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Multi-stakeholder initiatives, policy learning and institutionalization: the surprising failure of open government in Norway

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ABSTRACT

Global multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) promote policy to national governments according to a voluntary model that is often criticized for failing to produce formal policy outputs. This article proposes an analytical framework for policy learning to understand how MSIs can influence the informal institutionalization of policy in sub-national institutions, and formal policy outputs by extension. This framework is applied to Norwegian participation in one such MSI, the Open Government Partnership, and tests for the influence of those processes on the formal and informal institutionalization of policy related to civic participation and digital technology. Results validate a policy learning framework for assessing MSI contributions to informal policy outcomes, highlight the important role of institutional context in limiting the influence of this mechanism, and provide the foundations for developing a predictive theory of MSI policy influence through learning.

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Introduction and background

Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) are private governance arrangements that combine global policy platforms with national processes through which representatives of government, civil society, and the private sector debate, coordinate and collaborate to address complex policy challenges. This approach has proliferated in recent decades, with one non-exhaustive review counting “more than a fourfold increase [...] between 2000 and 2015 alone” (Stern, Kingston, and Ke 2015, 3). The multi-stakeholder approach is distinct from more rules-based models of collective action or policy partnership:

The need to balance the interests and perspectives of highly diverse constituencies (governments, civil society, philanthropists, foundations, private sector) necessitates governance that is more complex and nuanced than that of traditional collective action organizations. In particular, the effectiveness of their governance depends much more on “soft power” whose defining characteristics are attraction as opposed to force, persuasion instead of regulation, convincing rather than requiring others to follow and the power of complex information systems as opposed to rules-based systems (Bezanson and Isenman 2012, 1–2).

This approach has been particularly prominent in global efforts to improve national policies for public sector governance, but public governance MSIs have been criticized for lack of demonstrable impact (Brockmyer and Fox 2015; Gruzdt et al. 2018). Representatives of civil society, in particular, question whether or not voluntary initiatives that rely solely on soft power to influence government policy and practice are “a total waste of time” (Miller-Dawkins 2014).

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a prominent public governance MSI focused on improving government openness, accountability and responsiveness to citizens. This includes an emphasis on civic participation and the use of technology for transparency and accountability, and the OGP’s open government rhetoric dominates contemporary policy discourse on e-government and citizen engagement (Harrison 2013; Kassen 2014; Elgin-Cossart, Sutton, and Sachs 2016, 6). OGP-participating governments are encouraged to leverage technology for better civic participation in a variety of ways, including the creation of channels for direct communication between policy makers and citizens (Transparency and Accountability Initiative 2013), which is here referred to as digital dialogue.

To join OGP, countries must meet eligibility criteria according to international comparative metrics, publically endorse the values articulated in the Open Government Declaration, and commit to developing national action plans in collaboration with domestic civil society organizations.¹ OGP offers significant guidance on how these action plans ought to be developed (see, for example, Open Government Partnership 2017), and hopes that the “regular cycle” of consultation, collaboration, implementation and monitoring of action plans will institutionalize norms of civic participation over time. In line with the social incentives and soft power dynamics described above, this anticipates that “as norms shift and governments become more comfortable with transparency, governments will begin introducing more opportunities for dialogue and become more receptive to civil society input and participation” (Open Government Partnership 2014, 16).

This dynamic has not been theorized or explored. The majority of research on OGP and other public governance MSIs has to date emphasized compliance with MSI rules and procedures (Brockmyer and Fox 2015, 8; Turianskyi et al. 2018, 3), and has not assessed whether the soft power and social incentives that define these initiatives are actually influencing national policy.

Research on policy learning provides the foundations for an analytical framework with which to make such an assessment, and is applied here to the case of OGP in Norway.

Widely regarded as a pillar liberal democratic practice, Norway has been ranked the “world’s best democracy” by the Economist Intelligence Unit for six years running, and is a founding member of the OGP. Independent evaluations of Norway’s OGP implementation have, however, roundly and consistently criticized both the development and implementation of Norway’s national action plans, citing a lack of clarity, relevance and ambition (Wilson and Nahem 2013; Skedsmo 2014; Wilson 2017a). This poor performance runs counter to expectations, and has prompted descriptions of a “Nordic race to the bottom in the OGP” (Petrie 2015). Deviance from the presumed positive relationship between democratic practice and OGP performance provides a rich context in which to assess how global MSIs influence institutional cultures in national governments. Norway’s role as a founding member of OGP also provides a rich body of evidence, including documentation of interactions between multiple subnational agencies during the two years of planning and negotiation that preceded OGP’s launch.

Despite policy scholars' increasing attention to collaborative governance mechanisms (Arnold, Long, and Gottlieb 2017; Scott and Thomas 2017) and international policy intermediaries (Stone 2012, 491–496), there has been no explicit exploration of whether or how MSIs influence processes of national policy change. This article aims to fill that gap.

Theories of policy learning are used to construct an analytical framework with which to explain MSI policy influence, and that framework is applied to a specific case. Doing so expands the repertoire of policy studies research to include a novel type of policy intermediary, while providing policy-relevant insights on the effectiveness and impact of public governance MSIs. A specific focus on the formal and informal institutionalization of policy related to digital dialogue in Norway implies two empirical and two theoretical research questions:

- (1) To what extent did Norway's participation in the OGP lead to *formal or informal* institutionalization of open government norms?
- (2) Through what *mechanisms* did this occur, and did it differ for formal and informal outcomes?
- (3) What *explanatory power* does an analytical framework for policy learning and transfer provide for understanding these mechanisms?
- (4) What *theoretical propositions* can be derived to predict MSI influence over policy learning processes?

