

From Implementation Failure to Policy Reform: Explaining Institutional Learning Through Comparative Evidence from Denmark, Austria and Pakistan

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Abstract

Public policies frequently encounter difficulties during execution, yet the institutional processes through which governments convert those experiences into organisational learning and policy reform remain poorly understood. While implementation research explains why policies encounter difficulties in practice and policy-learning scholarship examines how governments adapt through experience, the institutional pathway connecting these two traditions has received comparatively little attention. This article addresses that gap through a qualitative comparative case study of Denmark, Austria and Pakistan based on documentary evidence drawn from ombudsman reports, audit findings, legislative documents and official government publications.

The study develops the Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF), a middle-range analytical framework that explains how practical experience is translated into progressively different levels of governmental response through six sequential stages: evidence production, evidence aggregation, institutional attribution, response selection, implementation and verified learning. The comparative analysis demonstrates that operational setbacks do not automatically generate organisational learning or policy reform. Instead, reform depends on institutional processes that interpret recurring evidence, attribute responsibility and authorise organisational responses. Although the three cases differ substantially in administrative traditions and state capacity, they exhibit a common institutional sequence through which experience is converted into administrative correction, organisational adaptation or policy reform. By specifying this sequence, ILRF explains why governments confronting similar implementation challenges often follow markedly different reform trajectories. The article

contributes to comparative public policy by integrating implementation research and policy-learning scholarship within a single explanatory framework while providing a practical analytical tool for examining institutional learning across diverse governance settings.

Keywords: implementation, institutional learning, policy reform, comparative public policy, governance, organisational learning, Denmark, Austria, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

Policies rarely fail in cabinet rooms. They falter when governments attempt to put them into practice. It is here that weaknesses concealed during policy design begin to surface: unclear responsibilities, fragmented coordination and administrative routines that cannot sustain reform. Yet governments do not respond to these setbacks in the same way. Some adjust, reorganise and improve. Others repeat the same patterns through successive reform cycles. Why?

Implementation research explains why public programmes encounter difficulties once they move from political decisions to administrative action. Organisational complexity, frontline discretion and coordination across public agencies all shape what ultimately happens in practice.¹ A separate body of scholarship examines how governments adapt through learning, institutional adjustment and policy change.² Together, these traditions explain how policies are carried into practice and how governments adapt over time. What remains less clear is the institutional process that connects them. How does administrative experience become a catalyst for reform rather than another administrative lesson that disappears within routine practice?

This article addresses that question through a comparative analysis of Denmark, Austria and Pakistan. The three countries differ substantially in administrative traditions, governance arrangements and state capacity, yet each sheds light on what happens once policy delivery begins to encounter difficulties. The comparison is not intended to identify the strongest administrative system. It is to understand why similar implementation challenges produce different trajectories of institutional reform.

To answer that question, the article develops the Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF). Rather than viewing reform as a single corrective response, ILRF conceptualises it as an iterative institutional process. Administrative experience generates evidence. Institutional feedback organises it. Organisational learning interprets it. Authorisation determines whether action follows. Policy reform is the outcome. Together,

¹ Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Michael Hill and Peter Hupe, *Implementing Public Policy*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2014).

² Peter A. Hall, "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 3 (1993): 275–296; Colin J. Bennett and Michael Howlett, "The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change," *Policy Sciences* 25, no. 3 (1992): 275–294.

these stages connect research on policy implementation with policy-learning scholarship within a single analytical framework.

The analysis adopts a qualitative comparative case study design supported by documentary evidence, including official reports, audit findings, legislative documents and peer-reviewed scholarship. Rather than asking which country performs better, the study identifies institutional processes common to contrasting governance contexts.

The article makes three contributions. First, it explains the institutional pathway linking administrative experience to policy reform, addressing a gap between research and policy-learning scholarship. Second, it introduces the Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF) as a conceptual framework for examining institutional adaptation across different governance contexts. Finally, it argues that implementation failure should be understood not only as evidence of administrative weakness but also as a potential source of institutional learning capable of informing future policymaking.

The remainder of the article reviews the relevant literature, outlines the research design, analyses the comparative findings from Denmark, Austria and Pakistan, discusses their implications for comparative policy research and practice, and concludes by considering how governments can strengthen institutional learning in practice.

