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How Do Foreign Aid Agencies Learn? A Comparative Analysis of Organisational Learning Determinants in National Donor Bureaucracies

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Abstract

We distil and validate a new theory of organisational learning (OL) to understand OL in foreign aid agencies. Reviewing existing scholarship on OL in the public sector, we devise a theoretical framework consisting of three variables that connect interacting dimensions co-determining the organisation-specific intensity of OL: (1) individual knowledge acquisition, (2) social practices and (3) organisational political embeddedness. To validate our approach to studying OL empirically, we heed calls for more comparative research on OL by analysing 89 randomly sampled interviews with national development bureaucrats in Germany, South Korea and Norway. Our analysis demonstrates that our theoretical framework explains varying intensities of OL across the three cases. Crucially, it reveals the second dimension, social practices, to be decisive. While all cases in our sample contain evidence of individual learning and awareness of the organisations' context-specific political embeddedness, we observe distinct social practices in each organisation. The organisation in which OL is most vibrant is the only one in our sample social practices that are directly conducive to OL. These practices comprise unsanctioned negotiations of organisational objectives among staff, as well as a consensus to prioritise evidence and terminate failed projects, despite political pressures to spend more, faster. We conclude that future research on OL needs to eschew references to hypothetical best practices and instead study OL empirically and comparatively by connecting previously disjointed scholarly literatures through theory.

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Keywords Bureaucrats · Development bureaucracy · Foreign aid · Organisational learning · Randomised interviews · Social practices

Résumé

Nous distillons et validons une nouvelle théorie de l'apprentissage organisationnel (AO) pour comprendre l'AO dans les agences d'aide étrangère. En examinant les recherches existantes sur l'AO dans le secteur public, nous élaborons un cadre théorique composé de trois variables qui relient les dimensions interactives co-déterminant l'intensité spécifique à l'organisation de l'AO: (1) l'acquisition de connaissances individuelles, (2) les pratiques sociales, et (3) l'ancrage politique organisationnel. Pour valider notre approche de l'étude empirique de l'AO, nous répondons aux appels pour davantage de recherches comparatives sur l'AO en analysant 89 entretiens échantillonnés au hasard avec des bureaucrates du développement national en Allemagne, en Corée du Sud et en Norvège. Notre analyse démontre que notre cadre théorique explique les intensités variables de l'AO dans les trois cas. De manière cruciale, elle révèle que la deuxième dimension, les pratiques sociales, est décisive. Tous les cas de notre échantillon contiennent des preuves d'apprentissage individuel et de conscience de l'ancrage politique contextuel des organisations; cependant, nous observons des pratiques sociales distinctes dans chacune des trois organisations. L'organisation où l'AO est la plus dynamique est la seule de notre échantillon à présenter des pratiques sociales directement propices à l'AO. Ces pratiques comprennent des négociations non sanctionnées des objectifs organisationnels parmi le personnel et un consensus pour donner la priorité aux preuves et mettre fin aux projets échoués malgré les pressions politiques pour dépenser plus, plus rapidement. Nous concluons que les recherches futures sur l'AO doivent éviter de se référer à des meilleures pratiques hypothétiques et plutôt étudier l'AO de manière empirique et comparative à travers une théorie reliant des littératures académiques auparavant disjointes.

Resumen

Destilamos y validamos una nueva teoría del aprendizaje organizacional (AO) para comprender el AO en las agencias de ayuda extranjera. Revisando la literatura existente sobre AO en el sector público, desarrollamos un marco teórico que consta de tres variables que conectan dimensiones interactivas que co-determinan la intensidad específica de AO en la organización: (1) adquisición de conocimiento individual, (2) prácticas sociales e (3) inserción política organizacional. Para validar empíricamente nuestro enfoque para estudiar el AO, prestamos atención a las llamadas a realizar más investigaciones comparativas sobre AO analizando 89 entrevistas seleccionadas al azar con burócratas nacionales de desarrollo en Alemania, Corea del Sur y Noruega. Nuestro análisis demuestra que nuestro marco teórico explica las diferentes intensidades de AO en los tres casos. Crucialmente, revela la segunda dimensión, las prácticas sociales, como decisiva. Todos los casos de nuestra muestra contienen evidencia de aprendizaje individual y conciencia de la inserción política específica del contexto de las organizaciones; sin embargo, observamos prácticas sociales distintas en cada una de las tres organizaciones. La organización donde el AO es más vibrante es la única en nuestra muestra que exhibe prácticas sociales directamente conducentes al



AO. Estas prácticas comprenden negociaciones no sancionadas de los objetivos organizacionales entre el personal y un consenso para priorizar la evidencia y terminar proyectos fallidos a pesar de las presiones políticas para gastar más, más rápido. Concluimos que la investigación futura sobre AO necesita evitar referencias a prácticas hipotéticas óptimas y en su lugar estudiar el AO empírica y comparadamente a través de teorías que conecten literaturas académicas previamente desarticuladas.

Introduction

Organisations ostensibly need to learn in order to succeed. This dictum can be found across scholarly literature ranging from management research to public policy, as it purportedly holds for private and public organisations alike. Alerasoul et al. (2022: 1) put forward that “organisational learning (OL) is essential for the survival of an organisation”. According to Argote (2012: 36) “[o]rganizations learn from both successes and failures”, and organisational motivations to learn are correlated positively with the cost of failure (Argote 2012: 37). Notably, scholars have ranked the foreign aid sector as relatively open to learning from failure, on a par with the business, aviation, and technology sectors (Chambers et al. 2022; cf. Eger et al. 2022). At the same time, scholarly definitions of OL abound: Basten and Haamann (2018) review 405 publications on different types of OL and identify 45 distinct approaches. They conclude that no single approach appears to be most appropriate and call for research to account for specific organisational contingencies (Basten and Haamann 2018: 14).

