the best practice has been adopted and implemented, how does it fit into the institutional and cultural context of jurisdiction Y?
7. Does the best practice in jurisdiction Y work? Does it produce comparable results to jurisdiction X?

These are essentially questions that pertain to what, in the policy literature, has been termed “policy transfer” or “policy diffusion,” and in the public management literature as the “extrapolation problem.” The difference is not simply between two fields of study, but in orientation as well. The policy transfer literature has a strong social science orientation in that it seeks to analyze and explain, but not improve policy transfer processes. The “extrapolation” approach, given its roots in best practice research, is interested in analysis and understanding as well, but also in ways of improving the process of policy adoption and implementation. This has led that literature to try to find appropriate protocols to guide the extrapolation process. We will also briefly discuss a third literature that, while distinct from these two, does have a strong connection. This is the literature on international standards. The interest among this group of researchers is in understanding how global policy coordination can occur without strong, authoritative global political institutions. Part of the answer is coordination through the acceptance and adoption of standards. But from the perspective of this paper, standards have a strong resemblance to best practices, though they are not necessarily the same thing – an accepted standard, for example, could be the lowest common denominator, or a threshold that must be accepted at a minimum, but which may be exceeded if desired.

The policy transfer literature is primarily interested in the mechanism and motivations of transfer, and far less in what is transferred or in improving the transfer process. The key insight came from Rose in 1993, when he argued that governments are often genuinely puzzled about policy problems, and seek to learn from other jurisdictions as to how those problems might be addressed. This was the demand side. On the supply

side, international organizations and loosely coordinated “epistemic communities” (Haas, 1992) in that period were becoming important policy transfer agents.

Intergovernmental and international organizations encourage exchange of ideas between countries with similar levels of economic resources. The European Community and OECD encourage exchanges among advanced industrial nations. The collapse of the Communist system is creating a group of more than a dozen states that may learn from each other ways to make a transition to the market economy and democracy. The IMF promotes lessons drawn from the experience of countries that have large foreign debts, and the World Bank and many United Nations agencies focus on programs of concern to developing countries. (Rose, 1993: 105)

As the literature evolved, different mechanisms and motivations of transfer were identified and debated. Bennett identified three transfer mechanisms: lesson-drawing (where governments see a problem and borrow an existing solution – essentially a rationalist problem-solving and borrowing procedure), legitimation (referring to other international examples to satisfy domestic critics), and harmonization. In his various contributions, Evans identified a range of terms that try to capture the dynamics of transfer: bandwagoning, convergence, diffusion, emulation, policy learning, social-learning, and lesson-drawing (Evans, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). Simmons et al. (2008b) in turn argued in favour of four basic mechanisms of transfer: coercion (where more powerful bodies, such as the World Bank, impose policy transfer as a condition for aid or a threat); competition (where state actors voluntarily adopt standards

or policies, usually in the economic field, to attract investors who would otherwise go to other jurisdictions that are more policy-friendly); policy learning (a rational exercise of assessing the efficacy of other policy models and adopting them, in whole or in part); and emulation (voluntary adoption of new policies considered to be best practices of “leaders”). Simmons et al. say that they were surprised at the “the strength of emulation-style mechanisms in several policy areas, including economic policies, that traditionally are analyzed in strictly rationalist and materialist ways” (Simmons, Dobbin, & Garrett, 2008a: 353-354). This highlights the importance of what has been identified as “fashion” in the dynamics of transfer (Kantola & Seeck, 2011; Lodge, 2005). Finally, Dolowitz and Marsh provide the most developed model of policy transfer, posing similar questions to the ones listed above, and also emphasizing a continuum of transfer from voluntary adoption to coercive imposition, with variations or mixtures in-between (D. Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; D. P. Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). The transfer literature is not without its critics (James & Lodge, 2003), but it has been an important analytical tool in trying to understand what appears to be a rising incidence of borrowing, transfer, and diffusion.

The term “extrapolation problem” was coined by Bardach in 2004. Interestingly, his article makes no reference to any of the literature discussed above, and he explicitly situates the problem as one of “professional practice.” He framed the problem in terms of a hypothetical scenario where a young policy analyst is asked by his boss to see what nearby counties are doing about a similar problem, and see if it makes sense for his jurisdiction.

