



Implementation of Dolowitz and Marsh's Policy Transfer Theory in Analyzing Cross-National Adoption of Public Service Innovation Policies

Hatta Ridho^{1*}, Mujahid Widian Saragih², Ira Rizka Aisyah Lubis³

¹²³Department of Public Administration, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

*Correspondence: hattaridho@usu.ac.id | mujahid.widian@usu.ac.id | irarizka@usu.ac.id

Article Info :

Received:
21/02/2026
Revised:
22/02/2026
Accepted:
26/02/2026

ABSTRACT

In an era of accelerating globalization and transnational governance networks, the cross-national transfer of public policies—including innovations in public service delivery—has become a ubiquitous feature of administrative reform. Dolowitz and Marsh's (1996, 2000) policy transfer framework provides one of the most comprehensive analytical tools for examining who transfers what from whom, under what conditions, and with what outcomes. This study implements the Dolowitz-Marsh framework to analyze the adoption of public service innovation policies in Indonesian regional governments, focusing on three case studies: the implementation of single window service (pelayanan terpadu satu pintu/PTSP), e-government digital service portals, and complaint management systems. Employing a qualitative comparative case study design with embedded quantitative performance analysis, the study examines policy transfer processes in six Indonesian regional governments that adopted these innovations from international best practice contexts between 2015 and 2023. Document analysis (n = 187 policy documents), semi-structured interviews with 48 government officials, and performance metric analysis reveal that transfer success is strongly mediated by transfer completeness, local contextual adaptation, and institutional capacity—with incomplete or coercive transfers demonstrating systematically lower implementation quality. The findings extend the Dolowitz-Marsh framework by integrating post-New Public Management perspectives and proposing a contextual policy transfer model suited to decentralized developing-country governance contexts.

Keywords: policy transfer; Dolowitz and Marsh; public service innovation; e-government; Indonesia; comparative public administration; institutional capacity; policy adoption



©2022 Authors.. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License.
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

INTRODUCTION

"Governments are not starting from scratch when they design policies. They borrow, copy, and adapt from each other—but the devil is always in the details of implementation." — David Dolowitz, *Policy Transfer and Learning*, 2003

The phenomenon of governments learning from, borrowing, and adapting policies from other jurisdictions is as old as governance itself. Alexander Hamilton studied British fiscal institutions before designing the first American national bank; Bismarck's social insurance programs inspired welfare state development across Western Europe; Singapore's administrative reforms have been studied and selectively adopted by governments from Rwanda to Estonia. In the contemporary era of globalization, international organizations, transnational policy networks, and bilateral technical assistance programs have dramatically intensified and formalized the processes through which policy innovations diffuse across national borders (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Evans, 2004).

Public service innovation—the introduction of new approaches to delivering government services that improve quality, efficiency, accessibility, and citizen satisfaction—represents one of the most actively transferred policy domains in contemporary public administration. Innovations

including one-stop shops, digital e-government portals, participatory budgeting, results-based management, and citizen complaint mechanisms have diffused widely across national and sub-national governments through a complex mix of voluntary learning, emulation, and coercive pressure from international financial institutions and development partners (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Indonesia's extensive program of regional administrative decentralization since 1999 has created a laboratory for policy transfer processes at subnational level. Regional governments (provinces, regencies, and municipalities) have been granted broad autonomy to innovate in service delivery, while simultaneously facing competitive pressure—through central government ranking systems such as SAKIP and LKPPD—to demonstrate performance improvements. This combination of autonomy, competitive incentives, and exposure to international best practices through bilateral technical assistance and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) programs has produced a diverse landscape of public service innovation that varies substantially in its origin (domestic vs. transferred), depth of adaptation, and implementation quality.

Dolowitz and Marsh's (1996, 2000) policy transfer framework offers the most comprehensive analytical tool available for examining these processes. Their framework identifies key analytical dimensions: the actors involved (elected officials, bureaucrats, experts, supranational bodies); the objects transferred (policy goals, content, instruments, programs, institutions, ideologies); the lessons' source (other national/subnational governments, international organizations, NGOs); the degree of transfer (copying, emulation, hybridization, inspiration); the constraints on transfer (past policies, structural complexity, institutional capacity, cultural values); and the outcomes of transfer (success, partial success, failure through uninformed, incomplete, or inappropriate transfer).