In response, we devise a multi-dimensional theory of OL capable of explaining variation in OL intensity as a result of organisation-specific configurations. We heed recent calls for more comparative research on OL in the public sector (Cuffa and Steil 2019; Dahlström and Lapuente 2022; Iao-Jørgensen 2023). We select three national donor bureaucracies to validate its applicability to the foreign aid sector. Our research objective is to study OL “non-metaphorically” (Ron et al. 2006: 1084) by examining how these organisations *actually* learn, as opposed to prescribing how they *should* learn. Drawing on existing scholarship, we hypothesise that OL results from activities in three interconnected organisational dimensions: (1) individual knowledge acquisition, (2) social practices, and (3) organisational political embeddedness. We ask: how does OL occur in organisational settings characterised by different configurations of these three dimensions?

Our theoretically guided empirical approach thus differs from scholarly contributions that resort to binaries of OL and suggest the existence of best practices. Examples of these binaries include the juxtaposition of “church-like organisations” producing “official branded knowledge” versus “open learning organisations” (Ellerman 1999), of a “linear model” of individual skill acquisition versus an “action learning approach” characterised by “cycles of action and reflection” (Johnson and Thomas 2007: 41); and OL occurring in either “Kafkaesk” or “representative bureaucracies” (Hoey 2015). We doubt that such heuristics can capture the diverse landscape of OL in foreign aid. Rather, they enable co-optation in the name of ostensibly ‘easy’ organisational reforms (McFarlane 2006; Chambers et al. 2022)



and reflect a managerialist yearning for learning that is undertheorised and empirically unsubstantiated.

We proceed as follows. Synthesising existing research seeking to explain OL empirically, we distil a three-tiered theoretical framework. This framework generates a working hypothesis that the intensity of OL is co-determined by three interrelated variables. Next, we present the methodology for our case selection and primary data collection. We then delve into a comparative analysis and discuss its main findings. We conclude by reviewing the validity of our theoretical framework and deriving implications for future research on OL in foreign aid and beyond.

A Novel Theoretical Framework for Organisational Learning

For over two decades, aid agencies have been “touting the importance of knowledge generation and organisational learning in one form or another” (Roper and Pettit 2002: 1; McFarlane 2006) and chasing normative ‘best practices’ (Biggs and Smith 2003: 1745–1747; Ferguson et al. 2010). At the same time, there has been a persistent frustration about the dearth of evidence of OL. Gilson et al. (2009: 6; also Rashman et al. 2009) echo Ulrich et al.’s research from over 30 years ago (1993: 59) lamenting that “to date there have been far more thought papers on why learning matters than empirical research”. Taken together, we read the lack of compelling theories and the scarcity of empirics as an opportunity to distil and validate a novel theoretical framework to explain varying intensities of OL. The literature we review for this purpose suggests that three distinct but interrelated dimensions should be analysed together.

Individual Knowledge Acquisition

Individual learning is widely considered to be the foundation of OL. In one of the most rigorous empirical studies of OL, Ron et al. (2006: 1084) conceptualise OL as “individuals, collaborating in team settings [...], process[ing] information relevant to the organization’s performance in a way that leads to systemic changes”. Individual knowledge acquisition thus serves as a necessary but insufficient condition for OL to occur; individual learning does not automatically translate into OL: “Increased individual capacity within one area of the organisation—or one organisation within the broader government—is unlikely to translate into a one-for-one improvement in overall performance and may sometimes be entirely disconnected from it” (Williams 2021: 345; cf. Vallejo and Wehn, 2016: 6).

Scholars have proposed that effective transmission comprises technical platforms for knowledge management (Argote 2012: 20) as well as social processes that are centrally informed by individual identities (Brown et al. 2015: 271). Identities also co-determine individuals’ aspirations to pursue different career paths (Ingram 2023; Tangianu et al. 2025). These, in turn, position individuals differently in terms of their ability to induce organisational change based on individual knowledge. This can occur either hierarchically, from a position of authority, or catalytically, through



social negotiation (Johnson and Thomas 2007: 46). While such social persuasion is more generative, it also carries greater professional and social risks (Loeffler 2021).

Social Practices

In a seminal article, Brown and Duguid (1991: 41) propose a causal relationship between “actual practices [and] the success or failure of organizations”. In addition to individual knowledge acquisition, our theoretical framework therefore needs to account for “staff’s everyday practices” within development bureaucracies (Eyben 2010: 384), focusing on actual routines as opposed to prescribed management interventions designed to produce OL. Catino and Patriotta (2013) provide evidence that such routines can be either conducive or detrimental to OL. Similarly, Barette et al. (2012: 146) demonstrate empirically that “actions such as tolerating mistakes, questioning established rules, and being open to experience and change” contribute directly to what Rashman et al. (2009: 470) term “learn[ing] through collaborative action”.

However, social practices conducive to OL face sector-specific challenges in foreign aid, as the beneficiaries of individual aid projects typically live overseas and cannot provide direct feedback to donor bureaucrats. Meanwhile, bureaucrats are not held accountable by those whom they are supposed to serve but rather by political principals within their own polities (Esser and Janus 2025). This lack of external feedback can facilitate organisation-internal social practices that become self-referential and self-reinforcing. As a result, OL in development organisations often legitimises and perpetuates existing practices rather than facilitating collective reflection and risk-taking (Chambers et al. 2022: 6). At the same time, we should not expect highly idiosyncratic social practices, given that organisational mimicry is a well-known phenomenon in the foreign aid sector (Gulrajani and Swiss 2019).