2. From Implementation Failure to Institutional Learning

2.1 Explaining Implementation Failure

Public policies rarely fail because governments cannot define objectives. More often, difficulties emerge as those objectives are translated into administrative practice. This insight established implementation as a distinct field of inquiry by shifting attention from policy intentions to what public institutions actually deliver.³

Early research challenged the assumption that policy adoption naturally produces successful outcomes. Instead, scholars came to view policy delivery as a chain of organisational decisions in which each administrative interaction created new opportunities for delay, reinterpretation and breakdown.⁴ Later research extended this perspective, arguing that delivery outcomes are shaped not only by coordination but also by institutional arrangements, administrative discretion, organisational capacity and the behaviour of frontline actors.

Taken together, this literature provides increasingly sophisticated explanations for recurring problems. Administrative discretion, weak coordination, resource constraints and ambiguous policy design all contribute to policy delivery failures. Yet the literature pays considerably less

³ Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

⁴ Paul A. Sabatier, "Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches to Implementation Research: A Critical Analysis and Suggested Synthesis," *Journal of Public Policy* 6, no. 1 (1986): 21–48

attention to what follows once these problems become visible. How do governments decide whether recurring operational problems require routine administrative adjustment, organisational reform or changes in public policy? Existing research explains the origins of delivery failures more effectively than the institutional processes through which practical experience is transformed into learning and reform.

2.2 Explaining Institutional Learning

A parallel body of scholarship examines how public institutions learn from experience. Across organisational learning, policy learning and performance management research, a common theme emerges: governments improve less through generating evidence than through interpreting, challenging and applying it. Learning is therefore neither automatic nor inevitable. It depends on institutional processes that transform experience into organisational action.⁵

Institutional learning also varies in depth. Institutions may respond to governance problems by correcting routine errors while leaving underlying assumptions unchanged, or they may reassess those assumptions and alter the rules that guide future decisions.⁶ Similarly, policy change may range from incremental adjustments to more fundamental shifts in governing ideas, depending on how experience is interpreted and institutionalised.⁷

Performance management research arrives at a comparable conclusion. Governments increasingly collect large volumes of administrative information, yet evidence rarely influences policy on its own. Information becomes useful only when organisational routines, leadership and institutional capacity enable it to be collectively interpreted and incorporated into future decisions.⁸ Across these perspectives, experience creates the conditions for learning, but institutions determine whether that opportunity is realised.

Despite these advances, one important question remains unresolved. Existing scholarship explains how institutions learn and why learning varies across organisations. It pays far less attention to institutional processes through which recurring operational experience leads to different levels of response whether routine administrative adjustment, organisational reform or policy change. It is this missing link that the ILRF seeks to explain.

⁵ Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996); Peter J. May, "Policy Learning and Failure," *Journal of Public Policy* 12, no. 4 (1992): 331–354.

⁶ Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

⁷ Peter A. Hall, "Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 3 (1993): 275–296; Colin J. Bennett and Michael Howlett, "The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change," *Policy Sciences* 25, no. 3 (1992): 275–294.

⁸ Donald P. Moynihan and Sanjay K. Pandey, "The Big Question for Performance Management: Why Do Managers Use Performance Information?" *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 20, no. 4 (2010): 849–866.

2.3 The Missing Link Between Implementation and Policy Reform

Research on implementation and policy learning collectively explains why policies encounter difficulties in practice and how governments adapt over time. What remains less clear is the institutional process connecting these two stages. Research on policy implementation largely stops once problems have been identified, while policy-learning scholarship typically begins after institutions have already recognised the need for change. The decision-making process that links practical experience to institutional response remains comparatively underexplored.

The transition is neither automatic nor purely administrative. Public institutions must determine whether recurring problems reflect isolated operational failures, organisational weaknesses or shortcomings in policy design. They must also decide when routine administrative correction is sufficient and when broader organisational or policy reform is justified. These judgements shape how accumulated experience influences subsequent government action.

This article argues that the missing link lies in this process of institutional judgement. Rather than proposing a new theory of implementation or policy learning, it develops the Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF) to explain how governments convert policy experience into progressively different levels of institutional response. The framework identifies the institutional processes through which recurring evaluation findings are interpreted, assessed and translated into administrative adjustment, organisational learning or policy reform. The following section introduces the framework and its analytical components.

3. The Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF)

The Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF) explains how governments transform implementation experience into different levels of institutional response. Rather than evaluating whether a policy succeeds or fails, it focuses on the institutional decisions that follow once problems become visible. Existing research distinguishes between collecting evidence and using it to improve decision-making,⁹ but offers less explanation of how institutions move from evidence to reform. ILRF addresses that gap.

