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Public Sector Reforms

The International Diffusion of Models of Public Management

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1. Introduction

When the government in a country embarks upon public sector reform, then it may have an image of what it wants to accomplish. This image consists of governance forms that may be analysed as a set of ideal-types for the organisation of public sector activities. Modernising or reforming the structure of the public sector in one country is often guided by the diffusion or export of such ideal-types of organisation.

I will argue below that there is ample evidence to the effect that diffusion has occurred in public sector reform during the last twenty years. The model or governance form employed in one country has been exported to another. It testifies to the growing linkages among countries. It is a matter not only of diffusion among countries forming a policy community, like the OECD with its public sector projects. Also exports from advanced countries to Third World countries have taken place and countries outside the established policy communities have imported models.

2. Diffusion of models of organisation

The question of diffusion of governance forms from one country to another is not unproblematic. On the one hand, some scholars underline the importance of institutional legacies to such an extent that there is little room for the import of governance forms from other countries. Public sector reform is path dependent, this theory claims, looking upon changes in governance forms as institutional trajectories from the past. On the other hand, one may take the position that each country has its own model – e.g. the NZ model of contracting, the Dutch model with networks or the Swedish model of statutory agencies.

In a more elaborate version of this theme, it is claimed that public sector organisation is strictly trajectory determined, meaning that each country has a legacy of administrative organisation that frames all reform attempts. The implication is that one should research how countries adapt to the international diffusion of reforms by changing their structures in a piecemeal fashion, because the country legacy sets too many restrictions upon the introduction of grand reform policies.

However, this argument exaggerates the extent of path dependency. There is a set of general models of public sector organization – governance forms – that may work in almost any well-ordered country. Public sector reform in this approach is to a considerable degree the diffusion of a small set of ideal-types for public sector organisation. They constitute “ideal-types” in the Weberian meaning, as they are general and abstract to be found in reality never fully blown.