

Policy Transfer Portals: an evaluation of the effectivity of dissemination of information

Prof. Dr. Jorge Machado

Public Policy Management Course

University of São Paulo (USP)

Coordinator of the Co-laboratory of Development and Participation (COLAB)

São Paulo, Brazil

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Summary: The search, analysis and replication of “best practices” is crucial for improving public management and transfer successful models into different contexts. The proposal of this study is to evaluate the efficiency of information dissemination in relevant policy transfer portals. For that task we make a comparison of different initiatives of policy transfer/dissemination/replication using modern criteria related to the most patronized, open and efficient protocols, file formats, methodologies that fosters collaboration, participation and reuse and dissemination of information.

Keywords: policy transfer, portals, access to information, best practices, effectivity, evaluation, dissemination of information

1. Introduction and Justification

The dissemination¹ and replication of successful public policies has historically been a goal pursued by policy makers and researchers. (ROSE, 1991, 1993; DOLOWITZ & MARSCH, 1996; WALKER, 1969; EVANS & DAVIES, 1999; MARSH & SHARMAN, 2009, BENSON & JORDAN, 2011). The applicability of methods, technologies and social techniques is the key component of initiatives that seek to introduce more innovative and effective practices for improving public management (STONE, 1999; UDESA, 2006, GRAY, 1975; GRUPP & RICHARD, 1973). This presupposes the search for better formulas or models that address issues related to various aspects of social life whose perception is common in different human groups.

At the center of this is the conception that good policies (or “good practices”²) can be applied in different contexts. DOLOWITZ (2003) argues that foreign political systems offer interesting laboratories of policy innovation, but the problem is how to share/reuse/adapt the experience and knowledge of good policies produced around the world? If we see knowledge as a "global public good" whose circulation is key to promoting human development, as Joseph Stiglitz (STIGLITZ, 1999) proposes, it is crucial to develop systems, patterns and protocols that allow better use of the available information. On the other hand, Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development³ proposes goals and targets that can be better achieved through an efficient sharing of practices and knowledge. The proposal of this study is to evaluate the efficiency of information dissemination in relevant portals from the perspective of the interoperability and the application of open technologies/formats/licenses in order to promote the reuse the information. For that task we make a comparison of different initiatives of policy transfer/dissemination/replication using modern

- 1 The definitions of diffusion of public policies in the literature are distinct and basically focused on: i) in the process (DOLOWITZ & MARSH, 1996), ii) in the causes (SIMMONS, DOBBIN E GARRETT, 2008) or iii) in its form of communication (ROGERS, 1962). For others, the dissemination of information is mainly from relationships of proximity or neighborhood (WALKER, 1969, GRUPP & RICHARDS, 1975; LIGHT, 1978, BERRY & BERRY, 1990).
- 2 In the “Report of the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements”, presented to the General Assembly, “best practices” could be understand as practice that: (1) Have a demonstrable and tangible impact on improving people’s quality of life; (2) Are the result of effective partnerships between the public, private and civil society sectors; and (3) Are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable - UN, 1995, A/50/37, according to ALBERTI & BERTUCCI (2006: 17).
- 3 The United Nations Agenda 2030 includes 17 goals and 169 targets, integrated in the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental. See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

criteria related to the most patronized, open and efficient protocols, file formats, methodologies that fosters collaboration, participation and reuse and dissemination of information.

In the analysis I take reference as innovation in public policy, the classical definition of Rogers⁴ for innovation. For him, innovation are ideas, practices or objects that are perceived as new by an individual or organization. So, it is no matter, if the idea already exists elsewhere: but it is unprecedented for potential adopters (ROGERS, 1962).

In the following section, we introduce the relation between the potential of dissemination of public policies and the modern open technologies and protocols. In the third part, we describe, compare and analyze some relevant initiatives of policy transfer portals based on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Finally, we conclude this study with some recommendations for improvements of the initiatives and their related portals.