What methodology should you use in fulfilling this request? How do you conceptualize “what they’re doing,” and see which if any elements might “make sense”? As an additional challenge, you must assume that strict and faithful replication is not in the cards. That just isn’t the way of the world. For lots of very good reasons, if people wish somehow to borrow from the wisdom and practice of others, they want to adapt it, customize it, localize it. If you want to perform well for your boss – not to mention the public interest – you must think not only about what you do see, but also, to some extent, about what you don’t see. That is, you have to speculate about those modest variations that would show up, both by accident and by design, when some practice would move from those source sites ... to your target site

(Bardach, 2004: 205)

Bardach called it the extrapolation problem because he assumed that in most instances, target sites would not simply replicate, but would adapt and amend. Extrapolation “is more like searching for interesting ideas about successful mechanisms that might be adapted at home, and then inferring from the experience of others plausible estimates about the chances of success of failure in implementing the adaptation” (Bardach, 2004: 218). For that reason there had to be a way of understanding how the “best practice” actually worked and which elements could be transferred. He recommended a five-fold analysis: the underlying “mechanisms” that have some causal power; cost-effectiveness; contingent features (institutional, political, economic, and interpersonal context) within which the practice is embedded; secondary effects; and vulnerabilities.

In the same spirit of trying to offer guidance on how best to extrapolate, other authors have developed protocols or guides for public managers. Barzelay (2007), in explicitly trying to improve on Bardach, offered the Essential Heuristic of Extrapolation-Based Design: “Craft contrivances with the intention of activating the same configuration of social mechanisms in the target site as that which were activated in the design exemplar and are believed to explain its outstanding performance characteristics” (2007: 528). He recommended that extrapolation-oriented research develop “instrumental case studies of experiences” that would provide exemplars in order to “improve governmental undertakings” (ibid.). Ongaro (2009) provides what he calls an “extrapolation protocol.” The protocol consists of five steps:

1. Identify the function to be performed: what is the function that the practice has made it possible to achieve ...
2. Define what *exactly* the practice is about ...
3. Describe the practice, by answering the following two questions: How does the system operate? How does the practice try to take advantage of the way the system operates (design and innovation dynamics)?
4. Identify *all* the effects of the practice...
5. Define the key “process context factors”: under what conditions the practice works (Ongaro, 2009: emphasis in original)

Bardach, Barzelay and Ongaro have tried to provide a methodology to analyze and break down best practices so that they can be “exported” or transferred to other

jurisdictions. They do this by stressing the importance of causal mechanisms – the analyst has to imagine how the practice achieves its results. Moreover, they wed that analysis of mechanisms to an analysis of context, which potentially neutralizes one of the standard critiques of best practice research and the attempt to transfer best practices: political, organization, and cultural context vary so much that it is extremely difficult – if not dangerous – to try to transfer practices (Brandsen & Kim, 2010; Grindle, 2004; Jabbara, 2008; Kim, 2008). For those in the development field this kind of transfer or extrapolation is particularly objectionable for several reasons. It historically has involved the transfer if not imposition (through conditionalities in the case of the World Bank and the IMF) of Washington-consensus style (Williamson, 1989) neo-liberal recipes to developing countries, often with questionable results. Rodrik has argued that the “type of institutional reform promoted by multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, IMF and the World Trade Organization is heavily biased towards a best-practice model” (Rodrik, 2008: 2). This mind-set actually narrows options, and he argued for an appreciation of “second-best institutions” that take account of context.

A stream of work related to best practices but still distinct is on the proliferation and spread of international standards, typically through international governmental organizations acting in concert with states and sometimes non-state actors (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; Brunsson, Rasche, & Seidl, 2012). Whereas best practice research is grounded in public management, and policy transfer in comparative politics and policy analysis, the work on standards stems from international relations, and particularly an

interest in “soft” global coordination. As mentioned above, a standard is not exactly the same thing as a best practice, for several reasons. First, it might simply be a least common denominator, and not necessarily “best.” Second, best practices tend to be informal recommendations or exemplars, while standards usually have the force of some form of formal agreement behind them. Third, a practice tends to be a specific act or behaviour or process, whereas a standard tends to be in the form of a rule governing behaviours in a certain realm. Despite these and possibly other differences, standards do have the flavour of best practice because their normative character – if a standard is in place, one should follow it because that will produce collective as well as individual benefits. The deeper connection between the two is that they permit disjointed coordination without a central coordinator. For example, regimes that do not follow best practice in democratic elections do so because they are corrupt and/or authoritarian. To that extent, when they interact with democratic regimes, that interaction will consist of two completely different systems, with all the misunderstandings, mistrust, and miscommunication that that entails. In contrast, the isomorphism of two systems with similarly democratic electoral systems is quite evident – a host of unspoken, shared assumptions make interaction much easier (though not necessarily without disagreement). The same is true of shared best practices, for example, in the area of tax administration. Businesses and individuals operating in two regimes with similar tax administration systems can behave in similar ways in both, which in itself becomes a species of invisible coordination.