Organisational Political Embeddedness

The third variable in our theoretical framework accounts for the way in which both individual knowledge acquisition and social practices are embedded in highly politicised environments (Gilson et al. 2009). OL in public organisations often occurs in settings marked by “resistance to change [...] a modest capacity to alter behaviour and organisational structures; a loss of learning continuities [...] because of elections cycles and government successions; [being] often held harshly to account over ‘errors’; [and the] need to be seen by the public as successful” (Gilson et al. 2009: 20). Although internal social interaction is not necessarily regulated, public officials still act politically. At the same time, even the poorest performers in the public sector do not face the same competitive pressures as in the private sector (Williams 2021); existential concerns therefore do not actually trigger learning (cf. Argote 2012). As a result, OL in the public sector in the shape of “organizational self-correction as an adaptive mechanism” (Cuffa and Steil 2019: 113) is always reflective of political objectives. In extreme cases, “processes of knowledge acquisition [in the public sector] may be shaped



by deliberate misrepresentation, opportunistic interest groups or by the emergence of dominant social constructions of problem and context” (Elliott 2009: 162).

Political embeddedness does not render OL in foreign aid agencies solely reactive, in the sense of ‘learning despite politics’. Rather, individuals and groups within organisations actively seek to influence political dynamics engaging in ‘learning through politics’. In both cases, however, political embeddedness conditions OL and therefore needs to be reckoned with theoretically and empirically. We summarise the three dimensions of our framework and their interactions in Fig. 1.

Figure 1 visualises our working hypothesis that the OL intensity is co-determined by three interrelated variables. Importantly, our reading of existing scholarship suggests that the interrelation in this case is not sequential or additive, but multi-correlated. However, as this is the first approach to combine these three dimensions, we can only provide indicative guidance on how each variable interacts with the other two. The empirical component of our research therefore serves a dual purpose: first, to validate the framework’s variables and composition; and second, to reveal which interdimensional dynamics are observable in practice and how they affect OL.

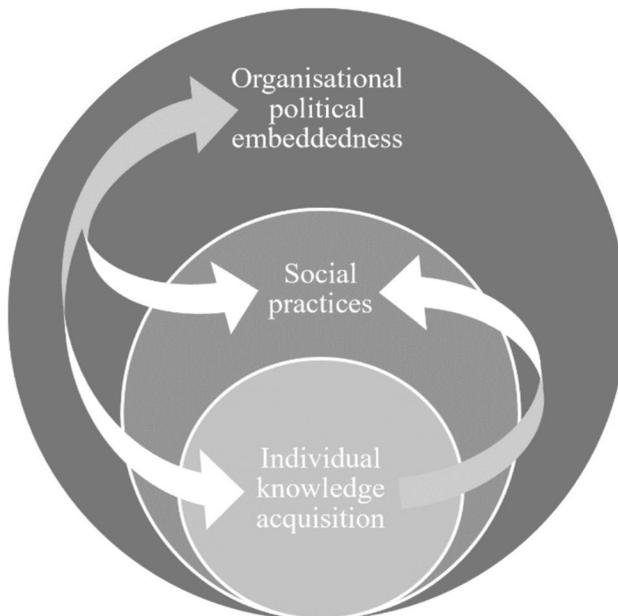


Fig. 1 Theoretical framework for organisational learning in foreign aid agencies. Source: Own representation



Case Selection and Primary Data Collection

We purposely choose three national aid agencies out of a universe of cases comprising 32 members of the OECD DAC, a foreign aid “donors’ club” (Eyben 2013: 80) that defines global norms and standards for ODA (Verschaeve and Orbie 2016). We then randomly sample between 27 and 31 interviewees in each of these three agencies. We select informants in each organisation from a pool of officials working in substantive as well as administrative roles across different hierarchical levels and organisational units, including HQ and field offices where applicable. This approach ensures that our selection is representative of the three agencies, while also yielding findings that are analytically relevant to other OECD DAC countries.

Between August 2022 and March 2023, we conducted 89 interviews at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Republic of Korea’s International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). We justify this choice on the basis of three rationales. First, BMZ, KOICA, and Norad are comparable in that they each functions as the nodal point of a national development administration, translating political priorities for official development assistance (ODA) into programmes and projects. Second, the officials in these organisations are civil servants who respond to bureaucratic incentives and oversee organisations responsible for implementing projects. Third, a recent review classifies all three cases as prioritising autonomy over accountability (Dahlström and Lapuente 2022). Within this sample, Germany and Korea are characterised as “Weberian bureaucracies” with autonomous civil servants operating within rule-based structures, whereas Norway is described as a “liberal bureaucracy” combining autonomous civil servants with “managerial, flexible principles” (Dahlström and Lapuente 2022: 56–57).

While the three organisations are thus comparable, differences in their institutional contexts are reflected by their sizes, policy approaches and local presence. BMZ was founded in 1961 and comprises nearly 1,300 staff members, around ten percent of whom serve as liaison staff at German embassies in partner countries. Its organisational units at headquarters (HQ) have both thematic and regional foci, and they cover “a wide swathe of issues and geographies” (Chen et al. 2023: 50). BMZ is formally responsible for allocating the majority of Germany’s ODA, arguably the world’s largest national aid donor after the de facto suspension of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) but has so far received limited attention from scholars (Esser and Janus 2023).

