

# The Governmental Learning Spiral

A concept to organize governmental learning around complex governance challenges\*

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**5 Introduction**

**6 The concept of the Governmental Learning Spiral**

7 Before the learning process

8 During the learning process

9 After the learning process

**10 Case Study: Workshop on Evaluative Lessons  
for Public Sector Reform in Africa**

11 Before the workshop

12 During the workshop

14 After the workshop

**14 Conclusion and outlook**

## Executive Summary

Are our governments organized in the right way and are they able to learn and apply lessons to solve the major governance challenges of our time? Common wisdom suggests that governments repeatedly make the same mistakes and do not learn from the past. At the same time, the stakes are getting higher. Governance challenges like climate change, financial crises and fragile states are growing more complex as is the knowledge required to solve them. There is also an increasing number of different stakeholders that need to be involved. Therefore, governments need to rethink the way they are organized to learn from experiences and organize the process to solve these challenges. To address this problem we have developed the concept of the Governmental Learning Spiral over the last ten years and applied it at the World Bank and with a number of governments all over the world. The concept helps governments and international organizations organize multi-stakeholder learning processes in a targeted and sustainable way by analyzing the problem, selecting the relevant stakeholders, and facilitating the process towards better solutions across governments.

## Introduction

The 21st century is characterized by challenges that go beyond the problem solving capabilities of individuals, organizations, and single governments. Fukushima, the recent financial crises, migration flows, and fragile states are examples of such complex problems.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, governments also face the rapid development of new technologies, the growing diversity of political viewpoints and the growing polarization of politics. As a result, the analysis of challenges and the process to find solutions and alternatives can become short-sighted, lack the input from key stakeholders, and fail to be implemented.

Facing these local and global governance challenges, democratic governments around the world must find better ways to learn how to best provide public goods and services to their citizens—and thus reduce poverty, accelerate economic growth, and improve sustainable development. Common wisdom and public opinion holds that governments do not learn from the past and make the same mistakes. However, there is a century old tradition of pedagogical and organizational learning theories on the learning capacity of individuals and governments. Practitioners and scholars also agree that governments in both developed and developing countries are able and willing to learn from their past and from other countries' experiences if they develop the capacity to do so.<sup>2</sup> More attention is being paid to the role of change agents and the way their capacity can best be supported.<sup>3</sup>

However, little is known about how governments learn best or what exactly makes them change their behavior in a targeted way to solve the governance challenges they face. Governments consist of thousands of state officials and numerous institutional units—the executive branch, parliaments, the judiciary, and the civil service—which function under unique political conditions and environments. Experience has shown that they learn differently than individuals and organizations do. Governmental learning is complex and hard to conceptualize since it must address many cultural, political, religious, and social particularities; psychological barriers; and practical constraints

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1. Snowden, D.J. Boone, M. "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making". Harvard Business Review, November 2007, pp. 69-76.

2. Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2005. Paris. <<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/11/41/34428351.pdf>>.

3. Otoo, Samuel/Agapitova, Natalia/Behrens, Joy (2009): The Capacity Development Results Framework—A Strategic and Results-Oriented Approach to Learning for Capacity Development, World Bank Institute, The World Bank, Washington, DC, <[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTCDRC/Resources/CDRF\\_Paper.pdf?resourceurlname=CDRF\\_Paper.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTCDRC/Resources/CDRF_Paper.pdf?resourceurlname=CDRF_Paper.pdf)>.

that might hinder or even prevent learning at all. Increasingly it involves not only governmental actors since the current challenges of our time cannot be solved by elected officials and public servants alone anymore. Many other stakeholders need to be involved in the process of solving governance challenges without losing sight of democratic accountability. While governmental learning appears difficult to understand and to initiate, there are encouraging empirical examples and theoretical concepts that suggest otherwise.

This paper introduces the Governmental Learning Spiral, a concept for organizing effective learning processes for governments and their stakeholders. It presents the concept and shows its application at a workshop on public sector reform in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2008. The concept rests on the assumption that we need to organize our learning processes around the governance challenges we are facing, not along existing organizational structures. Given the increasing complexity of those challenges we need to understand that the knowledge we create to address them is never final and needs to be updated continuously by all the stakeholders involved.

The concept of Governmental Learning Spiral is based on an analysis of past and current experiences of how governments learn, the particular knowledge they learn, and how knowledge gets created and transferred. It takes into account particularities of different governmental models; contemporary theories of change and knowledge management; and individual, organizational, and governmental learning approaches.<sup>4</sup> The Governmental Learning Spiral has been developed over the past decade through an ongoing dialectical process, where an original theory-based concept was applied in practice, reviewed, and subsequently reapplied in subsequent events. Therefore, it was repeated on an ongoing basis in numerous events held in developed and developing countries all over the world, with thousands of participants from all levels of governments, international, and nongovernmental organizations.