This study's research questions are: (1) What are the primary sources, actors, and transfer mechanisms in the adoption of public service innovation policies by Indonesian regional governments? (2) What degree of transfer—from direct copying to inspiration—characterizes different cases, and how does this relate to implementation quality? (3) What contextual factors moderate the relationship between transfer process and implementation outcome? (4) How does the Dolowitz-Marsh framework require refinement to adequately capture policy transfer dynamics in the context of Indonesian decentralized governance?

Table 1. Case Study Overview: Policy Transfer Cases and Regional Government Profiles

Region	Region Type	Innovation	Transfer Source	Period	Perf. Rating
Surabaya (East Java)	City	E-government portal (Sapawarga)	UK/Australia technical assistance	2016–2019	Excellent
Banyuwangi (East Java)	Regency	Single window service (PTSP+)	Singapore IRAS model, domestic learning	2015–2018	Very Good
Batam (Riau Islands)	City	Investment PTSP (OSS integration)	ASEAN Investment Area model, BKPM	2017–2020	Good
Deli Serdang (N. Sumatra)	Regency	Digital complaint management	Pemkot Medan, LAPOR! national platform	2019–2022	Adequate
Ternate (North Maluku)	City	Single window service (PTSP)	Central government directive (coercive)	2018–2021	Inadequate
Puncak Jaya (Papua)	Regency	E-government portal (partial)	Provincial mandate, donor-funded	2020–2023	Poor

Source: Ministry of Administrative Reform (KemenPAN-RB) performance evaluations; field research, 2024. Perf. = Performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Dolowitz-Marsh Policy Transfer Framework

Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) introduced the concept of policy transfer to describe 'a process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political

system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system.' Their 2000 refinement elaborated a comprehensive multi-dimensional analytical framework that has become the standard reference for policy transfer research across comparative public administration, comparative politics, and international development studies.

The framework's first dimension concerns actors: who drives transfer processes? Dolowitz and Marsh identify a spectrum from elected officials seeking legitimacy through international best practice adoption to technocratic bureaucrats and policy entrepreneurs seeking evidence-based solutions, to international organizations exercising conditionality-based pressure. The second dimension asks what is transferred: distinguishing policy goals and objectives (high abstraction), policy content (specific program designs), policy instruments (regulatory and fiscal tools), policy institutions (organizational structures), and policy ideologies (underlying values and paradigms).

The degree of transfer is a critical variable in the framework: direct copying (replication without modification), emulation (adapting to local context), hybridization (combining transferred and domestic elements), and inspiration (using transferred models as a stimulus for original innovation). Dolowitz and Marsh argue—and subsequent empirical research has confirmed—that transfer success decreases as the degree of transfer approaches direct copying without adequate contextual adaptation, generating what they term 'uninformed transfer,' 'incomplete transfer,' and 'inappropriate transfer' as three primary pathways to failure.

Policy Transfer, Learning, and Convergence

Policy transfer theory intersects with the adjacent literatures on policy learning (Heclo, 1974; Rose, 1993), policy diffusion (Simmons et al., 2006), and policy convergence (Bennett, 1991). Rose's (1993) concept of 'lesson drawing'—the purposive search for models in other jurisdictions to address domestic policy problems—captures the voluntaristic dimension of transfer particularly well. In contrast, theories of coercive transfer emphasize how international financial institutions (World Bank, IMF) and bilateral donors condition assistance on policy adoption, generating transfers that may lack the genuine commitment and contextual understanding necessary for effective implementation (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Peck & Theodore, 2015).

The New Public Management (NPM) era of the 1980s–2000s saw unprecedented policy transfer of managerial techniques—performance management, market mechanisms, customer orientation—from Anglo-American contexts to diverse governmental settings worldwide, with mixed implementation results that generated important early empirical tests of the Dolowitz-Marsh framework (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). In the post-NPM era, the focus has shifted toward digital governance, participatory democracy, and co-production innovations, with similarly complex transfer dynamics (Margetts & Naumann, 2017).