KOICA was founded in 1991 and employs approximately 500 officials, a third of whom serve in one of the agency’s 46 country offices. Its “global strategy is predominantly bilateral” (Kalinowski and Cho 2012: 243) and characterised by Korean ODA being “integrated into high-level resource diplomacy as an effective political vehicle to smooth Korea’s overseas resource development projects in selected developing countries” (Kalinowski and Cho 2012: 249). For most of KOICA’s history, this approach has resulted in a “focus on state-led and large-scale projects and the emphasis on construction” (Watson 2012: 92).



Founded in 1968, Norad is the smallest of the three organisations in terms of staff numbers. Its 250 officials constitute a “management apparatus for Norwegian development aid and southern policies” (Tvedt 2007: 631) concentrated at HQ in Oslo and working on thematic portfolios. In addition to advising the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and directly supervising multilateral contracts with international organisations and partner countries, Norad also plays a leading role in channelling and overseeing public funding in support of Norway’s “strategic communication regime” (Tvedt 2007: 620) on international development cooperation.

All interviewees in the three organisations received confidentiality assurances and provided their informed consent in writing. Inspired by an exploratory paper (Yanguas 2021), our semi-structured questionnaire consisted of five questions prompting informants to articulate linkages between the concepts of knowledge management, OL, and development effectiveness on the basis concrete practical examples drawn from their own professional experience. Most interviews lasted around 75 minutes, amounting to nearly 120 hours in total. Both authors produced individual transcripts of each interview. These data were subsequently anonymised and depersonalised. A team of research assistants adjudicated and consolidated all anonymised transcripts. Interviewee identifiers (e.g. BMZ 3, Norad 25) were assigned randomly and non-chronologically. The quotes in this paper thus stem from cross-validated data and comply with ethical requirements for expert interviews.

We structured the interview data in ATLAS.ti using a coding architecture informed by our theoretical framework, with child codes accounting for agency-specific characteristics. Our qualitative analysis tested the framework’s validity. It proceeded in two steps. The first step focused on each of the three agencies, seeking to ascertain the extent to which OL is conditioned by the three variables: (1) individual knowledge acquisition, (2) social practices and (3) organisational political embeddedness. The second step compared these organisation-specific configurations to gain insight into how the three variables interactively determine the intensity of OL in each case.

Agency-Specific Findings

BMZ

Without being prompted, 18 out of 31 interviewees at BMZ mention that the German ministry is constituted by generalists who rotate between positions, duty stations and responsibilities every two to three years. Two interviewees even quip that BMZ relies on “universalist dilettantes with broad general knowledge” (BMZ 7; also 9). In such an environment, “organisational learning is not possible without individual learning” (BMZ 7; also 19, 22) since “you learn most on the basis of your own experiences and less on the basis of other people’s experiences” (BMZ 25; also 12, 19, 26). Consequently, formal trainings are considered central (BMZ 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13) as they are expected to “produce” OL by equipping individuals with “collective knowledge that is outward facing” (BMZ 25). In addition, formal training is appreciated for imparting a range of skills, from “the correct procedure to file a request”



to bureaucratic tactics “for prevailing in tussles with enemies in other ministries” (BMZ 30).

Yet, several interviewees at BMZ recognise that participating in trainings is insufficient for OL if organisational units do not comprise experienced colleagues who share their knowledge “on a daily basis” (BMZ 3; also 2, 5, 13, 15, 24, 25), thus acknowledging the need for social practices. Accordingly, some interviewees advocate for “dialogue formats” involving all staff to “learn something as an organisation” (BMZ 18; also 1, 5, 12). One interviewee (BMZ 20; implicitly also 11, 25) refers to such learning as *Hauslernen*, literally learning as an institutional entity. However, *Hauslernen* is reportedly hindered by BMZ’s reliance on hand-over notes intended to pass knowledge on between individuals, an approach that numerous interviewees consider ineffective (BMZ 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 20, 29). Even those who consider job rotation instrumental for individual knowledge acquisition (BMZ 4, 7, 8, 13, 15, 16, 26) recognise transmission losses as an impediment to OL. Musings about “whether the rotation dates could be standardised so that all or many rotate at the same time and that this is harmonised with the training schedule” (BMZ 8; also 10, 13, 16, 18, 27) reveal an assumption that central coordination could facilitate OL. In such a scenario, perfectly synchronised knowledge acquisition and transmission would induce OL. A similar planning fantasy is articulated by interviewees who envisage a hypothetical digital repository providing information on how the ministry’s entire project portfolio relates to its political priorities, a link which is allegedly missing (BMZ 6, 19, 20, 21).

Another recurring theme at BMZ is that its political embeddedness affects OL directly. Structurally, budget increases in recent years have not been matched by additional human resources and have curtailed critical self-reflection: “We have a ministry that has grown tremendously. We are trying to adapt our structures and processes to the amount of funding and also implement the political priorities of the management. [...] There simply hasn’t been enough time for systematic learning” (BMZ 5; also 2, 4, 6, 24). As a result, interviewees at BMZ express scepticism that learning from the past is possible and struggle to articulate how such processes unfold in daily practice (BMZ 4, 10, 12, 21, 23, 26). Instead, “there is always a bit of a ‘politburo approach’ to reporting geared to making successes visible” (BMZ 12).

Similarly, numerous interviewees propose that OL at BMZ is hampered by an expansion of rules and regulations (BMZ 12, 16, 18, 24), which purportedly requires both internal and external stakeholders to focus on compliance rather than allowing them to prioritise learning (BMZ 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 18, 24, 30, 31). One interviewee (BMZ 5) summarises this dynamic as follows: “We are constantly improving [*verbessern*] and making things worse through improvement [*verschlimmbessern*]”. Such ‘improvements’ render the oversight of implementing organisations ineffective, instead producing “a culture of mutual reassurance [in which] everyone has a duty to document that they are fulfilling their tasks diligently. That takes up so much energy, and there is hardly any room for anything else. That is why our knowledge-sharing practice is so guarded. [Learning] just does not happen” (BMZ 12; also 5, 10, 18, 21).