### **The concept of the Governmental Learning Spiral**

Any discussion about governmental learning must clarify who learns, what is learned, and how it is learned. Without a deep understanding of the governance challenge at hand, a stakeholder analysis of who needs to be involved to address it, and how the process should be structured to look for solutions, governmental learning will most likely fail. The Governmental Learning Spiral therefore addresses these central

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4. See Blindenbacher, Raoul, and B. Nashat (Collaborator): 2010, particularly chapter two and three for a detailed explanation of the Governmental Learning Spiral's analytical and theoretical foundations.

questions during its three main parts, before, during, and after a learning process. The concept structures learning processes around the specific governance challenge at hand, the analysis of the kind of knowledge governments needs to address it, as well as the particular political and institutional environment, which determines the selection of the learning actors. It requires that the participants represent different perspectives regarding content and organizations and play a precisely defined role as both knowledge holders and knowledge seekers. In short, it tries to create the enabling conditions for generating a productive exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge around a specific governance challenge and then facilitate the process towards possible solutions.

A major characteristic of this type of governmental learning process is the planning and facilitation by a learning broker who oversees all aspects of the organization. This includes the logistics, the content preparation, the drafting and carrying through of the agenda, the moderation of the learning sessions, and the follow-up activities. The learning broker designs and facilitates the learning process according to the specific governance challenge at hand.

The Governmental Learning Spiral concept consists of an eight-stage template. In this template the stages are aligned in a chronological order and split into three distinct sequences for a particular learning activity.

### Before the learning process

The **conceptualization, triangulation, and accommodation** stages are the preparatory stages. During these stages, the specific governance challenge is defined, the knowledge is framed, the selection and invitation of the participants is completed, and a sense of trust between the learning actors and the event facilitator and between participants and the learning process is established. **Conceptualization and triangulation** stages require the learning broker to step back and analyze the problem before the planning process begins. Most challenges in current governance areas involve more than one level of government, the private sector, and civil society. The key is to identify the most relevant perspectives surrounding the problem and to frame the existing knowledge and experience around it in a straightforward way (content triangulation). In addition to triangulating the problem and the relevant perspectives and experiences, the selection of the participants is a key step. They should be selected with the goal to improve the chance for finding and implementing possible solutions

in mind given the wide range of governmental and nongovernmental institutions and the complex political economies of policy reform.<sup>5</sup> To build up a power structure that allows the implementation of the solutions into practice, each governmental body should be represented by at least one individual (stakeholder triangulation). These institutional stakeholders, together with the representatives of a particular perspective, are considered the core learning actors. The **accommodation** stage is about creating a safe learning space or learning situation. This stage includes building trust between the participants and with the learning brokers, defining communication rules for the learning process, such as equality, reciprocity, openness, and impartiality; and assuring physical security and logistical comfort.

### During the learning process

The following four stages are didactical steps and are applied during the learning event itself. The **internalization, externalization, re-conceptualization, and transformation** stages represent the core of the didactical procedures, where the learning actors review and adapt the new knowledge according to their personal and organizational needs. The learning actors change their individual and organizational thinking and behavior in a theory-guided inter- and intrapersonal process. The first of these stages is the **internalization stage**. By being invited to reflect on their own experiences, the learning actors get an opportunity to position themselves to the governance challenge presented to them in combination with the state-of-the-art experiences and perspectives (knowledge frame). It is crucially important that the participants have sufficient time to reflect on their everyday work with regard to this challenge. In the **externalization stage**, these self-reflections are shared among the other actors involved in the learning process. The learning actors are invited to engage with the other participants in an active dialogue in which they openly share their individual reflections. The learning broker encourages them to share not only their good, but also their bad individual and organizational experiences with the challenge at hand in an open and transparent way. In the **re-conceptualization stage**, the learning broker has to facilitate and summarize the individual reflections made in the previous stage and identify how they overlap with the way the challenge had been framed