Best practice research and recommendations and transfer continues, but we have listed some of the strong critiques that it has faced. Löffler concludes that “the term best

practice is presumptuous. Neither academics nor experienced public managers are able to make sound judgments about what constitutes best practice, especially from an international perspective” (Löffler, 2000: 202). Nonetheless, the idea and the goal of best practices are still routinely lauded. The editor of *Public Administration Review*, for example, noted that the journal “regularly features broad historical perspectives about “best practices” gleaned from yesteryear in order to create a better society in the future” (Stillman II, 2011: 912). But the critiques have had their effect. The un-selfconscious use of “best” ten years ago has given way to a host of softer terms, largely in response to the key criticism that what seems to work in one jurisdiction will not necessarily (not even likely) work in another because of differences in context. So, Bardach introduced the term “smart practice” (Bardach, 1998). Others have relied on the idea of a “good practice,” that is, a practice that shows merit in certain circumstances, may have its own limitations, but is worthy of consideration. As well, the idea of “good” allows a range of practices in the same field – all are good in some sense or in some way, but not necessarily singularly the best. The World Bank is moving to the use of “best fit” on the assumption that “what works” in public sector reform depends greatly on context. “The shift toward “best fit” in PSM [public sector management] reform learns from diagnostic approaches in other fields that sought to base reform design on empirics and focus on *where the shoe pinches most* through finding the binding constraint” (Blum, Manning, & Srivastava, 2012: 5; emphasis in original). A recent study points out that: “Development discourse is now replete with anti-modernization-theory aphorisms: “one size doesn’t fit all,” “there are no silver bullets,” “context matters.” Most development professionals are extraordinarily well

traveled and are acutely conscious of, and actively celebrate, cultural difference. Nearly all would agree that low-income countries “should be in the driver’s seat” when it comes to determining the content, direction and speed of their development policies... .(Pritchett, Woolcock, & Andrews, 2012: 5-6).

Whatever the terminology that is used, it is clear that there is a large and growing appetite for best practices, good practices, smart practices, lessons, experiences, examples, exemplars, and leading cases. It is also clear that the practical challenges of policy transfer, and the practical challenges of inducing and supporting public management reform remain as important, if not more important, today than they did before. In closing this section, we should reflect on the underlying dynamics of this phenomenon. Earlier we mentioned some of the drivers on the demand side. When governments face policy problems that they genuinely wish to solve, it is natural to look to other successful examples. Alternatively, there may elements of emulation or following fashion in order to be in good company, though unless the emulation is purely for show, there normally is an element of calculation about whether the exemplar actually generated favourable results. It is also important to consider the supply side. For many major consulting firms, selling “best practices” is an important part of their business. Even more importantly, various international agencies working on development and public sector reform and improvement, are dedicated to the production and spread of best practices to facilitate that improvement and reform (Pal, 2012; van Stolk & Wegrich, 2008), and possibly create markets for their own work (Hood, 1998). Löffler points out that when “certain practices

are declared to be in some sense “best,” they automatically become candidates for international diffusion” (Löffler, 2000:192).

The most important drivers of the policy transfer of best practices are a competitive environment and internal crisis. These can occur independently, but often coalesce. Regimes that are purely dedicated to extraction (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012) will of course not care about best practices, only about extraction of rents for elites. But outside that circle of regimes (and even here, there is some borrowing of best practice, at least in technology – e.g., North Korea’s program to build a nuclear weapon), others look to what works best in governance and public policy. If regimes like these face no pressure, external or internal, they have no need to search for lessons and borrow. The higher the calibration of pressures, the greater the incentive to search for solutions.

The Best Practices Project (BPP)

We have seen from the previous section that best practices research has had both its defenders and its critics. Nonetheless, the search for “what works” and possibly “what works best” continues unabated. There are now dozens of compendia of best practices across a host of policy fields. The UN, for example, maintains a best practice database for improving the quality of life in cities (United Nations, n.d.). Since 1996, working with over 140 countries, the web site has accumulated over 4,000 best practices that are “proven solutions to the common social, economic, economic and environmental problems... .” Interestingly, it has four categories: award winners, best practices, good practices, and promising practices. As another example, the European Commission maintains a

“database of Good Practices for Enterprise and Industry [containing] activities by public authority in European Union Member states that are recognized as good practices to improve the business environment of Small and Medium Enterprises in accordance with the Small Business Act” (European Commission, n.d.).

An interesting parallel development has been the creation of databases of “systematic reviews.” These eschew the term best practice, and instead offer databases of empirical evaluations of different programs. One of the most prominent, for example, is the Campbell Collaboration Library of Systematic Reviews (Campbell Library, n.d.). The organization is based in Oslo, Norway, and describes its work as follows:

The purpose of a systematic review is to sum up the best available research on a specific question. This is done by synthesizing the results of several studies. A systematic review uses transparent procedures to find, evaluate and synthesize the results of relevant research. Procedures are explicitly defined in advance, in order to ensure that the exercise is transparent and can be replicated. This practice is also designed to minimize bias. Studies included in a review are screened for quality, so that the findings of a large number of studies can be combined. Peer review is a key part of the process; qualified independent researchers control the author's methods and results.