Conceptual and theoretical framework

The changes to norms and institutional cultures anticipated by OGP can be conceptualized as the informal institutionalization of policy, which is often described as a precursor to the formal institutionalization in policy (Béland and Waddan 2015; Erikson 2015; Björnehed and Erikson 2018), and can influence policy outcomes in a variety of ways. Different branches of policy scholarship have emphasized the embedding of narratives about appropriateness that facilitate or block specific avenues to formal policy change (Hope and Raudla 2012; Leipold and Winkel 2017), how ideational frames signal changes of appropriateness within a policy environment (Erikson 2015; Björnehed and Erikson 2018), or the development of structural conditions for policy change within institutions (Bleich 2006). Many of these approaches also incorporate attention to policy learning, broadly construed as the processes through which individuals in institutions update their policy-relevant knowledge and beliefs (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013).

The conceptual model for individual and collective policy learning advanced by Heikkilä and Gerlak (2013) provides a useful frame for assessing whether OGP policy mechanisms lead to institutional learning, and informal policy change by extension. Heikkilä and Gerlak emphasize that “learning processes often start with individuals and move up into different levels of subunits of a group” (486), contributing to collective policy learning in institutions. That process is marked by three sequential stages. During *acquisition*, individuals receive information. *Translation* involves “interpreting the meaning of new information, or the application of existing information to a new context” through the use of heuristics, mental framing” and “characteristics of the collective group” (490–491).

In the final stage of *dissemination*, learning products and policy knowledge are shared with

others. This sequence has the potential to produce collective learning products, including “changes in collective behaviours or actions [that] can range from new or enhanced informal routines and strategies, to new or expanded programs and plans that structure group behaviour, or highly formalized rules or sets of institutional arrangements and policies” (491–492). Applying Heikkila and Gerlak’s model to OGP allows for a close look at how individuals interact with institutions in an open government policy context, and also allows for a useful distinction between formal and informal institutionalization of digital dialogue policy.

Models of policy learning also align well with theories of policy transfer and translation (Meseguer 2005; Stone 2012; Berry and Berry 2014, cited in Dunlop and Radaelli 2018).

The policy translation perspective emphasizes how communicative processes influence perceptions about the appropriateness of global norms and policies, reshaping them during the process of policy adoption (Johnson and Hagström 2005; Park, Wilding, and Chung 2014; Stone 2016). This approach explicitly avoids mechanistic conceptions of transfer from international norm entrepreneurs to national policy makers, and emphasizes “the messy processes of hybrid policies emerging from multiple exemplars, and the messy interpretative processes where importing countries translate and amend transferred policies” (Stone 2016, 55). Stone has noted the important contributions that international actors can make to policy learning in such processes, functioning as epistemic communities or policy intermediaries (2012, 491–496).

Setting Heikkila and Gerlak’s model for collective policy learning within a causal process of policy translation has two importance consequences. Firstly, it helps to explain the observation that the soft transfer of ideas and information to national policy makers is much more common than instances where ideas structure governance and become institutionalised (Stone 2012, 496). The spread of ideas precedes and justifies the transfer of specific policies into national contexts (Stone 2016, 62), and policy learning provides a framework for understanding how it does so.

Secondly, the policy learning model emphasizes individuals’ gatekeeping roles in translation processes, particularly at the translation stage of learning cycles. Here, global policy information is processed contextually and becomes policy knowledge. Heikkila and Gerlak (2013) note that this process often involves a “subconscious or unintentional mechanism that people use in translating information” and that these conceptualizations can be significantly influenced by the social and formal characteristics of institutions and social groups (489–490). This recalls ideas of “congruence” and “cultural match” in norms research, which are used to assess the “fit” between global norms and the cultural context of national institutions (Acharya 2004, 243), but situates logics of appropriateness at the level of the individual rather than national culture. This implies attitudinal processes and questions of credibility required for recognizing the presence of a policy problem to be addressed (Oxley, Vedlitz, and Dan Wood 2014), and may involve assessments of appropriateness at multiple levels. Ben-Josef Hirsch (2014) distinguishes, for example, between logics of morality, consequences, and specification (“relations with similar or alternative practices”) that drive changes in how norms and policies are understood in national contexts (812). Each of these logics could conceivably result in different assessments of appropriateness by different individuals assessing any given global norm.

This emphasis on individuals’ agency resonates with studies of civic participation and open government that demonstrate how individual perceptions of institutional cultures

can block or facilitate the adoption and implementation of policy (Vigoda 2002; Mizrahi, Vigoda-Gadot, and Cohen 2009; Head 2012; Wirtz et al. 2016). Individuals also play a key role in dissemination phases, and integrating these frameworks allows for insights from the diffusion literature on how individuals move ideas within and across institutional boundaries, and facilitate the flow of information between micro and macro policy environments (Douglas, Raudla, and Hartley 2015).

