



Managing partnerships for sustainable development: The Berkeley–China sustainable transportation program



Alainna Thomas^{a,*}, Elizabeth Deakin^b

^a Department of Urban Planning and Design Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University Higher Education District, 111 Ren'ai Road Suzhou, 215123 PR China

^b Department of City and Regional Planning 406A Wurster Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 April 2016

Received in revised form 21 July 2016

Accepted 24 August 2016

Available online 25 August 2016

Keywords:

Knowledge transfer

Research partnerships

Sustainable transportation

ABSTRACT

Over a five-year period, the University of California Berkeley's Global Metropolitan Studies-China Program conducted research in partnership with local counterparts in Beijing, Shanghai, Jinan, Chengdu, and Kunming. Research focused on strategies for maintaining and increasing the sustainability of the cities' transportation systems in the face of rapid economic growth and accelerating motorization, and included planning, analysis, and design of projects on transit-oriented development, non-motorized transportation, and bus rapid transit. In this paper, we focus on two cases that exemplify the positive and negative experiences in research partnerships. Through an assessment of these partnerships, we identify a core set of elements that are key to effective co-production and exchange of knowledge. The elements include: strong and engaged leadership at multiple organizational levels, engagement in capacity building projects as a strategy to develop mutual understanding, and multiagency and multidisciplinary collaboration. These findings are consistent with and elaborate on current research on knowledge transfer (Khirfan, 2011; Marsden et al., 2011). In our China work, where these elements were strong, we (including our Chinese partners) were able to incorporate strong principles of sustainable transportation into local planning. These experiences provide lessons and strategies for practitioners and researchers who plan to work in China.

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1. Introduction

From 2006 to 2011, as part of an international best practice network, the University of California-Berkeley's Global Metropolitan Studies-China Sustainable Transportation (CST) program worked with municipal planning bureaus, institutes, and universities in Beijing, Shanghai, Jinan, Chengdu, and Kunming (Fig. 1). The level of engagement in these cities varied from several months to several years. Our work was supported by the US-based Energy Foundation as part of their work under the China Sustainable Energy Program (CSEP). Our work in China occurred at a pivotal time—personal car and electric bicycle/scooter ownership and use were growing at unprecedented rates and traffic congestion was skyrocketing. Most transportation planners lacked experience or training as to deal with this assortment of modes and speeds. Best practices such as bus rapid transit and transit-oriented

development were gaining increased interest and support from local governments.

This paper focuses on our experiences in two cities—Jinan, Shandong Province, and Chengdu, Sichuan Province. Both cities were seen as ideal places to pilot transit-oriented development (TOD) in China. Both cities provided strong leadership support and interest in adapting TOD to their cities and wanted to incorporate it into their transit plans. While the partnership with Jinan was successful, the effort to develop a partnership with Chengdu failed.

The two cases provide insight into how to foster strong partnerships that lead to more sustainable transportation practices, and also illustrate what can go wrong with partnership efforts. We found that the success of the partnerships depended on strong and engaged leadership, multilevel and multidisciplinary cooperation, and successful capacity building efforts. A key factor was framing the partnership as a collaboration rather than knowledge transfer. A commitment to mutual learning resulted in effective co-production of knowledge. These elements were strong in Jinan and led to the incorporation of sustainable transportation practices into the local planners' work. In Chengdu, in contrast, we were

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Alainna.Thomas@xjtlu.edu.cn (A. Thomas), edeakin@berkeley.edu (E. Deakin).



Fig. 1. Map of China with sites of Global Metropolitan Studies-China program partnership cities.

never able to move forward beyond a superficial commitment to partnership and our efforts triggered defensive reactions, leading to termination of the partnership effort.

Our paper is organized in the following sections. In the next section, we discuss previous research on policy transfer and knowledge uptake. Increasingly, this literature emphasizes the importance of context and mutual learning to successful implementation of new policies. In Section 3, we provide a brief overview on Chinese transportation planning as it has evolved over the last 20 years. This context is important to understand since it shapes the way Chinese planning is organized, and in particular the ingrained silos in which planners carry out their work. The institution of transportation planning in China and its *modus operandi* created challenges to adapting transit-oriented development concepts, the substantive focus of much of our work, to the local context. In the fourth section of the paper we describe our work in Jinan and Chengdu, focusing on three components that we find to be critical to successful partnerships—strong and engaged leadership, capacity building, and multiagency and multidisciplinary collaboration. Section 5 summarizes our findings and Section 6 presents our conclusions.

2. Previous research on policy transfer

Research on policy transfer has identified a variety of processes under which it occurs, ranging from coercion (e.g., a policy is adopted and implemented under strict government mandate and supervision) to purely voluntary action (e.g., a local administration searches out alternative ways of dealing with a problem (Bulmer and Padgett, 2005)). While much of the literature has examined the role of individuals as agents of change, studying, for example, policy entrepreneurs as generators or promoters of new policies

and political champions as drivers of implementation (Mintrom, 1997; Kingdon, 1995), other research points to the importance of the broader governance systems under which policy decisions are made. In particular, research on organizational behavior stresses the importance of information exchange and peer group learning in facilitating the adoption of new ideas, or in some cases, blocking new ideas (See, e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Bulmer and Padgett, 2004). The importance of context is also underscored by researchers who point out that policies are rarely transferred directly but rather are translated or adapted to meet local conditions (e.g., Rose, 2004).

Recently there has been a growing body of research on policy transfer and policy learning in the field of transportation, some of which emphasizes how the learning actually takes place (See, e.g., Marsden and Stead, 2011; Marsden et al., 2011). Drawing upon case studies of cities in the European Union and the United States, the latter authors investigated how ideas about good practices in urban transportation move from city to city. They found that many cities are actively looking to learn from one another, but the search for good practices is often constrained by a lack of time and resources and therefore has a “hit or miss” character. The authors documented the importance of informal networks based on professional contacts as the predominant method of initial knowledge transfer and found that strong personal and professional contacts and an organizational culture that supported learning led to greater acceptance of new ideas. They further found local context is critical in determining whether policies will transfer well across cities, with lack of fit one reason for limited transfer.

Relatively few published studies to date have examined how these processes work when the knowledge transfer is between a developed country and a developing country, a situation that spurs

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