ILRF distinguishes three levels of institutional response. Administrative correction resolves individual problems without altering organisational arrangements. Organisational adaptation strengthens procedures, coordination or administrative capacity while preserving existing policy objectives. Policy reform occurs when recurring patterns indicate that the underlying policy requires revision. Organisational learning research distinguishes between routine correction and deeper institutional change.¹⁰ Building on that insight, ILRF differentiates

⁹ Donald P. Moynihan, *The Dynamics of Performance Management: Constructing Information and Reform* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008); Donald P. Moynihan and Sanjay K. Pandey, "The Big Question for Performance Management: Why Do Managers Use Performance Information?" *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 20, no. 4 (2010): 849–866.

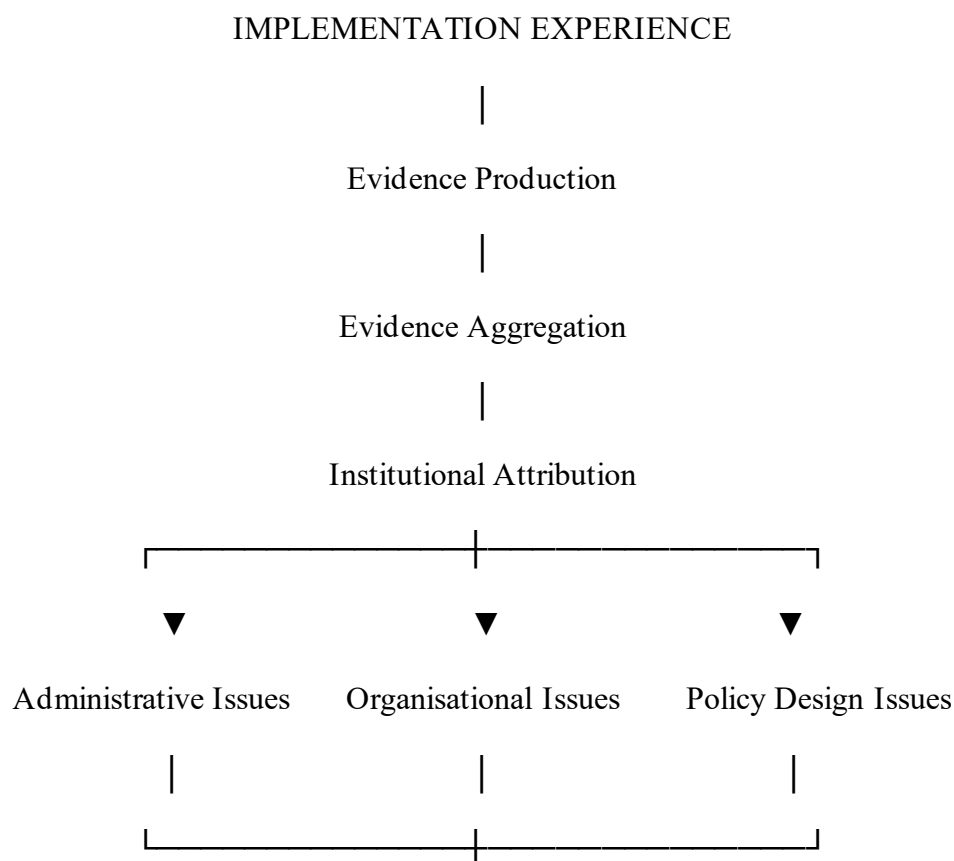
¹⁰ Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

administrative correction, organisational adaptation and policy reform as distinct institutional responses.