Viewed together and applied to the current case, this suggests an analytical framework that is sequential and initiated with the dissemination of knowledge and promotion of norms by global MSIs like the OGP. Knowledge transfer and the first phase of policy learning coincide when individual policy makers and civil servants are exposed to that information. Individuals then assess information in light of their national and institutional contexts, and if deemed appropriate, disseminate that knowledge in the third phase of policy learning, contributing to collective learning processes within institutions. Collective learning processes may then contribute to the informal institutionalization of policy in institutional culture, which may in turn support the formal institutionalization of norms in policy, law or administrative rules. This sequence is represented in Figure 1.

Methodology

Research scope and evidentiary sources

This analysis traces processes of MSI policy influence from the Norwegian MFA's first OGP discussions with representatives of the US National Security Council in 2010, through to the completion of Norway's second action plan in 2015. The analysis focuses on the promotion and institutionalization of norms and policy related to digital dialogue in eight institutional agencies and ministerial divisions (hereafter "agencies"). These agencies are selected on the basis of their involvement in the OGP process and the relevance of digital dialogue to their policy mandate, and are displayed in Table 1.

Evidentiary sources considered in this research include official documents produced by Norwegian government agencies and the OGP, as well as complementary policy

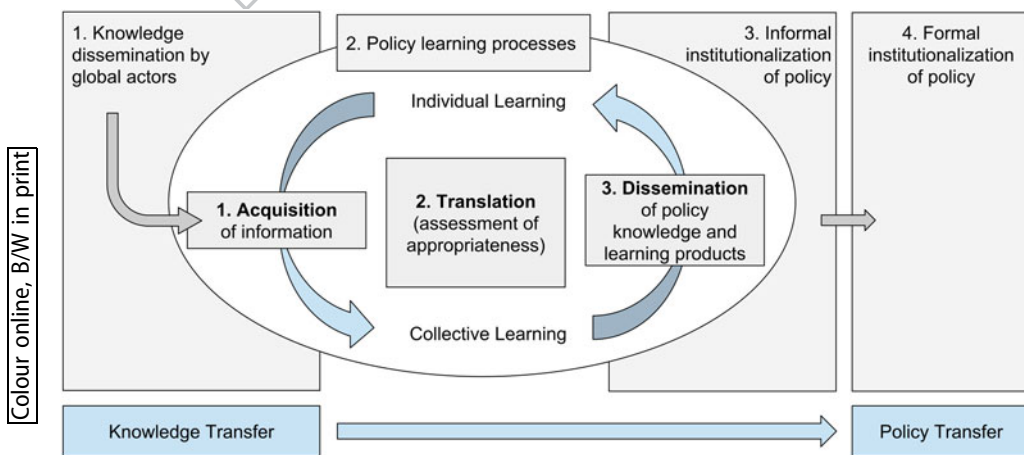


Figure 1. Analytical framework for the four stages of policy learning and translation.

Table 1. Overview of agencies assessed.

	Norwegian agency (and Norwegian acronym)	Commitments in 1st (*) and 2nd National Action Plans (numbered)	Other roles and responsibilities	Short name
230	Section for ICTs, Modernization and Innovation in the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization (KMD)**	*: Open Public Sector and Inclusive Government 1: Public review and public consultation 2: A better overview of committees, boards and councils [...] 3: "Simplify" ("Enkelt og greit") 5: Re-use of public sector information 19: Reducing conflicts of interests 21: Modernizing Public Governance	Responsible for national coordination of OGP from 2013.	ICTs and Modernization team
235				
240	Various divisions in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)	*: Transparency in the management of oil and gas revenues, [...] 22: Transparency in the management of oil and gas revenues 24: Transparency and anti- corruption efforts	Led planning and development of OGP, responsible for national coordination from 2010 to 2012.	MFA
245	Agency for Public Management and eGovernment (DIFI)	4: Electronic Public Records (OEP) 10: Registering and preserving digital documentation [...] 11: The Norwegian Citizen Survey 15: eGovernment with an end 16: Plain Legal Language	Responsible for implementing and coordinating Norwegian policy on e-government and modernization.	eGovernment Agency
250				
	Department of Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs (KUD)	8- Interaction with NGOs 9- Digital administration of arrangements for NGOs 10- Digital documentation		Department of Civil Society
255	Legislation Department in the Ministry of Justice	13- Strengthening the transparency of public authorities [...] 14- Strengthened information exchange for [...] crime prevention 6: Access to health data		Legislation Department
260	Directorate of Health in the Ministry of Health and Care Services			Directorate of Health
	Department for Economic and Administrative Affairs in Ministry of Petroleum & Energy	*: Transparency in the management of oil and gas revenues [...] 22: Transparency in the management of oil and gas revenues		Ministry of Energy
265	Department of Consumer Affairs and Equality in the Ministry of Children and Equality	*: Measures to promote gender equality and women's full participation in civic life [...]		Ministry of Equality

**= Note, KMD was created through a merger of two existing ministries in 2011. Prior to this, responsibility for coordinating OGP lay with the same team in the Ministry of Modernization (FAD).

documents and evaluations. Several documents were also secured from the Norwegian independent review mechanism (IRM) research team responsible for evaluating the Norway's first two national action plans, including 25 internal self-assessment reports prepared by OGP commitment focal points in Norwegian government agencies, minutes from public consultations, and records of 58 IRM interviews with civil servants and stakeholders. Consent was retroactively secured from those individuals whose information appears in documents not publicly available. The author also actively participated in policy debate and IRM evaluations of OGP in Norway while working as [redacted to preserve anonymity].²

In addition to documentation, twenty-seven in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-three individuals, either in person or over phone or VOIP, lasting between 45 and 90 min. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated, and subjected to categorical and axial coding (Bryman 2015, 574–589). Subject codes for referencing interviews in this article are presented in Table 2, together with interviewees roles and the institutions they represent.