2. The Use of TICs to promote innovation: the free software model

The expansion of the telecommunications infrastructure generated a favorable environment for innovation based on sharing and better use of information produced in different territories. The best known model is the free/libre open source software (FLOSS) collaborative development, emerged in 1983 with the release of GNU-Linux project (STALMANN, 1983). Free software is based on four principles (or "freedoms"): I) to run the software for any purpose, ii) to study how the program works, iii) to redistribute copies and to improve the program, and iv) release your improvements for the public (FSF, 2018), guaranteed legally by an open licensing model - GPL licenses. The development based on open source is through a feedback system that allows fix bugs and quickly share the improvements of code (see RAYMOND, 1999), that are completely auditable.

4 For Rogers (1962), the acceptance of an innovation depends on the following characteristics: a) comparative advantage: the extent that innovation is perceived as better than a previous practice; b) compatibility: the degree to which innovation is perceived as consistent with existing values, experiences and needs of potential adopters; c) complexity: difficulty of understanding and using innovation; d) the possibility to test: the user's chance to prove innovation before purchasing; e) observability: degree that the benefits of the innovation are visible to others. In this sense, innovation in public policy must be perceived as having comparative advantage in relation to what will be replaced, its visibility to potential stakeholders, the possibility of being tested, its compatibility with the environment and the chance to be adopted.

The fact that the source code of a software is freely available attracts other developers, collaborators and potential users. With this, groups of people are formed to collaborate and share information among themselves that, over time, they can become a collaborative community of software development.

Free software commonly use open standards. It is not only fundamental for software development, but also ensures future data access. Otherwise, with a proprietary code, it is not possible to know how the future computing platform works and how it could operate with an unknown file format that, due to any problem, may no longer exist and/or is still under a restrictive license.

In recent years, inspired by FLOSS, it has been developed in different fields forms of innovation based in the sharing of information that facilitate the processing, treatment and reuse of information. Examples comes from Open Access (technical and scientific publications), Open Data (primary information) and Open Spending (budget), Open Science (open scientific production, including primary data, research notebooks, etc), Open Educational Resources (education material, including teacher training), Open Government (open government, transparency and participation), Open Data (open data, especially public databases), Open Bank⁵ (access to bank transaction records to combat fraud, corruption and money laundering), Open Development⁶ (international cooperation and development), Open GLAM (access to the cultural heritage of museums, libraries and archives), Open Archives⁷ (opening and integration of institutional repositories), Open Transport (transport data and urban mobility), Open Sustainability (opening of databases and information on sustainability), Open Politics (access, collection and analysis of electoral data, public records of expenditures and activities of politicians), just to name some of the main streams⁸.

⁵ See: <https://openbankproject.com/>.

⁶ About Open Development, see SMITH & RAILLY (2013).

⁷ The objective of Open Archives Initiative is to develop standards of interoperability in order to facilitate an efficient dissemination of contents (OPEN ARCHIVES, 2018).

⁸ In general, these communities have the following characteristics in common: i) advocate for the opening of information or access to intellectual works, especially, if they are under the control of the State; ii) support of the development of applications for crossing, analyzing and visualization of information; iii) advocate for the reuse, distribution and production of content-derived works through policies for the adoption of free licenses; iv) act in network to support the political action of other organizations with similar purposes.

Some organizations have an important role in the promotion of global interoperability. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), a consortium of worldwide organizations responsible for the development of open standards to ensure the long-term growth of the Web, standardizes, for example, two formats widely used on the Internet, Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and Extensible Hypertext Markup Language (XHTML). On the other hand, the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS), standardizes office documents such as texts, spreadsheets, presentations and graphics and presentations through OpenDocument Format (ODF). ODF is also a worldwide standard recognized since 2006 by ISO. The ODF Alliance was created with the mission to promote the use of open standards and the OpenDocument Format. Formed by governments, businesses, and civil society organizations, the ODF Alliance gives support for the interoperability and collaborative development of open standards. ODF bears similarities to TCP/IP protocols, whose opening of the specification of the TCP / IP protocols enabled the explosive growth of the internet.