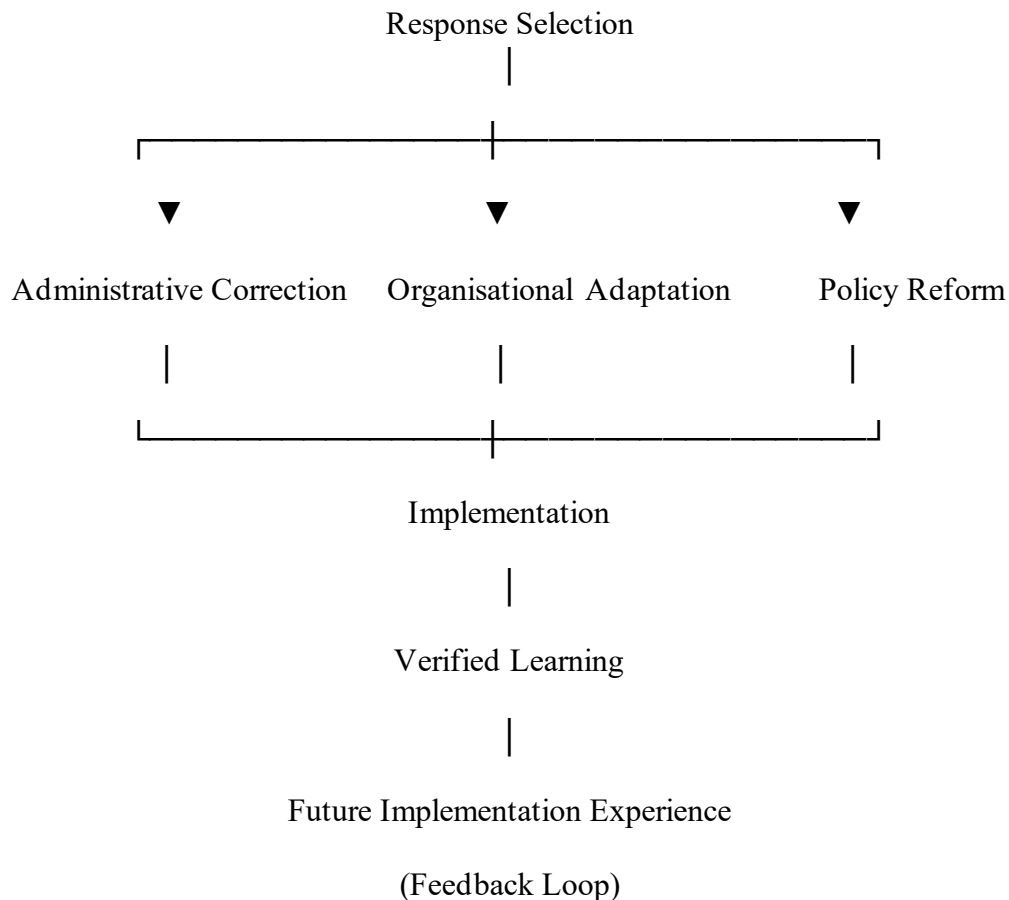
The framework explains this progression through six stages: evidence production, evidence aggregation, institutional attribution, response selection, implementation and verified learning (Figure 1). Administrative experience first becomes visible through complaints, audits, evaluations or routine monitoring. Individual observations are then aggregated into recurring patterns. Institutions attribute those patterns to administrative practice, organisational arrangements or policy design before selecting an appropriate response. Learning becomes evident only when those responses are implemented and shown to reduce the recurrence of the original implementation problem.

ILRF is presented as a middle-range analytical framework. Merton described middle-range theories as explanations of specific social processes rather than universal patterns.¹¹³ Consistent with that tradition, ILRF explains one institutional process: how governments transform accumulated experience into progressively different levels of institutional response

Figure 1. The Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF)



¹¹ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, enlarged ed. (New York: Free Press, 1968), 39–72.



4. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how public institutions transform practical experience into administrative correction, organisational adaptation and policy reform. Rather than comparing national governance performance, the study explains the institutional processes through which policy experience is interpreted and translated into different levels of institutional response.

The analysis employs structured, focused comparison, a well-established approach for theory building through a small number of carefully selected cases.¹² The same analytical questions are applied across all three cases, allowing institutional similarities and differences to emerge through a common analytical lens rather than through country rankings or predetermined assumptions.

The cases were selected because they represent contrasting institutional pathways through which implementation experience enters public administration. Denmark illustrates an ombudsman-based oversight model, Austria an independent audit and performance accountability system, and Pakistan an executive grievance-management pathway.

¹² Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

Collectively, they provide contrasting institutional settings in which recurring problems may remain matters of routine administration or progress towards organisational adaptation and policy reform.

The unit of analysis is the institutional pathway, not the country. This distinction is central to ILRF, which explains institutional decision-making rather than differences in national administrative performance.

The study relies primarily on documentary evidence, including ombudsman reports, audit reports, parliamentary records, legislation, government publications and administrative guidance. These sources are particularly well suited to examining formal institutional procedures because they document how public organisations allocate responsibilities, respond to implementation problems and record institutional change.¹³

The data were analysed using deductive qualitative content analysis, in which an existing conceptual framework guided the coding process.¹⁴ Applying a common analytical framework across all cases ensured analytical consistency while allowing institutional differences to emerge through comparison.

The study has several limitations. It relies on publicly available evidence and therefore cannot capture informal decision-making or internal deliberations that are absent from official records. Documentary sources may also describe formal institutional procedures more comprehensively than unsuccessful or abandoned reforms. The findings should therefore be interpreted as an analytical explanation of institutional learning and reform rather than statistically generalisable conclusions.