Methods and validity

The dependent variable treated here is institutionalization of digital dialogue policy. Digital dialogue is understood as the combined application of civic participation and technology for openness and accountability, two of the core open government values promoted by OGP (Open Government Partnership 2011). The use of digital technology to facilitate interaction between government and the public may take any number of forms, the scope and variety of which are well documented (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2016). The focus on policy ideas and learning in this analysis prioritizes conceptual validity over precision (Adcock and Collier 2001), identifying digital dialogue in any stakeholder policy articulation that references both civic participation and the use of technology.

Causal process tracing is used to assess the mechanisms through which OGP norm promotion contributed to the Norwegian institutionalization of digital dialogue. Process tracing's inherent orientation towards "multiple causality, feedback loops, path dependencies, tipping points, and complex interaction effects" (Falleti 2006, 7) is well suited to the messy environment of policy translation, and when applied robustly, offers "singular advantages for [...] understanding causality from within-case accounts of policy change" (Kay and Baker 2015, 2).

Noting the analytical risks posed by complex policy environments, the ambiguous character of norms, and the author's early involvement in OGP processes, this analysis adheres to the three part methodological standard asserted by Bennett and Checkel (2015), in

Table 2. Overview of interview subjects.

Role	#	Respondent interview codes	Agencies / Institutions
Agency commitment focal point	12	NO182*, NO183, NO185, NO186, NO187, NO188, NO189, NO190, NO193, NO194	KMD, UD, DIFI, KUD, JD, HD, OED, BLD
National OGP coordination	8	NO182*, NO184, NO191, NO195, NO199, NO203*	KMD, UD, SMK
Civil society stakeholder/ counterpart	9	NO192, NO196, NO197*, NO197*, NO198*, NO200*, NO201*, NO202	OGP Council, national NGOs, OGP Secretariat

*= repeat interviews with multiple subjects on a team

which process tracing methods are meta-theoretically grounded, contextually attuned to discursive structures, and methodologically attentive to challenges of multiple causal explanations (20–25). This latter standard implies the use of Bayesian-inspired tests for assessing the veracity of multiple causal explanations as they arise, and is strengthened by the diversity of evidentiary sources described above (Yin 2009, 68, 120–121; Bennett and Checkel 2015, 292–293).

Rigorous application of this standard, and in particular, the use of evidentiary tests to assess the veracity of causal explanations, helps to identify and mitigate instances of respondent and interviewer bias (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 24–25). Analysis of the current case took place over an 18-month period, during which multiple explanations were tested, rejected, and refined, new evidentiary sources were identified, and hypotheses revised. This processes, what Yin calls adaptive research design (2009, 65–67) is closely analogous to the “soaking and poking” phase in process tracing, whereby a researcher “immerses oneself in the details of the case and tries out proto-hypotheses that may either quickly prove to be dead ends or become plausible and worthy of more rigorous testing (Bennett and Checkel 2014, 18).

Theory building

This analysis should be considered a heuristic case study, aiming to identify new variables and relationships, in an effort to develop middle range theory with predictive capacity (George and Bennett 2005, 75). This effort capitalizes on the deeply contextual character of theory-driven process tracing (Falleti and Lynch 2009; Collier 2011; Bennett and Checkel 2015; Kay and Baker 2015), as well as the case’s deviance from a presumed correlation between strong democratic governance and strong OGP performance (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 269–272). The primary objective is to develop theoretical propositions on the basis of causal analysis, which can be tested in other cases in order to establish the structure and scope conditions of a middle level theory for the national policy influence of **MSIs** (George and Bennett 2005, 235–266).

It is important to distinguish this theoretical ambition from the analytical framework elaborated in the previous section. Analytical frameworks are in essence the collection and simplification of ontological assumptions about the world. Structuring assumptions for their application to empirical cases, they help to identify and understand complex phenomena across different contexts. Theory, on the other hand, explains the relationships between complex phenomena, and aspires to predict those relationships across contexts (George and Bennett 2005, 115–117). The analytical framework described above is thus applied to the Norwegian case in order to develop theoretical propositions, which can be leveraged in a more extended theory building effort.

Findings

Evidence of formal and informal institutionalization of digital dialogue policy

There is little evidence of digital dialogue being formally institutionalized in Norwegian policy as a result of OGP implementation. The eight agencies assessed here were responsible for a total of 20 open government commitments over the first two action plans.

According to the OGP's IRM, less than half of these (8) were completed and none significantly contributed to a more open government. The IRM did find that six commitments associated with the agencies under study resulted in "marginal" improvements, and the IRM's descriptions of these commitments' impact describes three outputs that might be considered formal institutionalization of digital dialogue (Wilson 2017b).

