P280 / Buying Expertise: Public Procurement, Consultancy and the Internationalisation of Policy Skills

Topic : Policy Transfer/Diffusion/Learning

Chair : Chepelin Boris ANGUISSA BEKONO (University of Yaounde 2, CERDAP, Cameroon)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Across the world, governments increasingly buy the expertise they need to design, evaluate and implement public policies. Studies, technical assistance, feasibility analyses, project supervision and reform programmes are routinely contracted out through public tenders. In many African countries, this trend is amplified by the rules of development finance: projects funded by the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the European Union or bilateral agencies come with procurement guidelines that open national markets to international firms, consortia and individual consultants. Public tenders thus become a key channel through which expertise, professionals, standards and policy models circulate across borders, and through which states decide, or are led to decide, who is competent to think and act on their behalf.

A substantial literature has examined the role of consultants in government. Work on "consultocracy" has shown how management consultants shaped public sector reforms in Western democracies (Saint-Martin, 2000; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019), and recent critiques question the hollowing out of state capacity that heavy reliance on consultancy may cause (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Research on policy advisory systems has analysed the externalisation of policy advice (Craft & Howlett, 2013), while studies of policy transfer and "fast policy" have identified consultants as key transfer agents (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Stone, 2004; Peck & Theodore, 2015). Yet these debates remain largely centred on the Global North and on advice rather than on procurement itself. Public tenders are seldom analysed as policy instruments that select expertise, distribute it among foreign and national actors and shape how African bureaucracies actually work (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2014).

The panel therefore asks: how do public procurement procedures organise the circulation and internationalisation of expertise, and what effects does this have on policy-making, administrative capacity and the markets for expertise, particularly in African states?

Contributions may explore several hypotheses. First, tender rules (eligibility criteria, references, turnover thresholds, language requirements) may structurally favour international firms and shape a hierarchy of expertise in which national consultants act mainly as subcontractors. Second, consultancy may operate less as a substitute for state capacity than as a negotiated arrangement in which administrations use external expertise to secure funding, legitimacy or room for manoeuvre. Third, "capacity building" and "knowledge transfer" clauses may produce uneven forms of learning, depending on how contracts are designed and monitored. Fourth, the growth of local and diaspora consulting firms may reshape these markets and the politics of expertise.

By bringing procurement into the study of policy advice and policy transfer, and by drawing on African and other Global South cases, the panel aims to refine general theories of state capacity, policy instruments and the transnational circulation of expertise.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites papers on the role of consultancy and public procurement in the circulation and internationalisation of policy expertise. It aims to bring to light a phenomenon that has received very little attention in the international literature: consultancy and the internationalization of expertise through public procurement tenders. Priority is given to African cases, but comparisons with other regions of the Global South and the Global North are welcome. We seek empirical case studies, comparative analyses, and theoretical or methodological contributions. Papers may address, among others, the following themes:

• tender rules and procedures as policy instruments: eligibility criteria, award methods, donor procurement guidelines;

• the actors of the consultancy market: international firms, national consultancies, individual experts, diaspora professionals, consortia and subcontracting chains;

• the effects of consultancy on policy design, implementation and evaluation in specific sectors such as infrastructure, health, education or public finance;

- state capacity, dependence and learning: what administrations gain or lose when they buy expertise;
- the circulation of models, standards and tools through consultancy contracts;
- accountability, transparency and sovereignty issues raised by externalised expertise.

Proposals should clearly state their research question, empirical material or theoretical framework, and expected contribution to public policy analysis. We welcome a wide range of methods, including interviews, ethnography, analysis of tender documents and contracts, process tracing, network analysis and quantitative approaches. We particularly encourage submissions from researchers based in African institutions, from doctoral and early-career scholars, and from practitioners, such as consultants, civil servants or donor staff, offering a reflexive account of their experience. Depending on the number and quality of proposals, the panel will be organised in one to three two-hour sessions, with papers grouped by theme to foster comparison and discussion. The panel will run in a hybrid format, allowing contributors who cannot travel to Rennes to present online. Abstracts should be submitted through the IPPA platform during the call for papers (16 November 2026 – 29 January 2027).