5. Comparative Analysis

5.1 Implementation Experience as the Catalyst for Institutional Learning

Implementation experience did not produce the same institutional response across the three cases. In each country, it exposed weaknesses that policy design had not fully anticipated. The difference lay not in the existence of those weaknesses but in how public institutions responded to them. Where repeated observations were systematically reviewed and incorporated into decision-making, recurring problems became a source of institutional learning rather than recurring administrative failure.

Denmark illustrates this dynamic through its municipal employment reforms. Decentralising labour market services created substantial variation in local practice despite a common legislative framework. Evaluations identified differences in administrative performance and

¹³ Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40.

¹⁴ Philipp Mayring, *Qualitative Content Analysis: Theoretical Foundation, Basic Procedures and Software Solution* (Klagenfurt: SSOAR, 2014).

service delivery, prompting successive adjustments to performance management, monitoring arrangements and intergovernmental coordination rather than abandonment of the reforms.¹⁵ administrative experience became a driver of institutional improvement rather than evidence that the policy itself had failed.

A similar pattern emerged in Austria through refugee integration after 2015. Coordination problems between federal authorities, regional governments and labour market institutions exposed weaknesses in delivery. Subsequent evaluations identified overlapping responsibilities and inconsistent practices across regions.¹⁶ Rather than reversing the policy, public authorities strengthened coordination mechanisms, clarified institutional responsibilities and expanded inter-agency cooperation. The case illustrates how structured evaluation transformed implementation experience into organisational learning.

Pakistan operated in a more constrained institutional environment but followed the same broad pattern. Governance reforms repeatedly encountered fragmented authority, inconsistent monitoring and limited administrative capacity. Institutional learning was slower and less systematic, yet reviews and subsequent administrative reforms increasingly drew on lessons from earlier initiatives.¹⁷ The case suggests that institutional learning depends less on administrative capacity than on whether that experience informs subsequent institutional decisions.

A consistent pattern emerges from the comparison. Policy experience became valuable only when public institutions possessed mechanisms for interpreting evidence, assigning responsibility and responding to recurring patterns. Where those mechanisms were embedded in routine governance, operational lessons supported organisational adaptation and, where necessary, policy reform. Where they were absent, similar problems were more likely to recur.

The analysis provides the first empirical application of the Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF). Rather than treating implementation failure as the end of the policy process, ILRF conceptualises it as the point at which institutional learning begins. The following sections examine how institutional feedback, organisational learning and authorisation shape that process across the three cases.

5.2 Institutional Feedback Mechanisms Transform Learning into Reform

Lessons from policy delivery influences reform only when public institutions possess mechanisms capable of converting administrative evidence into organisational knowledge. The comparison shows that differences in reform outcomes depended less on the occurrence of

¹⁵ Christopher Pollitt and Geert Bouckaert, *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis—Into the Age of Austerity*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Peter Dahler-Larsen, *The Evaluation Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ European Commission, *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027* (Brussels: European Commission, 2020); Martin Bak Jørgensen et al., relevant studies on refugee integration governance in Austria.

¹⁷ World Bank, *Pakistan@100: Shaping the Future* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2019); United Nations Development Programme, governance reform assessments for Pakistan.

persistent shortcomings than on the institutional capacity to collect, interpret and act upon recurring evidence.

Denmark illustrates the most mature feedback architecture among the three cases. The Parliamentary Ombudsman does more than investigate individual complaints. It identifies recurring patterns across complaints, inspections, media reports and institutional monitoring to diagnose broader weaknesses in public administration.¹⁸ Lessons drawn from individual cases are consolidated into general administrative guidance, allowing experience from one organisation to inform administrative practice across government. Feedback therefore functions as a mechanism for institutional learning rather than simply dispute resolution.

Austria institutionalises feedback through the Court of Audit. Audits assess administrative performance alongside financial compliance, while recommendations are routinely followed by progress reports and follow-up audits.¹⁹ This process allows public institutions to determine whether earlier recommendations have produced meaningful organisational change rather than simple administrative compliance. Feedback therefore becomes part of a continuous cycle of review, implementation and reassessment.

Pakistan relies on a less institutionalised but increasingly important feedback pathway. The Pakistan Citizen's Portal aggregates large volumes of citizen complaints and recognises their potential to inform procedural improvement and administrative reform.²⁰ The institutional processes linking recurring evidence to organisational review, however, remain less formalised than in Denmark or Austria. As a result, the translation of feedback into reform depends more heavily on administrative discretion than on established institutional routines.

Despite these institutional differences, the comparison reveals a common pattern. Institutional feedback transforms isolated problems into evidence capable of informing broader organisational decisions. Learning depends not on the volume of information collected, but on the institutional capacity to identify recurring patterns, diagnose their underlying causes and incorporate those findings into future decision-making.