Commitment 6 (Access to health data) led to online consultations with stakeholders regarding the design and functionality of the national health portal. Commitment 8 (Interaction with NGOs) led to the consultation with civil society regarding a Declaration of Principles for Interaction and Dialogue with NGOs, and the eventual publication of that declaration. Commitment 1 (Public review and public consultation) resulted in substantive changes to official Instructions for Official Studies of Central Government Measures, mandating that all government agencies consider specific consultation and participation mechanisms when considering reforms, rule changes or investments.

Interviews and review of self-assessment reports provide evidence of informal institutionalization associated with three agencies. In the Legislation Department, interviews suggested that implementation of commitments to improve coordination and freedom of information legislation led to increased formal and informal interaction with external actors, including both international government counterparts participating in OGP, and national civil society counterparts. The focal point for these commitments suggested that this was motivated by internal institutional concerns, but facilitated by OGP participation, which in the Legislation Department, was understood as a mechanism to facilitate internal debate about policy modalities (NO183).

Informal institutionalization was more widespread and readily apparent in the eGovernment Agency and the ICTs and Modernization team, which each noted in internal self-assessment reports that commitment activities had influenced policy discourse externally. The ICTs and Modernization team noted that a report on the availability of geospatial data was used in multiple external policy processes, including proposals to revise Norway's freedom of information legislation (Self-assessment regarding *Re-use of public sector information*, on file with author). The eGovernment Agency noted that workshops and publications regarding the clarity and accessibility of legal language prompted increased demand from civil society actors (Self-assessment regarding *Plain Legal Language*, on file with author). Respondents also noted an increased internal salience of open government rhetoric in both agencies, which drew attention to digital dialogue in the discussion of institutional processes (NO 184, 189, 194). In some cases, this made it easier to secure political support or financial resources for activities with a digital dialogue component. (NO192, 193, 194). Table 3 summarizes examples of informal and formal policy outcomes associated with each agency.

Policy learning and translation as causal mechanisms

Several respondents described OGP processes as having no influence over digital dialogue policy in Norway, and even enthusiasts were cautious in their attributions, noting that "there has been very little enthusiasm or excitement around [the OGP]. And what has come out on the other end that would not have come anyway, that I'm very unsure of" (NO196). Two aspects of institutional culture were particularly prominent in this regard.

Table 3. Overview of institutionalization outcomes by agency.

Agency	Evidence of <i>informal</i> institutionalization	Evidence of <i>formal</i> institutionalization
ICTs and Modernization team	Internal salience and external uptake of policy resources (public sector data use)	Expanded scope of public consultations in Instructions for Official Studies.
eGovernment Agency	Internal salience and external demand for learning outputs (clear legal language)	None
Legislation Department	Increased interaction with civil society stakeholders	None
Department of Civil Society	None	Official declaration on government interaction with civil society organizations
Directorate of Health	None	Digital consultations with stakeholders
MFA	None	None
Ministry of Energy	None	None
Ministry of Equality	None	None

Respondents regularly referenced the Nordic model of consensual policy-making, sometimes described as a natural driver of digital dialogue. Others noted that the Nordic model, insofar as it prioritizes the representation of organized interest groups at the beginning of policy-making processes and does not engage the general public or representative civil society organizations (Haugsvær 2003, 7; Arter 2016, 196–198), is fundamentally in opposition to contemporary notions of digital dialogue, and even suggested that any advances in digital dialogue policy would “over time be overshadowed by the ponderous Norwegian way of doing things” (NO184).

Notions of government efficiency were also regularly described as driving institutional interest in digital dialogue, which corresponds with articulations in Norwegian policy documents (“På Nett Med Innbyggerne: Regjeringens Digitaliseringsprogram” 2012) and reviews of Norwegian e-government by the OECD (OECD 2005, 161–163; OECD 2017, 48). Some respondents also noted that the ICTs and Modernization team explicitly framed the OGP as a component of the government’s modernization agenda, though this was not consistently reflected in how other agency respondents described the initiative.

Indeed, knowledge transfer from OGP to the agencies studied here was remarkably uneven. In the Norwegian model for OGP coordination, a single agency engages with the international OGP secretariat and community, then disseminates information to Norwegian counterparts and focal points. The MFA initially performed this role, which was assumed by the ICTs and Modernization team shortly after the launch of the first national action plan in 2013. As a result, individuals in these agencies were much more familiar with OGP norms related to digital dialogue than other respondents, whose familiarity appears to be significantly influenced the regularity of their interaction with national coordinators. Several respondents were completely unfamiliar with the initiative or how it functioned. Others were uncertain when asked about their familiarity, noting that they “understand the idea, but just the buzzwords; if you ask me about any specifics I’m going to have a hard time.” The exception to this was the eGovernment Agency, where civil servants had significant exposure to knowledge from the OGP, independent of Norway’s participation in the OGP, due to the agency’s mandate to develop and implement Norway’s open data policy.

Interviews suggest that the intermediary role of national coordinators had a significant influence on how OGP was understood in agencies. Respondents described a gradual process in the MFA and the ICTs and Modernization team during which the domestic

applicability of OGP was increasingly recognized, and noted that early conceptualizations of OGP by the MFA framed the initiative as a mechanism for promoting a Norwegian model of open government internationally rather than influencing domestic policy. Individuals working in agencies primarily involved in Norway's first action plan (the MFA, the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Equality) repeated this conceptualization in interviews, and these were also the agencies that were not associated with any informal or formal institutionalization of digital dialogue. This supports the assertion that knowledge dissemination, in this case regarding the domestic applicability of digital dialogue norms, is the first step in a causal sequence of policy learning towards institutionalization.