There are two ways to define "open" for information. The oldest and strictest is the *open source definition*, of Open Source Institute (OSI, 2007). With a broader scope, the *open definition*⁹, of Open Knowledge Foundation¹⁰ (OK: 2018). Providing principles and guidance for all things related with "open", this definition includes access, redistribution, reuse, machine readability, modification, the absence of technological restrictions (such as DRM), non-discrimination (in relation to groups, persons or area of application), application to any purpose, but also the possibility of two types of restrictions: citation of source and/or the obligation to publish derived content machine readability and licenses with permission to use, redistribution, modification, separation, compilation, propagation, application to any purpose under the same original license (the already mentioned "viral" effect).¹¹ We take as reference in this study the OK Open Definition, because it is the most precise definition and has wide world acceptance between the open information movements.

9 See <http://opendefinition.org/od/2.1/en/>.

10 Open Knowledge (OK) is an international non-profit organization that works in each country as a kind of hub of projects and initiatives of activists and civil society organizations in order to promote the opening, creation and sharing of knowledge (<https://okfn.org/>).

11 For details, see: <http://opendefinition.org/licenses/>.

As a practical reference of this study, we use the document *Data on the Web Best Practices* (W3C, 2017). Approved in 2017, this document is a standard of web publishing best practice of World Web Consortium (W3C). The aim of the document is to develop the open data ecosystem, enabling a better communication between developers and publishers; to provide guidance to improve consistency in the way data is managed, promoting the re-use of data; and “to foster trust in the data among developers, whatever technology they choose to use, increasing the potential for genuine innovation” (W3C 2017). This document includes orientation about the use of different meta-data, identifiers, vocabularies, web standards of API, licences, version and provenance information, among other criteria.

2.1 Open Data

To be considered a “open data”, a databases or information has to follow eight principles: complete (All public data is made available), primary (as collected at the source, with the highest possible level of granularity, not in aggregate or modified forms), timely (as quickly as necessary to preserve the value of the data), accessible (available to the widest range of users for the widest range of purposes), machine processable (reasonably structured to allow automated processing), non-discriminatory (available to anyone, with no requirement of registration), non-proprietary (in a format over which no entity has exclusive control) and license free (Data is not subject to any copyright, patent, trademark or trade secret regulation. Reasonable privacy, security and privilege restrictions may be allowed) (OPENDATAGOV, 2018).

2.2 The Open Data Charter

In 2013, the leaders of the G8 countries signed the document “G8 Open Data Charter” (or “ODC”), in addition to a technical document for guiding improvements in governance,

accountability, promotion of the development and innovation (GOV.UK, 2013a e 2013b). The ODC defines five principles for strategic action in this field by G8 members. These include the expectation that all government data will be published openly as standard, along with improved quality, increased quantity and the possibility of re-use. G8 members have also identified 14 priority areas - from education to transportation, health, justice and crime.

The goal behind ODC is to ensure that the data will be freely available and readable to both humans and machines. This is expected to increase transparency, make governance more efficient and stimulate social innovation through the use of public information. The expectation is that the all government data of the signatory countries would be open by default from the end of 2015. The data would also be published on a national portal so it can be easily located and downloaded. It also provides a data record with listings of the files, the meta-data and an application programming interface (API) for developers.

Regarding to the licenses, the data should be released under open licenses to avoid any blockages or restrictions on the reuse of information. Other principles of ODC include the use of consistent meta-data to describe the actual data and the mapping of the data. ODC partners should also provide a user feedback system in their portals.

3. Evaluation of the information offer of current initiatives of Policy Transfer

We select some platforms to evaluate the efficiency of dissemination of information applying a combination of the criteria emerged of the W3C Recommendation, Open Data Principles and Open Definition. These criteria are related to the use of patronized, open and efficient protocols, that promote a better data quality as well as methodologies that fosters collaboration, participation and legal reuse and dissemination of information published.

To select the most relevant platforms, we have searched in the web for “policy transfer portal”, “policy dissemination”, “best practices”, “city solutions”, using just English language. It is

important to say that there are not much portals having a structured database focused on policy transfer at a large scale. So, there was no difficulty to reach the five portals above.