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5. World Bank (2008): "The Political Economy of Policy Reform: Issues and Implications for Policy Dialogue and Development Operations", 2008, Social Development Department, Report No. – 44288-GLB, The World Bank, Washington, DC, <[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTSOCIALDEV/Resources/The\\_Political\\_Economy\\_of\\_Policy\\_Reform\\_Issues\\_and\\_Implications\\_for\\_Policy\\_Dialogue\\_and\\_Development\\_Operations.pdf?resourceurlname=The\\_Political\\_Economy\\_of\\_Policy\\_Reform\\_Issues\\_and\\_Implications\\_for\\_Policy\\_Dialogue\\_and\\_Development\\_Operations.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTSOCIALDEV/Resources/The_Political_Economy_of_Policy_Reform_Issues_and_Implications_for_Policy_Dialogue_and_Development_Operations.pdf?resourceurlname=The_Political_Economy_of_Policy_Reform_Issues_and_Implications_for_Policy_Dialogue_and_Development_Operations.pdf)>.



at the outset of the process (also called “knowledge frame”). If a majority of the collected individual reflections differ from the way the challenge had been analyzed and presented, it has to be re-framed in a way that reflects the participant perspectives. This new way of looking at the challenge (knowledge frame) incorporates the new insights and trends raised in the previous stages in an inductive process. In the **transformation stage**, the reframed state-of-the-art knowledge and experience on the governance challenge gets translated into the contextual circumstances of the learning actors in a deductive process. In this stage the individual actors transform their newly gained knowledge into the context of their particular governmental and political environment. This requires the development of practical measures that are adapted to the existing governmental structures and decision-making processes.

### After the learning process

The follow-up to the learning process is organized in the final **configuration** stage, where the newly reframed knowledge about a governance challenge is made available and accessible to everybody involved in the learning activity as well as to a wider audience for further feedback. This new knowledge can serve as the basis for the next spin of the Governmental Learning Spiral, as well as a feedback loop in the context of a new learning system.

Given that governance challenges such as fragile states or financial crises are not static events, the process of learning about them and working towards solutions has to be ongoing as well. This iterative procedure, where knowledge around a governance challenge is constantly reviewed, renewed, and transformed into political action in a real-time process can be illustrated as a spiral. In a figurative way, each of the eight stages of the learning process is bound together by a spin, which ends with the last configuration stage and restarts the next spin with the consecutive first stage.

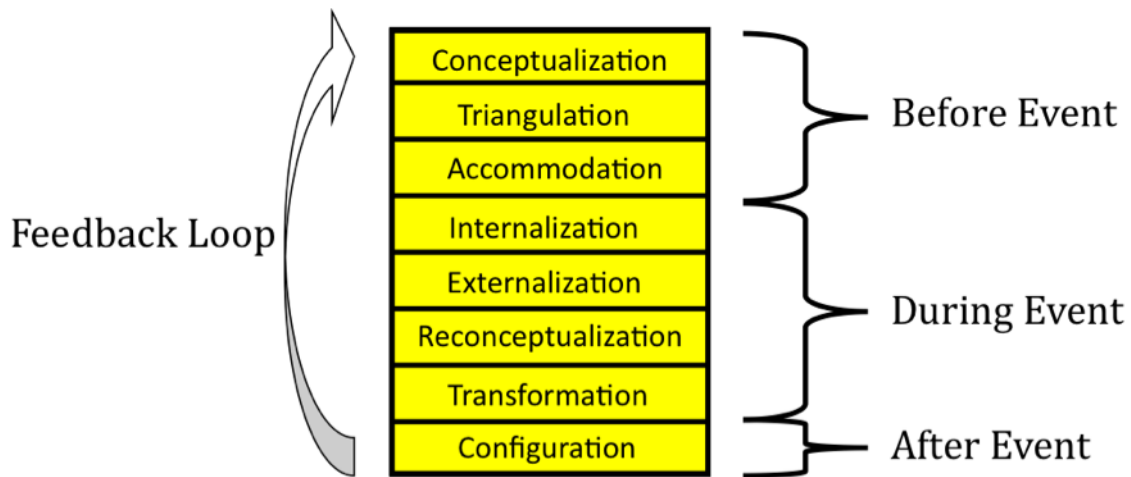


Figure 1: The eight stages of the Governmental Learning Spiral

These eight stages create the conditions to encourage behavioral change in governmental institutions, their members, and representatives from related nongovernmental organizations and interest groups around a specific challenge. The Governmental Learning Spiral serves as a practical guideline to organize governmental learning processes. It offers general directions on designing a learning process and should therefore be applicable to any form and type of governmental learning activity around specific governance challenges.

### **Case Study: Workshop on Evaluative Lessons for Public Sector Reform in Africa**

Over the course of the last ten years, the Governmental Learning Spiral has been applied to many learning processes. Some of these processes have been short-term such as a single workshop, while others have taken place over the course of several years and have resulted in networks that still exist. The following example gives quick overview of how a short-term learning process has applied the concept with evaluation-based knowledge.