In policy learning cycles, acquisition of information is followed by a translation phase, in which individuals evaluate the appropriateness of norms and policies. Respondent statements about the relevance of OGP and digital dialogue to their work paints a messy picture of how appropriateness is conceptualized. When describing why OGP did not lead to more significant policy outcomes in Norway, some respondents described common presumption that Norwegian governance was already sufficiently open.

That Norway was challenged on openness, that demands a little time to accept and understand and to make it useful. There was a completely uniform reaction from everyone, regardless of where in the system they were, they made it very clear [*det var smurt tjukt utenpå*], "why should we be pressured on this, we who are so open?" (NO184).

Others suggested that OGP values were already thoroughly integrated into the daily work of institutions (NO185). Several respondents also noted personal factors inhibiting the uptake of OGP policy ideas, including concerns about increasing individuals' own workload (NO184, 192), or a "what's in it for me mentality" (NO193) and the career ambitions of individuals in key positions for translating and disseminating OGP norms and policies (NO186, 196).

Institutional structures and incentives were prominent in how respondents discussed OGP's limitations. Some respondents objected to the idea that open government and digital dialogue norms should be formalized, describing OGP as a "conceptual match" but an "administrative mismatch," because "trust is informal in Norway, and does not require institutionalization" (NO195). Others noted that broad norms of open government are rarely translated into practice, and argued that more specific prescriptions from OGP would have provoked a defensive attitude among civil servants (NO183). Systemic factors, such as the predominance of political priorities (NO198) and competition with comparable initiatives for resources (NO186, 187) were also referenced. Several respondents specifically noted that digital dialogue was inherently foreign to a Norwegian context, either suggesting that the Nordic model of consensual policy-making in parliamentary processes was superior (NO182) or equivalent (NO185) to digital dialogue, or lamenting a widespread institutional reluctance to engage in meaningful interaction and participatory activities with civil society (NO193).

Despite this messy account, there is evidence that translation processes significantly impacted the positions and beliefs of individuals working in some agencies (the Legislation Department, the Department of Civil Society, the MFA), and led to dissemination of policy knowledge in others. In the eGovernment Agency and the ICTs and Modernization team, processes of translation appear to have seeped into institutional policy dialogues, focusing attention on policy issues relevant to digital dialogue. This was likely facilitated

by characteristics that these agencies share, and which distinguish them from other agencies at study. Firstly, respondents note that open government policy is easily associated with modernization policy, with which both agencies are mandated. Secondly, both agencies are formally located within the Ministry of Localization and Modernization, and enjoy the internal support of political leadership from a State Secretary deeply engaged in OGP policy. In the words of one respondent, “[the State Secretary] got it. He wrote blogs [about OGP]. That definitely helped to change the culture” (NO193). Both the eGovernment Agency and the ICTs and Modernization team also enjoyed a direct engagement with OGP knowledge products and international discourse which was not accessed by individuals in other agencies.

In the eGovernment Agency, knowledge about OGP norms were accessed and translated independent of national OGP processes. OGP processes nevertheless lent a legitimacy to the rhetoric of open government and digital dialogue, and respondents consistently credited this to the legitimacy conveyed by OGP’s international character. This rhetorical legitimacy enabled individuals to raise awareness with decision-makers and to secure political and financial support for related projects (NO193, 194). There is no evidence, however, that this led to specific formal digital dialogue policy outcomes.

The ICTs and Modernization team is the only agency studied here where informal institutionalization of digital dialogue is directly associated with formal institutionalization, through the expansion of digital dialogue in the Instructions for Official Studies. Most notably, earlier instructions to consult with “affected groups” in policy evaluation was expanded to instruct government bodies to include “everyone” in such consultations (chapter 3.3). This adjustment is both vague and modest (several exceptions are allowed), but likely meaningful, insofar as it applies to the development of all central government policy. Respondents attributed this change directly to a heightened attention to digital dialogue among a small group of case workers who actively lobbied in informal and ad hoc meetings for including a wider notion of consultation enabled by digital technologies.

The ICTs and Modernization team’s unique role in the OGP process likely contributed to this outcome. As the national coordinators of OGP, the ICTs and Modernization team was responsible for engaging with international events and dialogues, liaising between international and national actors, and the implementation of specific commitments. This likely heightened the salience of open government rhetoric in the ICTs and Modernization team generally, but also in how the agency understood the commitments with which they were mandated, including the commitment to improve public review and public consultation. Other factors in the Norwegian policy environment may also have contributed to this outcome, such as comparable policy promotion by organizations such as the EU and OECD, or tendencies towards inclusion in the broader digitization agenda. This is not, however, reflected in contemporaneous policy outputs, such as the 2016 Digitalization Memorandum produced by other agencies within the same ministry, or rhetoric employed by OECD and EU recommendations on open government. The assertion that informal institutionalization of OGP contributed to this formal outcome is further strengthened by respondent assertions that language in the final document was significantly tempered by concerns that a more explicit description of digital dialogue would impose undue bureaucratic burdens on government bodies.