The evaluated portals are:

City Solutions Database is the The National League of Cities (NLC) City Practices Database¹². The Portal offers examples of initiatives and projects on a variety of topics implemented in cities and towns. The NCL (USA) is an American advocacy organization representing about 19 thousand cities, towns, and villages, and encompassing 49 state municipal leagues. NLC provides training to municipal officials and provides assistance to cities in educational issues.



Canadian Best Practices Portal¹³ is a portal oriented to public health decision-makers. It offers a

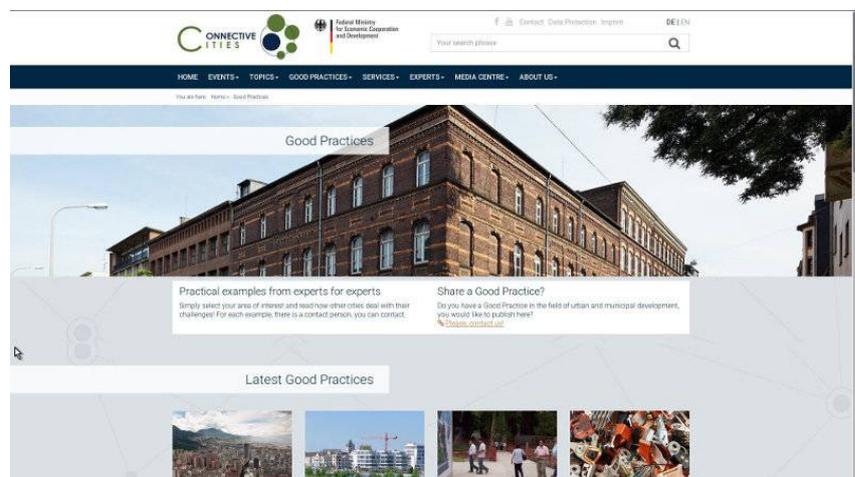
¹² See <http://www.nlc.org/city-solutions-database>

¹³ See <http://cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca/>

compilation of multiple sources to resources and solutions to plan programs for promoting health and preventing diseases for populations and communities. The Portal is an initiative of Public Health Agency of Canada.