Within the Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF), institutional feedback represents the first mechanism through which administrative experience becomes institutional learning. It enables governments to move beyond resolving individual cases by identifying recurring patterns that justify organisational adaptation and, where necessary, policy reform.

¹⁸ Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman, *The Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman* (official guidance); Peter Dahler-Larsen, *The Evaluation Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Austrian Court of Audit, follow-up audit reports on labour inspectorates and public administration; Christopher Pollitt and Geert Bouckaert, *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis—Into the Age of Austerity*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Pakistan Citizen's Portal, official operational framework and annual performance reports; World Bank, *Pakistan@100: Shaping the Future* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2019).

5.3 From Institutional Learning to Policy Reform: The Role of Authorisation

Institutional learning does not automatically produce reform. Across Denmark, Austria and Pakistan, public institutions generated valuable knowledge from governing experience, yet action depended on whether that knowledge entered an authorised decision-making process. The comparison identifies a stage beyond feedback and learning: institutions must recognise evidence as sufficiently important, credible and actionable to justify administrative, organisational or policy change.

Denmark embeds authorisation within legislative preparation. Since July 2018, ministries have been required to assess the practical consequences of proposed legislation, including organisational demands, administrative costs, effects on existing institutions and risks associated with information technology.²¹ This requirement incorporates operational knowledge into the formal legislative process. It does not guarantee that every identified problem will alter a proposal, but it requires ministries to consider how new legislation will function in practice before approval, giving accumulated experience a recognised route into policy design.

Austria authorises organisational learning through executive management and parliamentary oversight. Its system of outcome-oriented public administration aligns ministerial activity with common government objectives and subjects performance to regular monitoring. The purpose extends beyond measurement to embedding learning within routine governance. Court of Audit findings subsequently enter the National Council through formal reporting and committee deliberation, allowing elected representatives to determine whether recurring patterns warrant further governmental action.²² Administrative knowledge therefore acquires reform significance through executive and parliamentary decision-making rather than through audit findings alone.

Pakistan follows a more selective authorisation pathway. In 2019, a high-powered committee on overseas citizens' complaints directed departments to resolve outstanding cases within three weeks and submit policy recommendations where recurring problems required them.²³ This moved complaint evidence beyond case resolution by creating a formal route to policy advice. More recently, the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Parliamentary Affairs recommended the use of artificial intelligence to improve the sorting, categorisation and

²¹ Agency for Digital Government, "Public Implementation Impacts," accessed August 6, 2026. The guidance states that, from July 1, 2018, Danish ministries must assess and describe the public implementation impacts of legislative proposals, including organisational, administrative and technological consequences.

²² Austrian Parliament, "The Court of Audit," accessed August 6, 2026. The Court reports to the National Council, and its reports undergo preliminary deliberation in the Court of Audit Committee; Parliament may also request special audits.

²³ Government of Pakistan, Press Information Department, "Proposal: Overseas Pakistani Complaints Lodged under Call Sarzameen Portal, or under Any Other Medium, to Be Linked with Prime Minister's Performance Delivery Unit," press release no. 35, 2019. The committee directed departments to resolve complaints within three weeks and propose recommendations for policymaking where required.

classification of complaints.²⁴ The available evidence demonstrates that executive and parliamentary institutions can authorise broader responses to recurring grievance data, although it does not establish that these recommendations consistently resulted in policy reform.

An important distinction emerges from the comparison. Denmark formalises implementation assessment within legislative drafting. Austria integrates operational evidence into executive management and parliamentary scrutiny. Pakistan enables complaint evidence to reach policy discussion, although the transition from recommendation to adopted reform remains less consistently documented. In each case, the decisive question is not whether institutions possess relevant knowledge, but whether an authorised actor accepts that knowledge as a basis for action.

Within the Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF), authorisation marks the point at which institutional knowledge becomes institutional commitment. Feedback identifies recurring problems, attribution locates their source, and authorisation determines whether the response remains administrative, progresses to organisational adaptation or results in policy reform. This stage explains why similar governing experience may produce markedly different reform trajectories, even when institutions recognise comparable problems.

6. Discussion and Implications

6.1 Implementation Failure Does Not Automatically Produce Institutional Learning

One of the central findings of this study is that implementation failure and institutional learning are not interchangeable. While implementation research has long recognised that governments can learn from practical experience, the comparative analysis demonstrates that experience alone does not produce institutional learning. Across Denmark, Austria and Pakistan, recurring operational problems generated valuable organisational knowledge, yet only part of that knowledge shaped administrative practice or policy reform. The critical difference lay not in the occurrence of policy breakdowns, but in the institutional capacity to convert experience into learning.