Other contributions to formal outcomes

The two other instances of formal institutionalization documented here were not preceded by informal institutionalization in agencies. The implementation of digital consultations by the Directorate of Health appears to be completely decoupled from the influence of OGP. The agency focal point described those consultations as enabled by changes in technological and political environments that simultaneously made it easier to meet the expectations of OGP, but argued that the norms and values of OGP were thoroughly integrated into the day to day work of civil servants in the Directorate of Health long before the OGP was initiated (NO185).

The Department of Civil Society's *Declaration of principles for interaction and dialogue with NGOs* may well have been influenced by OGP, but there is no evidence suggesting that this was driven by mechanisms of policy learning. The Declaration was firmly rooted in political processes that significantly preceded the OGP, and the agency focal point for this work describes OGP as having no influence on the implementation of the commitment. Notes from IRM evaluations of Norwegian action plans include an interview with the national association of civil society organizations, however, which suggests that political leverage associated with OGP may contributed to producing the declaration.

The government signs up for lots of random stuff, which means that civil society can use it as an arena for improvements. This is also the case for OGP. This might be part of why we actually got the declaration, even though it was the former government that set it in motion. (interview notes on file with author).

This description aligns well with theories of political pressure and rhetorical persuasion in research on norm entrepreneurship (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Risse-Kappen, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999), and lends credibility to the claim that MSIs like the OGP provide credibility and open political space for reform efforts, independent of policy learning processes. This reinforces an understanding of policy learning as one of many mechanisms through which MSIs might hope to facilitate the institutionalization of policy in national contexts.

Discussion

Differences between mechanisms and processes

The above analysis traced the effect OGP norm promotion on institutionalization of digital dialogue in eight Norwegian agencies, and demonstrated the explanatory power of a policy learning and transfer framework in doing so. This revealed significant variation in the influence of MSIs across agencies, displayed in Table 4.

These differences highlight the contingency of policy learning and transfer as a mechanism for formal policy institutionalization. Not only can this process be inhibited or derailed at any stage of the sequence, it can interact with other causal mechanisms in complicated ways, as suggested regarding the production of the Official declaration on government interaction with civil society organizations. The way in which eGovernment Agency respondents deliberately leveraged the presumed international attention of OGP to secure resources and political support for digital dialogue is likely an example of this interaction within a specific institutionalization process.

The messy interplay of causal mechanisms driving policy outcomes is widely recognized (Kay and Baker 2015). These distinctions further validate the analytical framework

Table 4. Overview of institutionalization outcomes and causal mechanisms by agency.

Agency	Evidence of <i>informal</i> institutionalization	Evidence of <i>formal</i> institutionalization	Casual mechanism
ICTs and Modernization team	Internal salience and external uptake of policy resources (public sector data use)	Expanded scope of public consultations in Instructions for Official Studies.	Knowledge transfer and translation led to policy learning and informal institutionalization, which contributed directly to formal institutionalization.
eGovernment Agency	Internal salience and external demand for learning outputs (clear legal language)	None	Knowledge transfer and translation led to policy learning and combined with mechanisms of persuasion to support informal institutionalization.
Legislation Department	Increased interaction with civil society stakeholders	None	Knowledge transfer and translation led to policy learning and informal institutionalization.
Department of Civil Society	None	Official declaration on government interaction with civil society organizations	Visible engagement with OGP introduced political leverage, which contributed to formal institutionalization.
Directorate of Health	None	Digital consultations with stakeholders	No causal relationship.
MFA	None	None	None
Ministry of Energy	None	None	None
Ministry of Equality	None	None	None

of policy learning and transfer to assess such interactions, and serve as a useful reminder to practitioners about the “disturbances [that] can occur in the spaces between the ‘creation’, the ‘transmission’ and the ‘interpretation’ or ‘reception’ of policy meanings’ (Lendvai and Stubbs 2007, cited in Stone 2012, 487).

Individuals’ processes of translation

This analysis highlights a variety of logics and frameworks with which individuals assess the appropriateness of global policy information. The emphasis on individual incentives, personal convictions, and bureaucratic processes suggests that individuals distinguish between personal, institutional and national appropriateness of policy, in keeping with hierarchical understandings of policy beliefs, but also recalling Ben-Josef Hirsch’s (2014) distinctions between logics of consequence, morality and specification. These distinctions nuanced and further complicated by respondents’ consistent reference to the differences between abstract norms and specific policies that they are expected to support.

Translation processes of policy learning in this account are messier than first proposed, adding depth and complexity to a mechanistic notion of “soft” policy transfer laying the groundwork for “hard” policy transfer (Stone 2012), and to theoretical accounts of norm scholarship, which tend to situate logics of appropriateness in the context of national political and cultural norms (Cortell and Davis 2005). Most importantly, perhaps, this suggests that the sequence of policy learning and transfer can be blocked or disrupted by any number of assessments of appropriateness. Policy learning and transfer is a fragile mechanism, prone to disruption at the weakest link in individual processes of translation.