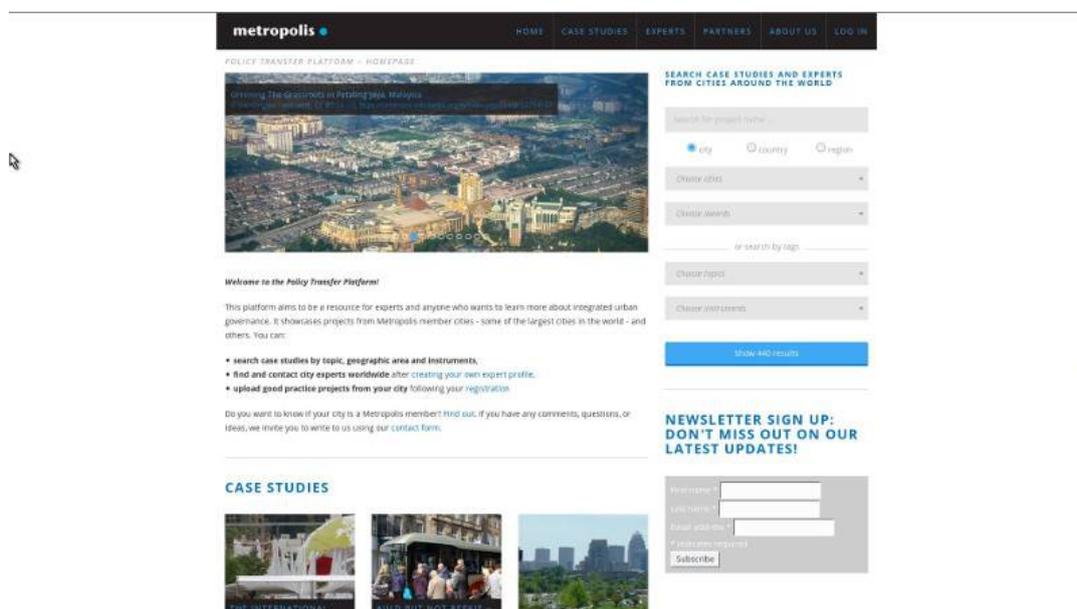


According to the Website¹⁴, **Connective Cities** is an “international community of practices for sustainable urban development. The initiative offer examples of good practices and it accepts contributions of users to the website. The project is coordinated by the German Agency for Development Cooperation (GIZ) and the German Association of Cities (Deutscher Städtetag).



14 See <https://www.connective-cities.net/en/good-practices/>

The Policy Transfer Platform¹⁵ is a “learning and networking portal for urban practitioners, experts and researchers” that offer documents about “innovative projects and policies that cities can take as inspiration and guidance”. Besides this the portal is an initiative of the World Association of Major Metropolises, their development is led by the City of Berlin.

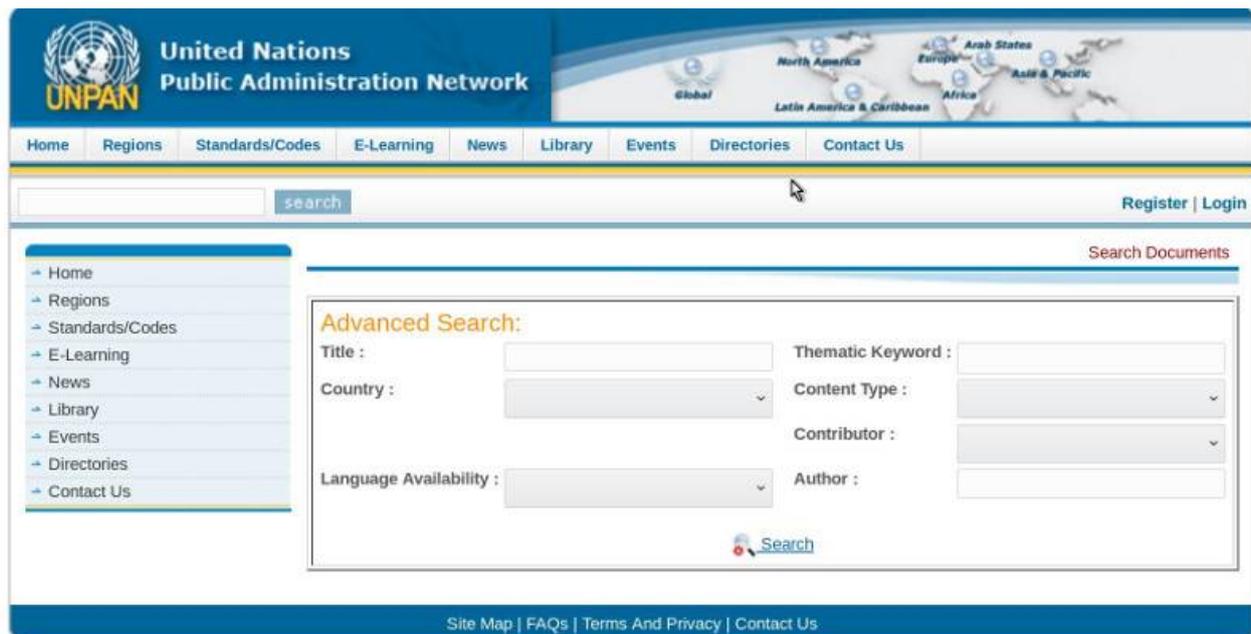


United Nations Network on Public Administration and Finance (UNPAN) has a directory of best cases¹⁶ in public administration. The directory is very simple and offers free access to pdf documents and some links with videos. Besides this, UNPAN has a second data base¹⁷ of case studies in ICT/eGov, that deals with the same limitations. The UNPAN databases seem not to have been fed in last years.