How does OL occur in such an organisational setting characterised by generalist individualism and a collective embrace of politics? Numerous interviewees recall



moments of OL when sharing information and negotiating across departmental boundaries (BMZ 1, 10, 11, 12, 31) and in project-level collaboration with external stakeholders (BMZ 1, 2, 6, 8, 10, 11, 14, 20, 21, 27). Experienced staff members also describe more comprehensive forms of OL during organisational assessments, which BMZ conducts on average every ten years (BMZ 27, 30). The most recent example, mentioned by 13 interviewees, is “BMZ 2030”, an internal reform process overseen by a former deputy minister (*Staatssekretär*) and implemented through a bottom-up process in 2019–2021.

Portrayed by some interviewees as “a gruelling, time-consuming process” (BMZ 21) “reinventing many broken wheels” (BMZ 30) and by others as “the sole significant process of OL” (BMZ 12) and “a major leap forward” (BMZ 4), BMZ 2030 epitomises that OL at BMZ requires a political mandate to enable collective introspection. BMZ 2030 reportedly allowed for comprehensive participation by almost all organisational units (BMZ 4, 11, 13, 21); open-ended discussions in small groups (BMZ 4, 8, 25) and building on internal knowledge as opposed to seeking external inputs (BMZ 3, 5). Tellingly, whereas political leadership was necessary to fashion BMZ 2030 as the “prime example of OL” (BMZ 7), it also turned out to be its downfall. The reform’s main achievements—reducing the number of partner countries and streamlining thematic priorities (BMZ 3, 15, 29, 30)—was partially rolled back by the ministry’s new leadership who did not favour the “BMZ 2030 label” due to its association with the previous minister (BMZ 4, 15, 25, 30).

KOICA

Interviewees at KOICA converge on a self-perception of being perpetual individual learners seeking to catch up with presumed professional standards of the development field, particularly those formulated by the OECD (KOICA 10, 17, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 27, 29). Many articulate a desire for a comprehensive database in the form of a digital archive (KOICA 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 17, 31). Relatedly, several interviewees express confidence in the usefulness of standardisation and manuals (KOICA 4, 5, 6, 7, 17, 26). Formal training tailored to individual levels of experience is equally valued (KOICA 1, 5, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 17, 21, 24, 27, 29). One interviewee explains that “there are roughly 30 to 40 courses” for new staff members, who are expected to complete a series of mandatory and elective modules (KOICA 29; also 5, 8, 15, 24). Topics range from business English and Microsoft Excel to courses on project management, regional studies, and development concepts (KOICA 21, 27, 29). Further, KOICA provides scholarships for staff to pursue postgraduate degrees in Korea and abroad (KOICA 2, 27) and regularly invites external experts as trainers (KOICA 6, 8, 17). However, opinions on training effectiveness vary, with some wishing for greater attention to be paid to individual learning objectives (KOICA 1, 2, 6, 7, 24).

Amid such a focus on individual training and learning, many KOICA interviewees articulate differences between learning individually and organisationally (KOICA 2, 6, 9, 11, 13, 17, 19, 22): “Sharing is at the individual and not at the organisational level. So many steps remain to share information at the organisational level” (KOICA 6). Likewise, knowledge can be so project-specific that peer



transfer is considered impossible, requiring that staff “learn by themselves individually” (KOICA 17). Additionally, a few interviewees stress that individual learning is constrained by “having to follow the guidelines” and “completing everything during a limited time” (KOICA 29; also 3). Nevertheless, several KOICA staff members conceptualise OL as a hypothetical precondition for organisational effectiveness (KOICA 2, 13, 15, 17, 23, 26, 27). Although most struggle to provide concrete examples of OL, one (KOICA 13) suggests that OL could be equated with “determining what did not work”.

Numerous interviewees at KOICA refer to social practices relevant to OL. Peer training (KOICA 8, 9, 10, 15, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, 27) whereby staff with “special areas of knowledge” (KOICA 15) lead internal training seminars (KOICA 22, 23, 24, 27) is mentioned frequently. Several also report participating in voluntary study groups (“clubs”; KOICA 5, 6, 14, 18). Staff thus engage in vibrant social learning, yet they doubt that these practices are sufficient for OL. While “people are very interested in learning and having access to resources, [...] they are not putting it in practice” (KOICA 9; also 7, 13, 21). The same interviewee proposes that such limited “skill-to-practice application” (KOICA 13) is rooted in individual learning motivations being primarily geared towards career advancement rather than organisational development (KOICA 9). Despite elements of an “open organisational management and culture” (KOICA 15), collective reflection rarely informs strategic programming and implementation.

When explaining the disconnect between OL and existing social practices at KOICA, many interviewees point to intra- as well as interorganisational hierarchies (KOICA 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 18, 21, 25, 27, 28). One characterises the agency as “very rigid and conservative” (KOICA 18); another as “too big to make a change” (KOICA 28). Two interviewees illustrate a dual hierarchy of internal and external constraints: “The top people say what should be done, and the lower-ranking ones do not have much say. [...] This is our dilemma; we are not independent; we follow the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and they are very strict and very bureaucratic” (KOICA 15; also 28). Similarly, other interviewees express frustration with strict oversight of KOICA by cabinet-level entities: “Because we are under monitoring, we cannot do this” (KOICA 9; also 2, 4, 11) is one of several quotes illustrating this perceived limitation.