Theoretical propositions and implications

Some distinctions are notable, however, and suggest two theoretical propositions that could be tested on additional cases. Firstly, widespread attention to the “good fit” of abstract norms at the macro level and across all three logics of assessment appears in several instances to have inhibited the acquisition and translation of information on more specific policies. This seems directly linked to the degree and regularity of agencies’ exposure to the global discourses in which abstract digital dialogue norms were articulated as specific policies. Simply put, the abstract norms of open government were such a good fit for Norway, many respondents failed to recognize a policy problem for which digital dialogue could be relevant. Several respondents articulated some version of the conviction that “Norway is open enough already.” The attitudinal process underpinning policy problem recognition is here shaped not only by the persuasiveness of policy messaging (Oxley, Vedlitz, and Dan Wood 2014), but by a more broad understanding of relevance. Theoretically, this suggests that in countries where abstract governance norms are a “good fit” with national cultures and structures, MSI contributions to policy outcomes through policy learning will be unsuccessful unless those norms are framed as specific policies and in light of institutional logics of consequences and specification.

Secondly, this analysis suggests that considerations of specific policies according to logics of consequences and specification can be a powerful inhibitor, not only of translation in policy learning, but even at advanced stages in the analytical framework applied here, as evidenced by the strategic use of open government rhetoric in the eGovernment Agency and the conservative description of digital dialogue in the Instructions for Government Studies. Theoretically, this suggests that mechanisms of policy learning will contribute to formal and informal policy outcomes to a greater degree when policy learning is framed according to logics of consequence and specification at the level of institutions and individuals. In the Norwegian context, this would likely have involved a stronger application of the frame of government efficiency that has driven Norway’s digitization agenda.

Lastly, and though not analytically generalizable on the basis of this study, it is worth noting the absence of civil society engagement in the Norwegian OGP process. IRM assessments consistently cite this lack of engagement in explaining the lack of meaningful OGP outcomes (Wilson and Nahem 2013; Wilson 2017b; Skedsmo 2014), recalling the notion that national civil society actors play an important role in mechanisms of persuasion and political pressure in policy translation processes (Stone 2004; Johnson and Hagström 2005; Park, Wilding, and Chung 2014). This perspective was also articulated by several respondents, who noted that “OGP failed to connect with national watchdogs.”

The above analysis complicates this notion by providing evidence of OGP’s policy learning influence independent of national civil society engagement. It also raises the question of how more meaningful engagement might have influenced policy learning processes and their outcomes. In particular, the importance of mediation in knowledge transfer suggests that national civil society actors already linked to international open government and participation discourses could have played an important role connecting agencies with those discourses. In doing so, they could be expected to function as policy “go-betweens”, contributing to the uptake of policy by facilitating access to information in the macro policy environment (Douglas, Raudla, and Hartley 2015). This dynamic has been

ignored in previous accounts of non-state actors in policy learning and diffusion processes (Stone 2012, 491–496), and merits further study.

Conclusions

This exercise identified three formal and three informal instances of policy institutionalization associated with OGP, and traced the causal mechanisms underpinning each. This provides several case-level insights about how Norwegian institutional legacies and path dependencies are inhibiting the adoption of more progressive policy for digital dialogue and participation.

It is not clear the degree to which these findings are generalizable across a wider body of countries or public governance MSIs. Large-n empirical analysis is necessary to determine whether or not comparable dynamics are at play. One useful site for this determination would be assessing whether MSI membership has causal effects on tangential policy areas, for example, whether OGP membership influences the adoption of e-participation policy in member countries. Empirical evidence of this dynamic would validate the theoretical proposition advanced here, that MSIs influence national policy through learning processes, which lead to informal institutionalization of norms, and formal policy outputs by extension.

Despite constraints to external validity, the findings presented here do suggest a number of practical implications for considering MSI influence on public governance policy. Most importantly, they suggest that MSIs should actively consider the ways in which the governance norms they promote are framed – not only in the context of national politics, but in relation to the institutional and individual incentives embedded in the most relevant sub-national institutions. This in turn implies a role for national civil society actors beyond simple participation in national policy fora or the application of political pressure and persuasion vis-à-vis government actors. National civil society can also play a key role as “go-betweens” between micro and macro level policy environments, facilitating the effective dissemination of knowledge that is framed as nationally, institutionally and individually appropriate to the civil servants and policy makers on whom policy learning relies.

Conceptually, this analysis validated an analytical framework by which public governance MSIs influence national policy through knowledge transfer, policy learning, the informal institutionalization of policy, and subsequent formal policy outcomes. This process was necessarily sequential, and the ways in which norms and policies are framed and contextualized were shown to have a blocking effect at several stages in the process. Notwithstanding the limits to external validity discussed above, this conceptual model provides a basis for analytical generalization (Yin 2009, 20–21) ☺ in the form of two theoretical propositions.

Qualitative research should test these propositions against a set of cases that differ from the current case according to key variables, including the alignment of national level norms. Testing against such a contrast typology (see George and Bennett 2005) can, in tandem with the large-n quantitative analysis suggested above, iteratively define the scope conditions for a middle range theory of MSIs and policy learning. As such, these propositions are a first step towards the elaboration of a theoretical framework capable of predicting when and under what conditions public governance MSIs achieve formal

policy outcomes through processes of knowledge transfer, policy learning, and informal institutionalization.

Notes

1. See <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/about-ogp/how-it-works/how-join>, accessed 10 April 2019.
2. These experiences took place prior to data collection for the current analysis and introduce additional risks of bias. This prior experience also increases access to data, however, and strengthens contextual understanding in analysis. These experiences are conceptualized as ex post facto participant observation, in order to identify appropriate measures to for mitigating socio-cultural and confirmation bias, as described in the following section.

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