15 See <http://policytransfer.metropolis.org/>

16 See <http://www.unpan.org/Library/SearchDocuments/tabid/70/ctl/DocumentDetails/mid/985/did/34374/Default.aspx>

17 See <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/casestudies2>



We took the items listed below as criteria of evaluation, since they are a consensus of large communities, and which objective is the facilitation of the communication and dissemination of information, using common protocols and formats with high quality and collaborative methodologies. Some criteria are auto-explicative, but others we explain in the following pages.

Table – Analysis of policy transfer portals on information publishing and practices

Organization	National League of Cities (USA)	Canadian Best Practices Portal	Connective Cities	World Association of Major Metropolises	United Nations Network on Public Administration and Finance (UNPAN)
Portals name	City Solutions Database	idem	Connective Cities – Good Practices	Policy Transfer Platform	Best Practices Directory
CRITERIAS*					
Meta-data	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
Summary	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Data provenance	partially	partially	partially	partially	yes
Complete Data	no	no	no	yes	yes
Primary data	no	yes	no	yes	no
Data quality (machine readable)	partially	partially	partially	partially	no
Data format	no	no	no	no	no
Data identifiers	no	no	no	no	no
Data Vocabularies	no	no	no	no	no
Accessibility	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
API	no	no	no	yes	no
Feedback system	no	no	no	yes	no
Evaluation system	no	no	no	partially	no
Data License Information	no	partially**	no	inapropriated	partially**
Reuse permission	no	partially	no	no	no
Data Preservation (URI ¹⁸)	no	no	no	no	no
Data versioning	no	partially ***	no	no	no
Data enrichment (datasets)	no datasets available	no datasets available	no datasets available	no datasets available	no datasets available
Republication (provides feedback for publisher)	no	no	no	no	no
Compliance level (%)	21	34	16	44	24

* All criteria applied a of Data on the Web Best Practices (W3C) plus “summary”, “primary data”, “complete data”, “evaluation system” and “reuse permission”.

** Just website. *** “Last update”.

18 Uniform Resource Identifier (URI) is a string of characters used to identify a resource. A Uniform Resource Name (URN) may be compared to a person's name, while a Uniform Resource Locator (URL) may be compared to their street address. In other words, a URN identifies an item and a URL provides a method for finding it. (WIKIPEDIA, 2018)

Reference: NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES, 2018; CANADIAN BEST PRACTICES PORTAL, 2018; WORLD ASSOCIATION OF MAJOR METROPOLISES, 2018; UNPAN, 2018; CONNECTIVE CITIES, 2018.

Some items pointed out in the table are fundamental for the identification of contents published in the web, such as meta-data, summary, identifiers, vocabularies. Others are associated with quality, access, use, reuse, preservation of data and improvement of the database, like formats, existing API, feedback system, URL and licenses with adequate permissions. A more detailed explanation of each item can be found in the document cited elaborated by W3C (2017).

It is important to highlight the need for the use of Free Licenses, which allow us to offer users more freedoms in comparison to the use of works protected by copyright, making the pre-Internet standard of "all rights reserved" more flexible.

The CC licenses can be applied to databases. They are even used by many open data portals, such as the cities of Barcelona, Berlin, Montreal and countries like Australia, Germany and New Zealand, among others. There are also licenses designed for data, like Open Data Commons for databases (OdbL¹⁹), Open Data Commons for data (ODC²⁰) and Open Data Commons Public Domain Dedication License (PDDL²¹), which is equivalent to the public domain. The first two have variations to allow or disallow commercial use and viral effect.

Although the OdbL, ODC and PDDL licenses are suitable for data, CC licenses are more functional for two reasons: in addition to data, they include any type of content and they are better known to users.

19 See <http://opendefinition.org/licenses/odc-odbl>

20 See <http://opendefinition.org/licenses/odc>

21 See <http://opendefinition.org/licenses/odc-pddl>

Another common problem is the publication of the documents in pdf formats. The publication of data should be done in formats that are adequate to better meet the eight principles of open data. Fearing for the integrity of the documents available on the network, the PDF format is used to prevent changes of the data. However, an image encapsulated in a PDF does not replace the original document that generated it. This type of file, besides not guaranteeing security, creates a barrier for the reuse of information. This causes more costs, due to the need of file conversion, correction of extraction failures and the increase in storage costs, information processing and data transmission.