The starkest expression of KOICA’s political embeddedness conditioning OL is a government-wide annual performance assessment that KOICA has had to undergo since 2018 (KOICA 2, 9, 11, 13, 30). Each year, the agency receives “a mark from A to E. If you get an E, then [the KOICA] president will be fired. That is a serious issue” (KOICA 2). KOICA used to receive low marks but subsequently improved its score (KOICA 2). The assessment “is very important for the public image and personal gain” (KOICA 11). However, the same interviewee criticises that since its launch, “everyone at my level feels that we are not really working to improve the livelihoods of beneficiaries, but we are working to make this report better” (KOICA 11).

How does OL occur in such an organisational setting characterised by hierarchically constrained social practices and the primacy of annual performance assessments? Although our data on KOICA contain scant evidence of OL overall, there



are instances of individual entrepreneurialism in defiance of organisational rigidities. The most compelling case details the termination of a KOICA programme — an unusual occurrence in the foreign aid sector where budget growth and fast disbursement tend to be rewarded more than phasing out ineffective interventions. The respective KOICA programme had been launched in response to a senior leader's request but did not comply with ODA standards as it solely benefited Korean—rather than recipient country—citizens:

I tried to push back against it through my direct boss many times, actually every day. But my boss was loyal to [the leadership]. I kept sending messages to my colleagues and to the other department bosses [...]. At the staff level, they all agreed that this cannot be an ODA programme. Even some bosses agreed, but [one of them] objected. So, it was not easy, but [another senior official eventually] listened to the staff opinion and gave me an opportunity [to address senior management]. Ultimately, the programme was stopped. (KOICA 10)

This example demonstrates that OL can be kindled by principled and courageous individuals willing to take professional risks. Even though OL at KOICA could theoretically gain momentum from social practices already present in the organisation, such as staff participating eagerly in peer trainings and study groups, our data indicate that it instead hinges on individuals taking the initiative to effect programmatic change in opposition to hierarchical norms.

Norad

Interviewees at Norad report wide-ranging opportunities for acquiring knowledge individually (Norad 12, 16, 18). This assessment is grounded in positive experiences with existing databases (Norad 8, 11, 14, 18, 19, 20, 24) including learning platforms (Norad 3, 19), effective documentation of country-specific knowledge that facilitate staff rotation (Norad 3, 10, 11, 18, 24) as well as on-boarding (Norad 3, 8, 18, 19, 20). Several staff suggest that “systematising knowledge” (Norad 1, 3, 7, 9, 12, 13, 17, 19) would improve OL further, yet none articulate concrete formats. While some express reservations about the efficacy of technological solutions in general (Norad 19, 20, 27), the majority is confident that digital formats hold promise for individual knowledge acquisition. Commenting on the organisational level, however, most interviewees highlight the centrality of social practices for OL rather than the use of technological platforms.

At Norad, social practices described as conducive to OL are characterised by “a lot of independence and trust” (Norad 6) and comprise “feedback loops on whatever positive or negative experience you have gained [...] to improve outcomes and processes” (Norad 24; also 2, 12, 13). Such practices are seen to be enabled by flat hierarchies: “I hold conversations, and other people outside the hierarchy are involved – not by consensus, but at least by several voices being conferred with. That is just generally the way we do things” (Norad 2; also 11, 17, 22, 24). Additionally, a “Speakers’ Corner” is an institutionalised practice to find “the best way to solve



a problem, bring[ing] it down to a practical level” (Norad 11; also 15). Another recurrent format receiving credit for OL is “demo days” for portfolio management where “[e]veryone can come and ask questions. It feels very participatory. This goes beyond being informed” (Norad 18; also 14). Interviewees also recognise diverse team composition as facilitating OL: “Our skillsets are complementary: [...] the knowledge naturally comes out in working together, [...] very naturally” (Norad 8).

Unsanctioned negotiations among staff about organisational objectives are reportedly routine. Interviewees frequently refer to internal discussions anchored in a recognition of increasing budgets amid limited human resources as a challenge (Norad 6, 13, 21, 22), requiring Norad “to do more with less” (Norad 22). Such routinised deliberations have produced tacit agreement that “OL is about doing aid better”, which demands a prioritisation of quality over quantity (Norad 17; also 14, 25, 27) and a willingness to learn collectively from failure: “[Y]ou look at what you have done before and if you have done it: why didn’t it work?” (Norad 19; also 3, 4, 5, 20, 25). Adamant that “we are not effective if we do the same thing over and over again” (Norad 14), these interviewees offer illustrations that OL centrally includes learning from failure: “Lots of mistakes have been made before. There is a clear understanding that we need to learn from each other and other organisations and use that to get the most out of the limited funds that we have [...]. Everyone is always encouraged to learn, not just to disburse funds” (Norad 2).

Similar negotiations have taken place within the organisation to determine an acceptable level of risk, eventually shifting Norad’s programming towards more of a risk-embracing approach:

We would apply the rules in the same strict way in assessing small and big projects, it was the same workload whether it is a small or a big project. [...] Now, this has changed. We still have solid procedures, but we try to look at relevance and risk. [...] We prioritise where we should put our time. This change is a result of organisational learning, and it goes toward development effectiveness. We are managing more money, we have less people, and we need to be more effective. (Norad 13)

A recent organisation-wide reform introducing thematic portfolio-based teams provides another example of critically engaging with changing organisational structures. Though several interviewees doubt the viability of the reform (Norad 5, 8, 10, 15), others (Norad 2, 3, 11, 13, 18, 21, 26) credit it with fostering—even constituting—OL as such: “A thematic area is now defined as a portfolio, and we draw different streams of knowledge together” (Norad 3). Such perspectives on internal social practices of learning also extend to external actors. Accordingly, interviewees repeatedly recall leveraging “knowledge in networks, in collective settings” and thus “apply[ing] knowledge for ourselves and learning with others” (Norad 26): “We go through a lot of reports from other donors, too. We re-use knowledge from a lot of different sources, both in Norad and among partners” (Norad 23; also 5, 10, 13, 17).