The Campbell Library does not make recommendations, but the point is clear: it has scientifically reviewed the literature in a specific field of practice, and tries to show “what works.” For example, in 2006 it conducted a meta-review of 66 independent evaluations of the effectiveness of incarceration-based drug treatment on criminal behaviour, and

concluded that the use of therapeutic communities was more effective in reducing drug use and recidivism than “correctional boot camps.”

The BPP⁴ tries to tackle the problems of best practice research in several ways. The primary interest of the project is in examining the diffusion of policy ideas on public sector reform and practice. In the last twenty years the “public sector” has become a target of consistent reform efforts, driven primarily by financial crises, global competition, and the now accepted principle that strategic advantage comes from an effective and efficient public sector. Moreover, there is a remarkable synchronicity in these reform efforts. Ideas like public-private partnerships, or anti-corruption strategies, become subjects of global conversations among international agencies, governments, NGOs, and think tanks. Ideas spread quickly, and are diffused through dense as well as extensive networks of actors. The organizations being studied are a key source of advice to governments about what allegedly “works,” and moreover, they are crucial nodes in international networks where governmental and non-governmental actors meet, share ideas, and try to diffuse them globally as well as locally.

The project has six key objectives related to three main segments of research. The first segment – discussed here – is an analysis of publications and reports on public management “best practices” recommended by major international agencies between 1990 and 2011 (detailed methodology is described below). Each of these agencies, while specialized to a certain degree, have regularly and continuously produced research on

⁴ The three-year project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, grant #435-2012-1248. The project website is <https://portal.publicpolicy.utoronto.ca/en/BestPractices> (also accessible through the redirecting url www.publicmanagementbestpractices.ca).

good governance “best practices” in books, journals, reports, symposia, conferences, and other vehicles such as checklists and guides and toolkits. Indeed, the sheer amount of material produced by these agencies is so large and variegated that we have developed a typology to subdivide public management into just under 40 sub-fields (that we call public management subjects).⁵ Our typology builds on our earlier work analyzing the curriculum content of Canadian MPA and MPP programs (Clark & Pal, 2011) draws on the 2010 OECD approach to defining the core of public administration in terms of eight pillars: budget practices; human resource management; integrity; internal and external reporting; e-government readiness; centre of government; regulatory quality; multi-level governance (OECD, 2007, 2010), as well as the way that the OECD currently organizes its divisions and its statistical databases.

At the top level are four domains: 1) Tools and Skills for Public Management; 2) Institutions, Processes and Contexts of Governance; 3) Management Functions and Governance Instruments; and 4) Policy Sector Applications of Public Management. Below each of these domains are public management “subjects.” For example, one subject under the second domain is Ethics and Accountability; and under the third domain, one subject is Budgeting and Financial Management. The third level is topics: there are “teaching topics” that are derived from syllabi of Master’s courses in public policy and public administration, and what we call “advisory topics.” An advisory topic contains the actual advice from international agencies. Each advisory topic entry is organized as follows: a

⁵ The typology is outlined on the Atlas of Public Management website at <https://portal.publicpolicy.utoronto.ca/en/About/NavigatingAtlas> and at <https://portal.publicpolicy.utoronto.ca/en/About/Typology> and will be the subject of a forthcoming working paper.

Title which gives the topic of the advice; the Summary Advice; the Main Points that indicate the detailed content of that advice, often verbatim from given documents and sources; a Commentary by the research team; the Source from which the advice was taken; and the team member(s) who created the entry.

This segment of the project hones in on the second and third domains of public management. Subjects in these domains include ethics and accountability, budgeting and financial management, human resources management, evaluation and performance measurement, and service delivery and e-government. To the best of our knowledge, there are no compendia or databases of best practices in public management defined along these lines.

The first objective in this segment is to use the typology in conjunction with some operational definitions of what falls under the category of “best practice” to trace the production of advice in each of the major international agencies over the past ten years. This is producing a database (advisory topic, specific advice plus source citation) of hundreds of examples of advice about what constitutes “best practice” in a given sub-field (subject) of public management. The second objective in this segment is to conduct an analysis of trends for each agency in the evolution of their definitions of “best practice,” comparison among different agencies, overall aggregate trends, and a probe for contradictions and inconsistencies. We hypothesize that even in the same sub-field (e.g., budgeting and financial management) agencies will have different definitions or approaches to “best practice.” Furthermore, we hypothesize that there will be reversals and even ruptures, depending on circumstances and fads, in these definitions. As an

example, “agentification” and contracting out was all the rage in the 1990s, but came into question as governments realized that their oversight capacity of these agencies was shriveling (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Pollitt, Thiel, & Homburg, 2007; Radin, 2006). The relatively sudden emphasis on ethics and integrity is another example (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003).