As we can see in the table, the Portal that more comply with the requirements of best information practices is the the Policy Transfer Platform (44%). Close to it, is the Canadian Best Practices Portal (34%). Besides the fact that it is a very old Portal, needing a urgent update, the UNPAN's Best Practices Directory was not too bad (24%) in the evaluation. The City Solutions Database (21%) and Connective Cities – Good Practices Portal (just 16%) are the worst and do not comply with the most of requisites.

In general, there is a great potential to share efficiently information which is important for the public interest and for a better life quality. But the conditions under which this information is offered in Internet are very poor, not user friendly and do not give any incentive for the reuse of the data. Primary information, for example, – like technical data, reports and legal regulations – is vital for public managers from local governments with small teams and with a lack of skills. Duplicate work for example, through the extraction of closed information is unnecessary in the “age of information” and in the “sharing economy”. A lot of information is not available, although in Portals and platform with the mission to promote the information transfer – so where we supposed that should be available. Furthermore, a lot of contents do not have the permissions for reuse, whats seems to be a contra-sense.

Platforms and systems that follow open standards – opposed to the proprietary model of document creation – can be a guarantee of interoperability and of an optimal use/reuse of the information.

IV. Conclusions

In the context of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, public policy dissemination portals play a key role in generating knowledge and sharing experiences. They can take advantage of the potential of new information and communication technologies to improve the well-being and living conditions of billions of human beings. Efficient forms of communication, dissemination of information, evaluation and the use of common protocols and appropriate licenses are some of the key elements for enhancing the impact of the dissemination of good practices and innovative models of public policies.

This study proposed the evaluation of the efficiency of dissemination of information in relevant portals from the perspective of the interoperability and application of open technologies/formats/licenses.

The evaluated policy transfer portals, do not have a common protocol, do not communicate with each other, do not follow a pattern of publication and do not have a data policy that allow content reuses. In most cases, they do not provide primary and technical information about the policies. On the other hand, the portals do not have a system that allows independent evaluation, including the possibility to insert comments, feedback and ratings. In many cases, the information available is produced by the proponents of policies – underlying the absence of self-criticism. In few words, they do not use the potential of the web, do not follow the most basic standards of publication and they have very limited functionalities.

Most of the current dissemination initiatives are based on the spontaneous creation of databases described as "best practices" or simply sharing platforms. There is a lack of data policy that could configure as default the availability of all technical documents related with public policies in open formats and protocols. The design of the portals could enable a participative feedback that could better reflect the reality of a public policy implementation. A availability of rating of comments and commentators should stimulates a more qualified collaboration/participation included a better

engagement of public managers, civil society leaders and citizens in general. The offer of technical data (inclusively spreadsheet, shape files, drawings, images, and other technical documents) could be specially useful for local governments, that have small technical teams and limited resources. Open data enable also studies on policy transfer through the produced information as well as the possibility to produce and to work with indicators in order to evaluate the effectivity of public policies.

ODF document formats, as well as web standards defined by the W3C, are already widely accepted in the international context. These standards are not subject to patent restrictions and can be implemented without any burden by vendors and platforms. For such reasons they are ideal for a data policy. The adoption of open formats and standards by administrative bodies would bring many technical, economic and social advantages to society as a whole. Enabling the copy, share, distribution and modification/remix through a free licenses policy as well as a cross-referencing, automated processing, data processing and more detailed studies and analyzes of the data available. It could also create a propitious environment for a collaborative environment of public policy development, through a system of open reviews of policies that include the different actors perspectives: public managers, civil society and specialists (academics and experts).

A more effective use of public information in the way they are disseminated, replicated and evaluated can transform the field of public transfer in order to enhancing the value chain information in favour of the increase of social well-being and quality of life and the solution of common problems that affect different human groups.

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