Taken together, these statements corroborate the characterisation of Norad by three interviewees as “a bureaucracy, but not a bureaucratic organisation” (Norad 6; also 8, 12).□□ Such framing is remarkable since Norad is, of course, part of a national institutional architecture and as such not immune to political dynamics:



“There are so many layers of political priorities or political tensions!” (Norad 14). Two interviewees separately mention “cancelled” programmes that “also had positive effects, but they are being neglected. It is a political decision” (Norad 10; also Norad 6). Another complains, “Norwegian aid is so driven by politics! [...] Every new minister wants to put their mark on the aid budget and wants to come with their thematic baby. They want to align with their priorities. This is really dysfunctional” (Norad 4). Norad’s political embeddedness is thus seen to interfere with its organisational purpose: “That is the privilege of the politicians, but it jeopardises long-term development effectiveness” (Norad 6).

In response, Norad staff converge on keeping an arms-length relationship with political principals to uphold a long-term focus on development effectiveness, shielded from political interference. In the short term, “communication is a priority” (Norad 2), and some Norad reports are described as “more for the public and less for our system” (Norad 2), to the point where another interviewee refers to one of these reports as “the glossy ‘Look what we have done report’, very American” (Norad 9). In the long term, however, staff are determined to “justify our choices on the basis of knowledge, not political steering” (Norad 1, also Norad 7, 24).

How does OL occur in such an organisational setting characterised by unsanctioned negotiations about how best to support development processes despite politicisation? Our data on Norad are rich in examples of OL rooted in both social practices of collective introspection and individual entrepreneurialism. A mid-career staff member (Norad 24) offers two compelling illustrations of how OL at Norad unfolds. In the first instance, Norad was purportedly able to learn how to introduce a new financial instrument through a combination of document reviews, fact-finding missions to other donor agencies, and a “rigorous analysis” of the political economy of reform in other countries, leading to a multi-fold increase in the instrument’s impact. The interviewee’s second vignette outlines yet again the social practice of reviewing and terminating ineffective projects as an example of OL:

I have an example of a programme that has been around for twenty years. [...] I wanted to get to know it better before committing funding to a new phase. I wanted to know its nuts and bolts before recommending continuation. [...] Over the course of the next six to eight months, I had a lot of dealings with [internal and external stakeholders]. I read all the documentation and talked to others about similar programmes. In the course of these eight months, I had the feeling that not everything was as it should be. It was during a phone call with an ex-employee that I understood that the programme is poorly administered at the top level: what it looks like on the outside does not reflect the inside. Then I had to change gears, and I spent two months perusing the evaluation reports. I eventually informed [the other funders]. Last week, I learned that the other [funders] resigned from the programme. It will most likely be discontinued. (Norad 24)

These two vignettes illustrate that OL at Norad is driven by collective efforts to gather and learn from evidence as well as by individual entrepreneurship, which is enabled rather than constrained by organisational structures. Comparing Norad’s OL to the other two cases, we observe divergences in both dimensions. Whereas BMZ’s



period of shared reflection was politically mandated and of limited duration, social practices at Norad have institutionalised negotiation around organisational objectives as a professional routine. And while in the case of KOICA, micro-level agency driving individual knowledge acquisition occurs despite organisational rigidities, such initiative-taking at Norad is aided by flat hierarchies and shared commitment to evidence-based decision-making.

Comparative Findings

All three cases confirm individual knowledge acquisition as a necessary variable for OL but also highlight its insufficiency. Individual knowledge does not translate cumulatively into OL. Several examples of effective individual entrepreneurialism notwithstanding, our data from two “Weberian” bureaucracies, Germany and Korea, corroborate a well-known structural limitation: for individuals to induce organisational change, they either need to occupy “a position of considerable influence” or “act as a ‘change agent’ and catalyse organisational learning from a junior position” (Johnson and Thomas 2007: 46), accepting that such actions can jeopardise one’s career advancement.

Crucially, different career paths and professional identities emerge as indirect but powerful determinants of OL within the individual dimension of our theoretical framework. Whereas some staff at BMZ may join the ministry as development professionals, others are could be attracted by civil service benefits. According to our data, compliance with short-term political priorities constitutes an overriding duty at BMZ. The typical career path at KOICA, too, is predicated on a generalist profile; specialists have less job security and limited prospects for promotion. In contrast to BMZ, however, generalists at KOICA are more likely to be promoted based on cumulative substantive expertise. At Norad, career paths are curiously non-linear; several interviewees describe moving between leadership and desk positions based on personal preferences, personal circumstances, and changing organisational needs. As a result, substantive expertise at Norad appears to be widespread and not correlated to any seniority level or professional profile.