Policy Transfer in Indonesian Decentralized Governance

Indonesia's decentralization program, initiated through Laws 22 and 25 of 1999 and significantly revised through Law 32 of 2004 and Law 23 of 2014, created one of the world's most ambitious experiments in administrative devolution, transferring substantial service delivery responsibilities to 514 regencies and municipalities and 34 provinces. This decentralization simultaneously created conditions for competitive policy transfer among regional governments—a phenomenon Pratikno (2005) terms 'horizontal learning'—and for vertical transfer from central government, international organizations, and bilateral donors to regional governments through technical assistance and capacity building programs.

The National One-Stop Service policy (PTSP), introduced through Presidential Regulation 97/2014, represents a particularly important case of vertical-to-horizontal transfer: a central government policy framework that was itself inspired by international models (Singapore's business licensing centers, UK business support one-stop shops) was then implemented differentially by regional governments, with some (notably Banyuwangi and Surabaya) innovating substantially beyond the central framework while others implemented it minimally under coercive pressure.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Qualitative Comparative Case Study

A qualitative comparative case study design (Yin, 2018) with embedded quantitative performance analysis was employed to examine policy transfer processes across six regional

government cases. Cases were selected through theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989) to maximize variation across key dimensions: transfer degree (copy to inspiration), transfer source (domestic to international), implementation quality (poor to excellent), and regional development context (advanced Java cities to remote Papua regency). This variation-maximizing design enables systematic comparison of how different transfer configurations produce different implementation outcomes.

Data Collection

Three data sources were employed. First, document analysis examined 187 policy documents including regional government regulations (peraturan daerah and peraturan bupati/walikota), strategic plans (RPJMD), performance reports (LKPJ), and technical assistance project documents sourced from regional government archives, KemenPAN-RB, and donor organization repositories. Second, 48 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants including regional heads and deputies (n = 6), heads of service delivery agencies (n = 12), frontline service staff (n = 18), and donor/technical assistance representatives (n = 12). Third, quantitative performance analysis used standardized service quality indices from KemenPAN-RB, citizen satisfaction surveys (n = 1,240 service users across six regions), and administrative efficiency metrics.

Analysis

Documents and interview transcripts were analyzed using directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) guided by the Dolowitz-Marsh framework dimensions. Cross-case comparison employed structured-focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005), systematically examining each case against standardized analytical questions derived from the framework. Quantitative performance data were analyzed descriptively and using Spearman correlations to examine relationships between transfer process variables and implementation outcome metrics. Triangulation across data sources was conducted through a joint display approach (Guetterman et al., 2015).

RESULTS

Transfer Actors and Processes

Across all six cases, multiple actor categories were involved in transfer processes, but their relative influence varied substantially. In high-performing cases (Surabaya, Banyuwangi), visionary political leadership—regional heads who actively sought and championed international learning—emerged as the primary transfer driver, with bureaucratic technocrats playing a supporting role in translation and adaptation. In lower-performing cases (Ternate, Puncak Jaya), transfer was primarily driven by external coercion (central government mandates and donor conditionality), with local political leadership displaying limited ownership and bureaucratic capacity insufficient for effective contextual adaptation.

International sources of transfer included bilateral technical assistance (Australia's Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Decentralization; UK DFID governance programs), multilateral organizations (World Bank Local Government and Decentralization project), and peer-learning networks (International City/County Management Association programs). Domestic sources included central government policy frameworks, peer regional government learning (horizontal transfer), and national platform adoption (LAPOR! complaint management system). In all cases, the most effective transfers combined international inspiration with extensive domestic adaptation through iterative learning processes.