The research is still at an early stage, but we want to share our work earlier rather than later, in order to solicit comment and feedback. To do this, we are providing public access to the BPP database as we create it through the online Atlas of Public Management (<https://portal.publicpolicy.utoronto.ca>) and providing online access to working papers such as the present one. The Atlas includes a compendium of key topics and concepts used in the teaching of public administration and public policy. This larger dataset harvests concepts from courses taught in what we are calling “landmark courses” from leading Master’s programs in Canada and around the world, including many from the Harvard Kennedy School which recently posted on its website the syllabi for virtually all its courses. The information on teaching topics, concepts, and references is interconnected with the advisory topic data on best practices, and the interconnected databases are entirely searchable.

The key project database at this stage of the research is the AdviceMap which is found on the Atlas of Public Management at <https://portal.publicpolicy.utoronto.ca/en/ContentMap/AdviceMap>. It is organized in the hierarchy described above. In this paper we examine the best practices found to date in two subjects: evaluation and performance measurement, and budgeting and financial

management. The research team has at this stage been reviewing the publications of the four principal international agencies providing public management advice to governments: OECD, the World Bank, the IMF, and UNDP. To date, there are nine advisory topics under the first, and twenty-one under the second. They are listed, with brief descriptions, in Tables 1 and 2. At this point, all of the topics come from the OECD, with the exception of Comprehensive Government Budgets, which includes on advisory from the IMF. Eventually, the project will combine advisories from different sources if they clearly fall under the same topic. This will permit easy comparisons of what international organizations are saying to governments on similar subjects.

Table 1: Evaluation and Performance Measurement

Advisory Topic	Summary
Addressing the Benefits and Costs of Evaluations	Benefits of evaluations should outweigh costs.
Choosing the Right Evaluator	Independent evaluation is appropriate in order to improve accountability; self-evaluations are appropriate for organizational learning.
Enhancing Evaluation Credibility	Credibility is a key to utilization.
Ensuring Links with Decision-Making Processes	Evaluation can be an important factor in policy formulation.
Fostering and Evaluation Culture	Organizations need to be encouraged to learn from feedback and results.
Identifying Main Participants for Evaluations	Successful evaluations are based on collaboration among key participants.
Involving Stakeholders and Communicating Findings	Stakeholders can be appointed to evaluation commissions or involved in advisory groups.

Advisory Topic	Summary
Managing Evaluation Activities Strategically	While central agencies have a role in managing evaluations, actual evaluations should be decentralized.
Measuring Results	Managers should be held accountable for both output and outcome measures.

Table 2: Budgeting and Financial Management

Advisory Topic	Summary
Budget Functions	Governments should take account of the four fundamental functions of a government's budget (authorization, allocation, macroeconomic assessment, administrative) and three preconditions for fulfillment of these functions (principles of universality, unity and specificity).
Central Input Controls	Governments should relax central input controls because heads of agencies are better placed to judge the mix of inputs.
Citizen's Guide to the Budget	Budget proposals and public finances should be presented in one simple, plain text document made available to the general public.
Comprehensive Government Budgets	Government budgets should be comprehensive, which means that they should encompass all government revenue and expenditure.
Financial Assets and Liabilities Disclosure	Government budgets should include a full disclosure of all financial liabilities and financial assets.

Advisory Topic	Summary
Financial Management and Accounting Principles	Modern financial management and accounting uses accruals, capital charges, carry-overs of unused appropriations, and interest-bearing accounts.
Fiscal Consolidation Instruments	Countries can reap sizeable budgetary benefits by adopting “best practices” in many spending and revenue areas, notably health and education and via pension reforms. The approach is generally that of political economy (see below).
Fiscal Projections	Fiscal projections should: be prepared on an annual basis; compare with past assessments; include sensitivity analysis; clearly present methodology, assumptions and data sources; illustrate the consequences of different policy options; linked to fiscal targets.
Fiscal Rules	Fiscal rules must be carefully designed to be effective and have the following features: track record of compliance; supported by well-specified policy measures; transparent; targeted; consistent with other rules; simple; flexible; enforceable.
Intergovernmental Grants	Measures to contain the negative effects of intergovernmental transfers to sub-central governments (SCG) include: using measures of potential tax base that reduce SCG strategic behaviour in order to receive more grants; basing grant allocation on broad-based geographic, demographic or socio-economic need indicators; institutional reforms to contain pressures from special interests.
Loan Guarantees	The use of explicit contingent debts, such as loan guarantees, should follow sound principles of valuation and reporting, be transparent, and treated as regular expenditure decisions.