Differently structured careers and individual professional identities produce interaction effects with our second variable, social practices, by facilitating group convergence on organisational objectives. The latter is more likely to occur in organisations where social practices conducive to OL are normalised. This insight is best exemplified by collective reckoning with failure and conforms earlier research on OL by Ron et al. (2006) stressing the importance of balancing unbiased review and frank judgement. It also echoes Brown and Duguid’s (1991: 53) precondition for OL to avoid any “restrictive influence of the existing canonical view”. Our theoretical framework helps conceive of OL not as a discrete, measurable output but as an emergent organisational quality. Our empirical findings illustrate that open-ended reflection on mistakes can be a typical indicator of vibrant OL in foreign aid agencies.

At Norad, frank conversations about failed projects and programmes are routine. In contrast, interviewees at KOICA and BMZ rarely if ever mention instances when



failure was appraised collectively and openly. If such reviews occur, then they form part of hierarchically mandated reforms. Importantly, individuals in both organisations recognise such efforts as time-intensive but conducive to OL. However, the “Weberian” features of Germany’s and Korea’s bureaucracies seem detrimental in this context as rule compliance and avoidance of accountability amid a “blame culture” (Catino and Patriotta 2013: 438) are prioritised over perspective-taking and constructive dissent, which are more likely to occur in “liberal” administrative settings such as Norway’s (Dahlström and Lapuente 2022: 56–57).

Even though our empirics confirm the analytical value of differentiating between “Weberian” and “liberal” bureaucracies, our research demonstrates that a dichotomous reading of our data would be misguided. None of the three agencies exhibits “church-like dynamics producing ‘official branded knowledge’” (Ellerman 1999), while all cases show that OL is precisely *not* characterised by neatly delineated “cycles of action and reflection” (Johnson and Thomas 2007: 41). Rather, OL is conditioned by heterogeneous and ubiquitous social practices within each organisation. Similarly, our research confirms that organisational size per se does not condition differences in OL (Walker et al. 2024). Instead, our data contain evidence of managerially mandated organisational reform deemed effective for OL in the largest as well as in the smallest bureaucracy in our sample. Likewise, individual initiative fostering OL is evident across the three organisations but conditioned differently due to variation in social practices and organisational political embeddedness, as illustrated by our theoretical framework.

Corroborating research by Barette et al. (2012), our third variable, political embeddedness, holds further explanatory power. Especially politicisation of organisational objectives impedes OL, and none of the three agencies are seen to be learning *because* of such politicisation. Rather, they learn *despite* and *through* politics. Although political embeddedness acts primarily as a constraint to OL, it also shapes OL processes as a function of organisational norms. At BMZ, short-termism amid frequently changing ministerial priorities is accepted as a fundamental condition. We detect a comparable dynamic at KOICA where staff members feel wedged between ministerial hierarchies and beholden to contributing to the agency’s score in the annual performance assessment as the ultimate measure of success. In both cases, OL occurs only when it is either initiated hierarchically or when individuals take on personal risks. In contrast, numerous interviewees at Norad provide evidence of ‘learning through politics’ by critically engaging with politicisation and pushing back against it. This organisational consensus stems from social practices at Norad that facilitate staff convergence on the view that the agency’s ultimate objective is to achieve development effectiveness, which requires evidence-based programming fostered by open-ended discussions about what works and what does not.

Conclusion

We have applied a novel theoretical framework to an original dataset comprising interviews with nearly one hundred randomly selected bureaucrats in three OECD DAC member states to explain OL in the foreign aid sector. Our research objectives



have been, first, to validate the framework's variables and, second, to reveal how interactions between individual knowledge acquisition, social practices, and organisational political embeddedness affect OL in the three organisations. Our comparative analysis confirms that agency-specific interactions between these three variables account for varying intensities of OL across the three organisations, with social practices playing a pivotal role in OL in, and possibly also beyond, foreign aid.

All our cases contain evidence of individual learning and awareness of organisational political embeddedness; however, we observe distinct social practices in the three organisations. Norad—the agency where OL is most prevalent—is the only case in our sample exhibiting social practices directly conducive to OL. These practices comprise unsanctioned negotiations of organisational objectives among staff and a consensus to prioritise evidence and terminate failed projects despite political pressures to spend more, faster.

Social practices cannot be engineered. For instance, the effectiveness of technical platforms to enhance knowledge management—a typical managerialist 'best practice'—depends on their integration into organisational routines. In contrast, vignettes from KOICA and Norad provide tangible illustrations of OL in the process of discontinuation of ineffective projects and evidence-based allocation of public funds. Our analysis suggests that organisational leaders can encourage collective reflection on organisational rigidities and even failures, but this only results in OL when it catalyses shared commitment to organisational change among staff who withstand political headwinds. Those seeking to facilitate OL in foreign aid agencies therefore need to eschew references to vacuous 'best practices' and instead create social space for unsanctioned negotiations that allow for collective learning how to do less, better.

Our findings have several implications for research on OL in both national and international bureaucracies. In the theoretical realm, our research demonstrates the potential of studying OL empirically through theory that connects previously disjointed scholarly literatures. Although each of the three variables derived from previous analyses of OL explains certain aspects of OL, they are neither additive nor sequential; only a focus on their interactions renders deeper comprehension of varying intensities of OL. We have thus shown that our novel framework is appropriate to capture agency-specific OL dynamics in the foreign aid sector. On this evidentiary basis, we are confident that our approach can be applied more widely. Resulting research should be wary of interpreting organisations bluntly in 'cultural' terms. Our cases indicate that we need to conceive of organisational cultures more granularly as conglomerations of social practices (Cicmil and Gaggiotti 2014) that co-determine, but are also conditioned by, individual knowledge acquisition and political embeddedness. We are keen to see our analytical approach to studying OL being extended beyond the OECD DAC, as well as beyond international development administration.

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Declarations

Conflict of interests On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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