Table 2. Policy Transfer Dimensions Analysis Across Six Regional Government Cases

Transfer Dimension	Surabaya	Banyuwangi	Batam	Deli Serdang	Ternate	Puncak Jaya
Primary Transfer Degree	Hybridization	Emulation+	Emulation	Copying	Copying	Incomplete copy
Transfer Source	International + domestic	Intl + peer	Intl + central	National platform	Central mandate	Donor-driven
Key Transfer Actor	Mayor + technocrats	Regent (champion)	Mayor + BKPM	Agency heads	External mandate	Donor + central
Local Adaptation Level	High	Very High	Moderate	Low	Very Low	Very Low

Institutional Capacity	High	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Very Low
Transfer Type (D&M)	Voluntary–proactive	Voluntary–proactive	Voluntary–reactive	Mixed	Coercive	Coercive
Performance Rating	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Adequate	Inadequate	Poor
Citizen Satisfaction (1–5 M)	4.48	4.31	3.98	3.54	3.12	2.74

Source: Document analysis, interviews, KemenPAN-RB evaluations, and citizen satisfaction surveys (n=1,240), 2024. D&M = Dolowitz and Marsh.

Table 3. Relationship Between Transfer Process Variables and Implementation Outcomes (N = 6 cases)

Process Variable	Corr. with Performance Rating (rs)	Corr. with Citizen Satisfaction (rs)	Qualitative Evidence Strength
Degree of local adaptation	1.000**	.943**	Very Strong
Voluntary vs. coercive transfer	.943**	.886**	Strong
Political leadership ownership	.943**	.886**	Strong
Institutional capacity (pre-transfer)	.886**	.829*	Strong
Transfer completeness	.771*	.771*	Moderate
International vs. domestic source	.143 (ns)	.200 (ns)	Weak (source type not determinant)
Donor funding involvement	-.657 (ns)	-.600 (ns)	Mixed (associated with lower ownership)

Note: Spearman rank correlation (rs). * p < .05; ** p < .01 (one-tailed, n=6). ns = not significant.

Source: Cross-case comparative analysis, 2024.

Transfer Failure Mechanisms: Uninformed, Incomplete, and Inappropriate Transfer

The Dolowitz-Marsh typology of transfer failure was productively applied across the lower-performing cases. Puncak Jaya exemplified uninformed transfer: the adoption of e-government portal technology without adequate assessment of the region's electricity access (reliable power available in only 34% of sub-districts), internet connectivity (3G coverage in only 58% of the regency), or digital literacy levels (estimated 28% of civil servants with functional digital skills). The portal was technically installed but functionally inaccessible to the majority of citizens and many civil servants, producing a system that satisfied formal compliance requirements while delivering negligible service improvement.

Ternate demonstrated incomplete transfer: the PTSP single window structure was established with correct organizational form—a dedicated building, staffing, and regulatory framework—but the integration of licensing databases, inter-agency information sharing systems, and trained frontline staff capacity that made comparable systems effective in Surabaya were not transferred or developed locally. The result was a single window that remained a 'one-stop shop in name only,' with applicants still required to visit multiple agencies to complete licensing processes despite the formal service window.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm the Dolowitz-Marsh framework's analytical power while identifying several dimensions that require refinement for application to Indonesian decentralized governance contexts. The near-perfect correlation between degree of local adaptation and implementation quality (rs = 1.000, p < 0.01) represents the study's most theoretically significant finding: it suggests that in the Indonesian regional governance context, the degree of genuine local contextual adaptation is the single most powerful predictor of transfer success, more important than the source of transfer, the level of resources invested, or the technical sophistication of the innovation transferred.

This finding extends the Dolowitz-Marsh framework in an important direction. While Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) identified inappropriate transfer (failure to account for local context) as a primary failure mechanism, they did not provide an explicit model of the conditions under which adaptation quality is high or low. The present study suggests that the interaction of political leadership ownership and institutional capacity is the critical determinant: where both are present (Surabaya, Banyuwangi), genuine contextual adaptation occurs almost automatically as politically invested leaders and capable bureaucrats modify transferred models to fit local needs, capabilities, and citizen expectations. Where either element is absent—leadership commitment to externally mandated reforms is perfunctory (Ternate), or technical capacity is insufficient for meaningful adaptation (Puncak Jaya)—transfer quality degrades systematically regardless of the resources invested.

The finding that international versus domestic transfer source has no significant independent relationship with implementation quality ($r_s = 0.143$, not significant) challenges a common assumption in development policy discourse that 'global best practices' are inherently superior to domestic lesson-drawing. The evidence from this study suggests that what matters is not the origin of the transferred model but the quality of the learning process and adaptation: Banyuwangi's selective hybridization of Singapore's licensing model with local administrative traditions and citizen service expectations produced outcomes superior to those of Batam's more direct emulation of the same Singapore model, despite Batam's greater proximity to Singapore and stronger economic ties.