Advisory Topic	Summary
Medium-Term Budget Frameworks	Governments should develop medium-term budget frameworks because they form the basis for achieving fiscal consolidation. The frameworks should clearly state the government's medium-term fiscal objectives in terms of high-level targets such as the level of aggregate revenue, expenditure, deficit/surplus and debt. They then need to operationalize these high-level targets by establishing hard budget constraints for individual ministries and programmes over a number of years. This lends stability and credibility to the government's fiscal objectives.
Off-Budget Expenditures	Off-budget expenditures result in inconsistencies that may impair the four main functions of the budget, namely: the authorization function, the allocative/distributive function, the macro-economic function and the administrative function. Although most OECD countries strive to ensure that all expenditures and revenues are included in the budget, there still remain some forms of "back door" and "off-budget" expenditure that may hinder the proper functioning of the budget.
Pre-Budget Reports	Governments should issue a pre-budget report no later than one month prior to the introduction of the official budget proposal.
Pre-Election Budget Reports	Governments should issue a pre-election budget report, the purpose of which is to illuminate the general state of government finances immediately before an election.

Advisory Topic	Summary
Prudent Economic Assumptions	Deviations from the forecast of the key economic assumptions underlying the budget are the government's key fiscal risk and that it is important to make prudent economic assumptions that are transparent, tested with sensitivity analysis, and compared to private sector forecasters.
Role of Legislature and Civil Society in the Budget Process	A transparent and accountable budget process has three essential elements: 1) the systematic and timely release of budget data, 2) the legislature must be able to scrutinize the budget reports, independently review them, debate and influence budget policy and be in a position to effectively hold the government to account and 3) there must be an effective role for civil society, through the media and non-governmental organizations in order to influence budget policy and hold the government to account.
Tax Competition between Sub-Central Governments (SCGs)	Policies that are likely to reduce tax competition among SCGs are: move toward property taxation; harmonize the sub-central tax base; introduce fiscal equalization systems; limiting the autonomy of SCG tax autonomy.
Tax Expenditures	Budgetary control of tax expenditures can be enhanced by: identifying them clearly, as well as their cost; including them in the budget document; assigning them to individual ministries; making them subject to normal budgetary control.
Top-Down Budgeting Techniques	Instead of using the traditional bottom-up technique in budgeting, where agencies and ministries send requests to the Finance Ministry, governments should instead employ a top-down method. This approach requires the government to make a binding political decision as to the total level of expenditures and to divide them among individual spending ministries.

Advisory Topic	Summary
Transparency in Government Budgets	Budget transparency is the full disclosure of all relevant fiscal information, which can be achieved by: comprehensive presentation of all expenditures and revenues; early release of a draft budget for comment; inclusion of non-financial performance data; a medium-term perspective; comparative information on actual expenditures and revenues in the past year; inclusion of tax expenditures; comprehensive presentation of all assets and liabilities.

There are several general observations to be made of these advisory topics and the advice therein. First, the advice that we have harvested spans a range of years from 1998 to 2012, and across two subjects in public management. The 2012 budgeting and financial management best practices, for example, have clearly been coloured by the financial crisis. The advice on evaluation, with one exception, all comes from an 1998 OECD publication literally entitled “Best Practice Guidelines for Evaluation” (OECD, 1998). Second, all of the best practice advice above comes from the OECD, and so represents the views of only one organization. We prefer to see this advice as “emanating” from the organization rather than representing some sort of collective viewpoint. It might appear that since there will be vetting processes within the organization, views or recommendations that are contradictory to the organization’s mission will be disallowed or filtered out. It is hardly likely that the OECD, for example, would endorse a report recommending the nationalization of the commanding heights of any economy. Nonetheless, the range of acceptable views within complex international government organizations like the OECD is

wider than usually thought. These organizations consist of divisions (however they may be termed), often with their own approaches and perspectives. There are often internecine battles within organizations between divisions on some issues, and what the organization eventually endorses may be the views of the winners. So, while we agree that international organizations have distinctive footprints, we do not believe that they are ideational stamping machines, with each idea or recommendation necessarily reflecting some organic view (Deacon, Hulse, & Stubbs, 1997). Third, the level of detail among these different bits of best practice advice varies considerably. The project website has links to all the original documents, and what is presented above is simply summary, but it is clear that the best practice advice in the evaluation field seems to consist more of bromides, while the best practice advice in the budgeting and financial management subject area has both more detail and seems in most cases grounded in explicit theories of political economy.

At this early stage, and with respect simply to these two public management subjects, we can pose two preliminary questions. First, are there any consistent or semi-consistent principles that underlie this body of advice? The task here is to rise above the details of the advisory topics themselves, and see if there are threads that unite them. In this respect, we might indeed suggest that if there is strong evidence of certain underlying principles in the advice, that this might represent an organizational view, in this case of the OECD. Second, are there any glaring inconsistencies or tensions in the advice? We suspect so, for a few reasons. As we noted in the opening discussion of the best practice literature, one of the complaints is that practices do not seem to accumulate into a solid

body of knowledge. Though the literature has not put it this way, best practice advice may have some of the character of proverbs, and as Simon pointed out long ago, and may actually come in contradictory pairs (Simon, 1946). As well, the advice emanates from different parts of the organization, populated with professionals who come from different disciplinary backgrounds. Evaluation best practices will be recommended by evaluators; budgeting and financial management best practices will be recommended by economists and accountants.