The comparison further demonstrates that policy breakdowns mark the beginning rather than the end of an institutional process. Complaints, audits, evaluations and routine monitoring expose recurring shortcomings, but they do not generate learning on their own. Public institutions must recognise patterns, identify their underlying causes and determine whether

²⁴ National Assembly of Pakistan, “Meeting of the Standing Committee on Parliamentary Affairs,” press release, 2025. The committee recommended using artificial intelligence to improve complaint sorting, categorisation and classification; the source documents the recommendation rather than its implementation.

they warrant administrative correction, organisational adaptation or policy reform. Learning therefore depends not simply on generating evidence, but on interpreting and acting upon it.²⁵

A second finding concerns the role of institutional judgement. Learning is not a technical exercise in collecting better information. Public institutions must determine whether recurring experience reflects isolated administrative error, organisational weakness or shortcomings in policy design. These judgements shape the level of institutional response and ultimately determine whether operational challenges lead to routine correction, organisational adaptation or broader policy reform.

The comparison also identifies authorisation as a distinct stage in this process. Across all three cases, administrative knowledge influenced policy only after it had been recognised as a legitimate basis for institutional action. Denmark incorporated implementation assessment into legislative preparation, Austria embedded evaluation findings within executive management and parliamentary oversight, while Pakistan demonstrated that operational experience could inform reform when supported by executive and parliamentary authority.²⁶ Learning therefore becomes institutionally significant only when it is formally authorised.

Viewed together, these cases suggest a different way of understanding implementation failure. Rather than treating it primarily as evidence of weak governance, the analysis shows that its significance depends on what follows. Some operational shortcomings remain isolated administrative events, while others become catalysts for organisational adaptation or policy reform. The distinguishing factor is not the failure itself, but the institutional capacity to interpret evidence, authorise institutional responses and translate accumulated experience into sustained reform.

6.2 Implications for Comparative Policy Research and Practice

Comparative public policy has traditionally explained cross-national differences through administrative capacity, institutional design and governance performance. Far less attention has been devoted to how governments learn from experience once policies enter practice. The analysis presented here suggests that institutional learning deserves greater attention within comparative policy research. Administrative capacity and institutional design remain important, but they explain only part of why governments adapt differently. Similar practical experience may produce markedly different reform trajectories because institutions differ in how they interpret, validate and act upon it.

This insight also has methodological implications. Comparative studies frequently assess governments using indicators such as effectiveness, regulatory quality and administrative capacity. While these measures capture policy performance, they reveal comparatively little

²⁵ Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); James G. March, "Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning," *Organization Science* 2, no. 1 (1991): 71–87.

²⁶ Mark H. Moore, *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2003).

about the institutional processes that sustain improvement over time. Future comparative research should therefore examine how operational evidence is organised, interpreted and authorised alongside conventional measures of governance performance. Doing so offers a richer explanation of why some governments adapt more effectively than others.

Governments increasingly invest in monitoring systems, evaluation frameworks and performance indicators on the assumption that more information will produce better decisions. This expectation is well established within the evidence-informed policymaking literature. The comparison, however, suggests that information alone is insufficient. All three cases generated substantial evidence through audits, evaluations and citizen feedback, yet its influence depended less on the quantity of information collected than on the institutional arrangements responsible for interpreting and legitimising it. Better evidence did not automatically produce better policy; stronger institutional processes did.

These findings also carry practical implications. Governments typically design implementation systems to monitor compliance and evaluate programme performance. The comparison indicates that these systems create greater long-term value when they also support institutional learning. Feedback mechanisms should therefore do more than identify operational shortcomings. They should reveal recurring patterns, encourage organisational reflection and inform future policy decisions. In this sense, monitoring arrangements are most effective when they function as learning systems rather than solely as accountability mechanisms.

The analysis also contributes to debates on policy transfer. Governments often seek to replicate successful reforms from other jurisdictions, yet the comparison suggests that policy instruments alone rarely explain sustained success. Denmark, Austria and Pakistan differ substantially in administrative traditions and institutional capacity, but each demonstrates that reform depends on the organisational routines through which experience is converted into institutional learning. Policy transfer research has long argued that governments borrow institutional ideas as well as policy instruments. This study extends that argument by suggesting that they should also strengthen their capacity to learn from experience.

Ultimately, the comparison encourages a different way of thinking about comparative public policy. Governments should not be assessed solely by the policies they adopt or the outcomes they achieve, but also by their ability to learn from experience. Institutional learning is therefore more than an administrative activity; it is a comparative characteristic that helps explain why governments confronting similar policy challenges often follow different paths of reform.