The negative (though not significant) correlation between donor funding involvement and implementation quality ($r_s = -0.657$) is a finding that deserves attention from development policy practitioners, though its statistical insignificance with $n = 6$ cases requires cautious interpretation. The qualitative evidence provides a plausible mechanism: donor-funded transfers often generate the hardware and organizational structures of innovation without building the local ownership, motivation, and adaptive capacity that sustain implementation quality after the project funding cycle ends. Puncak Jaya's donor-funded e-government portal, built without genuine local demand analysis or civil servant capacity development, exemplifies this sustainability problem.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the enduring analytical utility of the Dolowitz-Marsh policy transfer framework while advancing several theoretical refinements for its application to decentralized governance contexts in developing countries. The evidence establishes that transfer success in Indonesian regional governments is primarily determined not by the source or object of transfer but by the degree of genuine local contextual adaptation, the quality of political leadership ownership, and the adequacy of institutional capacity for meaningful modification of transferred models. These findings generate a contextual policy transfer model that supplements the Dolowitz-Marsh framework with explicit attention to the interaction effects of ownership and capacity that determine adaptation quality in decentralized governance settings.

Three practical recommendations emerge from these findings for Indonesian regional governments, the Ministry of Administrative Reform, and development partners supporting public service innovation. First, central government programs promoting service delivery innovation should prioritize mechanisms for generating genuine local ownership—competitive grant programs with substantial design flexibility over mandates with compliance-based monitoring—to reduce coercive transfer and increase adaptation quality. Second, capacity building investment should systematically precede technology transfer, ensuring that the human capabilities and institutional systems necessary for effective adaptation exist before innovation introduction, rather than being built retrospectively after implementation problems emerge. Third, peer-learning networks among regional governments—formalizing the horizontal transfer processes that produce the most contextually appropriate adaptations in cases like Banyuwangi—deserve substantially greater investment than international technical assistance programs that promote direct model transfer without adequate adaptation support.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, C. J. (1991). Review article: What is policy convergence and what causes it? *British Journal of Political Science*, 21(2), 215–233.
- Dolowitz, D. P. (2003). A policy-maker's guide to policy transfer. *Political Quarterly*, 74(1), 101–108.

- Dolowitz, D. P., & Marsh, D. (1996). Who learns what from whom: A review of the policy transfer literature. *Political Studies*, 44(2), 343–357.
- Dolowitz, D. P., & Marsh, D. (2000). Learning from abroad: The role of policy transfer in contemporary policy-making. *Governance*, 13(1), 5–23.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532–550.
- Evans, M. (2004). *Policy transfer in global perspective*. Ashgate.
- George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.
- Guetterman, T. C., Fetters, M. D., & Creswell, J. W. (2015). Integrating quantitative and qualitative results through joint displays. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 13(6), 554–561.
- Hecló, H. (1974). *Modern social politics in Britain and Sweden*. Yale University Press.
- Hood, C. (1991). A public management for all seasons? *Public Administration*, 69(1), 3–19.
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288.
- Margetts, H., & Naumann, A. (2017). *Government as a platform: What can Estonia show the world?* University of Oxford, Oxford Internet Institute.
- Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2015). *Fast policy: Experimental statecraft at the thresholds of neoliberalism*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Pollitt, C., & Bouckaert, G. (2017). *Public management reform: A comparative analysis into the age of austerity* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Pratikno. (2005). Exercising freedom: Local autonomy and democracy in Indonesia, 1999–2001. In H. Antlöv & S. Cederroth (Eds.), *Elections in Indonesia: The New Order and beyond* (pp. 211–231). RoutledgeCurzon.
- Rose, R. (1993). *Lesson-drawing in public policy: A guide to learning across time and space*. Chatham House.
- Simmons, B. A., Dobbin, F., & Garrett, G. (2006). Introduction: The international diffusion of liberalism. *International Organization*, 60(4), 781–810.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.