Before looking at consistent and inconsistent principles, we can step back a little and ask about the general view of the policy universe that comes through in even this limited set of 30 best practices. In other words, by understanding the best practices being advised, we can read off those practices the assumptions about what “bad practices” are and how they may infect policy-making systems. It is striking, for example, how many of the best practices in this sample call for transparency (at least three of the evaluation practices, and fully eleven of the budgeting and financial management). This implies that a lack of transparency is a major problem among governments. Another example is the emphasis on accountability. This is of course closely linked to transparency – greater transparency encourages accountability because the public and stakeholders can assess government policies better. In the evaluation best practices, accountability was primarily intra-governmental, or about the accountability of managers for overseeing evaluations and ensuring that the information thereby generated feeds back into the organization and provided corrective opportunities. The accountabilities stressed in the budgeting and financial management practice advice are more extra-governmental, to the public,

stakeholders and the legislature. But in both cases, if we read off from the advice, the clear implication is that there are strong tendencies within governments to thwart both transparency and accountability.

The twenty-one advisory topics in the budgeting and financial management subject field are more detailed and explicit about the evils that these best practices are designed to thwart. They reveal an *sub rosa* theory of the political universe that is quite consistent with public choice and recent political economy analyses of the policy process (Mueller, 2003). In addition to several calls to ensure transparency (as we noted) in complex financial transactions, many of the best practices in the budgeting and financial management subject area deal with strategic behaviour that tries to get around budget constraints. In the Fiscal Projections best practice, for example, there is advice to prepare fiscal projections on an annual basis, since irregular projections “or those which are out of sync with the electoral cycle, may allow for gaming, in pre-election times, over when to prepare projections.” The other principles under this advice topic veer toward the technical (e.g., include sensitivity analysis), but many are clearly intended to lash governments tightly to the mast of their budgetary policies, and discourage them from wiggling out of their bonds. Simple examples of what clearly would go against the grain of any government trying to position itself favourably: projections should compare past data to show whether performance has improved or not; projections should show clearly the fiscal consequences of policy decisions. Another example is intergovernmental grants, where the advice is geared to assist central governments in dealing with sub-national government machinations to try to obtain higher grants. Best practices on loan guarantees caution

against hiding their true costs, and fees associated with the guarantees should be set by “entities not directly involved in the decision to issue the guarantees.” The advice on off-budget expenditures is aimed at rigour, transparency, clarity, and strict accounting principles. Again, piercing through the technical language, it is clear that these protections are not simply against methodological error, but against temptations to use off-budget expenditures in unethical ways, or at the very least, in ways that affront the public interest. Another interesting example is the advice to issue “pre-election budget reports.” This advice can be seen as a technical effort to improve the budget process, but the link to elections (and the advice to make these reports credible and binding) is linked to a concern about governments gaming the electoral process through privileged knowledge about the true fiscal situation, leading to “morning-after” exclamations of surprise about how bad that situation actually is.

The clearest window into the policy universe that best practice responds to is in the advice on budget consolidation. Though it is tempting to see “budget consolidation” as a euphemism for budget cuts, it is in fact OECD-speak for a mix of expenditure and revenue and targeted policy measures (e.g., pensions) that have the potential to reduce debt ratios. This is the scenario outlined in the original document:

Successful fiscal consolidations in the past have been largely driven by spending cuts due to political economy considerations and their positive impacts on efficiency and, when concentrated on transfers and other current spending, their perceived durability. Already reaching around 35% of GDP on average across the OECD (and up to around 50% of GDP in some

countries), many tax regimes reduce GDP by blunting incentives to work, save and invest. Public spending is elevated in most high-debt OECD countries. Faced with imminent spending pressures from population ageing, the most promising path to fiscal sustainability is through spending reforms that reduce outlays to improve allocative efficiency (i.e., better overall use of resources) or productive efficiency (i.e., lower resource cost per unit of service delivery). At the same time, the more vulnerable members of society need to be protected from cuts, including through targeted offsets if necessary. (OECD, 2012b)

Recommendations for improvement through the adoption of best practices imply that what is being improved has been wanting in some sense, a victim of “bad practice.” In the education sector, “effective reforms include making budgets more responsive to the educational needs of students (e.g., through more decentralized budgets), allowing more autonomous budget management balanced by greater accountability (e.g., at the school level), and introducing more competition.” The obvious implication is that currently, most educational budgets are not responsive to student needs, are too centralized, and sheltered from competitive pressures. While urging caution in cutting the public sector wage bill, the OECD did recommend “restoring private-public pay relativities,” thinly suggesting that public sector wages unjustifiably exceeded private sector equivalents. With respect to transfers, they “have become less focused on their original objectives and have become replete with disincentives to work (e.g., lengthy and unconditional unemployment benefits).”