6.3 Policy Recommendations for Institutional Learning and Reform

The comparative analysis suggests that improving public policy requires more than strengthening administrative capacity or expanding monitoring systems. Governments should establish institutional arrangements that enable practical experience to progress from isolated administrative events to organisational learning and, where necessary, policy reform. This

requires strengthening every stage of the Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF) rather than concentrating solely on policy execution.

A first priority is improving how evidence from practice is organised and used. Public institutions already generate substantial information through audits, evaluations, complaints and routine monitoring. The challenge is rarely the absence of information but its fragmentation across organisations and administrative levels. Rather than expanding reporting requirements, governments should establish mechanisms that consolidate evidence, identify recurring patterns and distinguish isolated incidents from systemic weaknesses.

A second priority is strengthening institutional attribution. Recurring problems may arise from administrative practice, organisational arrangements or shortcomings in policy design. Research on organisational diagnosis and performance management has long argued that effective institutional responses depend on correctly identifying the source of performance problems before selecting an intervention.²⁷ Treating every operational difficulty as evidence of defective policy design risks unnecessary reform, while dismissing persistent systemic weaknesses as isolated administrative mistakes prevents institutional learning. Governments should therefore adopt structured review processes that identify where problems originate before deciding how they should be addressed.

The findings also highlight the need for clearer authorisation procedures. Across all three cases, evidence influenced policy only after it had been formally recognised within institutional decision-making. Public institutions should establish transparent pathways showing how evaluation findings move from operational review to organisational decision-making, who authorises institutional responses and how those decisions are monitored. Without such arrangements, valuable organisational knowledge is likely to remain within evaluation reports rather than informing future policy.

Governments should also evaluate monitoring systems not only by their ability to detect problems but by their capacity to demonstrate learning. Success should be assessed by whether practical experience results in administrative correction where appropriate, organisational adaptation where necessary and policy reform where justified. This shifts attention from measuring operational performance alone towards assessing institutional capacity for continuous improvement.

These recommendations are intentionally process-oriented rather than prescriptive. ILRF does not advocate a single institutional model or governance structure. Instead, it provides a practical set of questions that governments can apply regardless of administrative tradition: How is evidence collected? How are recurring patterns identified? Who authorises the institutional response? How is organisational learning embedded? How is reform subsequently evaluated?

²⁷ Christopher Pollitt, *Advanced Introduction to Public Management and Administration* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016); Geert Bouckaert and John Halligan, *Managing Performance: International Comparisons*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2019).

By focusing on these institutional processes rather than specific organisational designs, ILRF offers a flexible approach to strengthening adaptive governance across diverse policy settings.

7. Conclusion

This article began with a simple question: why do some governments learn from experience while others confront the same policy problems repeatedly? The comparative analysis of Denmark, Austria and Pakistan suggests that the answer lies not in the occurrence of policy breakdowns themselves, but in the institutional processes that follow them. Across all three cases, administrative experience generated valuable knowledge. Whether that knowledge produced organisational adaptation or policy reform depended on the capacity of public institutions to gather evidence, recognise recurring patterns, authorise institutional responses and incorporate those lessons into future decision-making.

The findings challenge a common assumption within public administration that policy failure should be understood primarily as evidence of weak governance. Instead, they suggest that recurring operational problems can become an institutional resource when governments possess credible mechanisms for reflection, evaluation and adaptation. The comparison therefore shifts attention away from policy outcomes alone and towards the organisational processes through which governments interpret experience, validate institutional learning and convert it into reform.

To explain this process, the article introduced the Implementation Learning and Reform Framework (ILRF). Rather than treating policy execution, organisational learning and reform as separate stages of the policy cycle, the framework explains how they are connected through institutional feedback, attribution and authorisation. In doing so, it provides a structured explanation of why governments facing similar administrative challenges may follow markedly different reform trajectories.

The study has several limitations. It draws on three purposively selected cases and relies primarily on documentary evidence, making its contribution analytical rather than statistically generalisable. Future research could apply ILRF across additional policy sectors, governance systems and political contexts, while also examining its explanatory value through mixed-method and quantitative research designs.

Ultimately, effective governance should not be judged by the absence of policy failures. In complex public institutions, setbacks are inevitable. A more meaningful measure is whether governments recognise recurring problems, learn from experience and translate that learning into better policy. From this perspective, implementation is not simply the final stage of the policy cycle. It is the point at which institutional learning begins.

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