There is nothing remarkable in this portrait of constant pressures to use the policy process for political gain, either by governments, other political parties, sub-national governments, stakeholders, pressure groups, or citizens. At the macro-level, the best practice advice being proffered is intended to blunt if not neutralize those pressures.

In reviewing the 30 best practices in this small, preliminary sample, we can discern five key principles that seem to run through them and provide consistent touchstones. At the same time, as we note below, there are some principles that are in tension.

Principles

1. Transparency (mentioned above): As we discussed, a principle that runs through both the evaluation and budgeting subjects is that reports and processes be as transparent as possible. Transparency is linked to accountability, but also to the creation of public pressures (based on better knowledge) for change and reform.
2. Accountability (mentioned above): This is both accountability by managers to their ministries and functional responsibilities, and by governments to the broader public.
3. Citizen and stakeholder participation: As with the first two principles, this “opens up” government, empowers non-governmental actors, and possibly enhances credibility and trust.
4. Credibility: This principle underpins several best practices in the evaluation as well as the budgeting subject areas. At one level it is an admonition to be as transparent, truthful and intelligible as possible, for reasons cited above. At another level, it is

linked to a stricture that reports, analyses, assumptions and decisions should be as rigorous and as methodologically sound as possible.

5. Consistency: As banal a principle as this sounds, it has deep import for those who advise governments on best practice. At the level of a single practice, for example standards of evaluation or audit, if it is consistent across ministries and agencies, then it must be transparent, evident, known, absorbed, and applied in the same manner. This then implies that the government's "audit function" is indeed something that scales horizontally over government-as-a-whole. At the level of process, for example budgeting, consistent practices in categorizing and treating expenditures and revenues reduces the chances of "off-budget" or "back-door" practices.

Tensions

In this limited sample, we have uncovered two sets of principles that are in tension.

We would point out that the tensions themselves are not surprising, and on reflection are probably characteristic of public sector management everywhere. We offer them less as revelations about the policy process, than as observations on the challenges of positing best practices.

1. Centralization vs. decentralization: The hints for this tension were not strong, likely because of the small size of the sample. Further research into the database can provide better evidence if this is indeed a tension that runs through the body of best practice advice from different international organizations. In the budgeting

and financial management subject area, for example, under central input controls, the OECD recommends (unless there is a danger of increasing the probability of corruption) that central input controls be relaxed and that budget decisions be decentralized to the heads of agencies. However, in the best practice advice on top-down budgeting techniques, the OECD advises in favour of centralized and top-down decision-making. In the evaluation subject field, the advice is: “Central government agencies play an important role in managing the evaluation process; however, the actual evaluations can be decentralized to different actors at all levels of government.”

2. Methodological rigour vs. accessibility: We noted earlier that a key principle that underlies the best practice advice we have reviewed in this paper is transparency and citizen engagement, which translates into credible reporting and wide dissemination of core information like budgetary expenditures and revenues, projects, likely consequences of fiscal decisions and so on. At the same time, however, a good deal of the best practice advice urges the most rigorous methodology and technical competence possible. These are not contradictory, but they are in tension, and governments that accept both best practices will be challenged to find the balance.

Conclusions

The first section of this paper highlighted the range of criticisms leveled at best practices research, but concluded that the appetite for exemplars – or simply good ideas –

is by no means abating. The demand is probably increasing across a range of fields as competitive, cost, and other pressures force organizations to cast about for ways to improve themselves. A pedestrian but telling example comes from the university sector, where measures of performance (usually in research output), quality of programs, and various measures and rankings have increased dramatically in the last decade. For the most part, governments face the same pressures, and the quality of governance systems is increasingly being monitored and measured (Buduru & Pal, 2010). On the supply side, as we noted, there is no shortage of advice. This combination of supply and demand creates strong and continuous search for best practices, or something that goes by a less offensive euphemism. A good illustration is the OECD's recent initiative of an Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OECD, 2012a). Its aim is "to systematically collect, categorize, analyse and share innovative practices from across the public sector, via an online interactive database." The site goes on to refer to Task Force members providing "valuable input, sharing lessons and ideas from their own national experiences." This is the heart of a best practices enterprise.

The BPP project has no formal affiliation with the Observatory, though it has exchanged information and consulted. The two projects are different in several ways. The Observatory is practitioner and country led as part of the overall OECD structure; the BPP is an academic research endeavour. The Observatory is focusing on "innovation," which while clearly related to best practices, does have a different tone, pitch and conceptual underpinning. The Observatory is carefully developing a series of country case studies that will provide illustrations both of the content and process of innovation; whereas at

this stage the BPP is harvesting advisory statements. However, the parallels between the two projects are encouraging, and reinforce our conviction that the interest in best practices or innovation in public management and governance will remain high.

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