The workshop “Lessons of a Decade of Public Sector Reform, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on December 9–10, 2008” was jointly organized by the Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank (IEG), the Africa Region Public Sector Reform and Capacity Building Unit (AFTPR) of the World Bank, the PREM Public Sector Governance Unit (PRMPS) of the Bank, and the World Bank Institute and was based

on four IEG evaluations on public sector reform, decentralization, financial management, and capacity building.<sup>6</sup> This workshop focused on bringing together all the available knowledge and experience on how to improve public sector effectiveness and efficiency, a priority item on the reform agenda of most African countries.

### Before the workshop

Sixty participants from eight African countries were invited based on their close involvement in designing and implementing World Bank-supported public sector reform projects. Several development partners and regional organization representatives with strong interest in the subject were also asked to attend (**stakeholder triangulation**). To take into account the complexity of public sector reform in multilevel governmental systems and to ensure that the relevant perspectives were considered, the invited participants represented all major spheres in the national and sub-national levels, as well as policy makers and civil servants. In addition to this range of existing practical experiences, the workshop attempted to bring together the lessons learned from four IEG evaluation reports related to the same overarching challenge of public sector reform. The reports thus presented the basis for framing the existing knowledge around this challenge. This approach differed from conventional dissemination procedures with a much stronger focus on the involvement of colleagues from other World Bank units and governmental and international stakeholders (part of the *stakeholder triangulation*). It also shifted the focus from disseminating single evaluation studies towards a thematic learning approach around specific challenges.

The key findings of the four evaluation reports were summarized and sent to the workshop participants ahead of the workshop and they were given a chance to react and validate these findings. The workshop agenda was structured around the two key lessons that emerged as a result: *effective public sector reform has to be based on coherent and country-owned strategies*; and *appropriate capacities for their implementation have to be systematically strengthened* (**conceptualization and triangulation stages**). To ensure the **accommodation** and make the learning process transparent and accessible, a concept note was edited to describe the purpose, objectives, structure, and rules of the workshop.<sup>7</sup>

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6. The IEG reports included were: *Decentralization in Client Countries: An Evaluation of World Bank Support, 1997-2007*; *Public Sector Reform: What Works and Why?*; *Country Financial Accountability Assessments and Country Procurement Assessment Reports: How Effective Are World Bank Fiduciary Diagnostics?*; and *Capacity Building in Africa* (all reports are available for download at <<http://www.worldbank.org/ieg/publicsector/>>).

7. The overarching message in this document was that all participants have equal treatment during the



Photo I: (From right to left) Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister of Ethiopia; Kenichi Ohashi, World Bank Country Director to Ethiopia; and Anand Rajaram, World Bank Regional Manager, Sub-Saharan and North African Region.



Photo II: Roundtable with 60 participants.

## During the workshop

During the first part of the workshop, IEG representatives re-introduced the key findings of the reports thereby framing the existing knowledge around the evaluation

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workshop. All participants were seated around a closed rectangle with no podium and no “head” of the table. In an additional guidance note, the methodologies of the workshop as well as the specific roles of the different participants were explained. Heavy emphasis was given to the description of the communication rules, which bound all participants equally. Among them were the Chatham House Rules, which limit the exchange of information with the outside world (for further information see <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/>). Other rules were applied to the regulation of the formal exchange, such as five-minute speaking time limits and the prohibition of PowerPoint® presentations.

report results. In order to encourage all participants to position themselves to the way public sector reform effectiveness had been presented in the reports, the learning brokers invited three participants from different countries to reflect and respond to these lessons in light of their respective country experience (triangulation of perspectives). The statements were spontaneous and informal in style and reflected the personal opinion of the speakers. The individual reflections opened a facilitated dialogue among all the other participants, who were invited to reflect and share their individual experiences in light of the lessons and the way they had been framed (**internalization stage**). Responding to the different experiences voiced by the participants in the first session, the learning brokers split the plenary into two parallel breakout groups to create a more intimate space that would allow participants to share their individual reflections among their peers (**externalization in break out groups**). The groups were formed along French- and English-speaking participants to ease communication. Based on the shared country experiences in the plenary session, the emphasis in the break-out groups was on developing new insights and practices about effective and country-owned public sector reform strategies and about effective capacity building. The breakout group participant facilitators reported their observations to the plenary about new patterns and insights raised in the two groups with regard to country-owned public sector reform strategies and capacity building. These observations were complemented by the individual lessons learned that one country and three donor representatives shared with the plenary. In the following discussion a modified understanding of effective public sector reform projects was adopted. Thereby the original results of the evaluation findings became redefined and updated to the latest course of action and thus more relevant to the practitioners present (**re-conceptualization of the evaluation knowledge**).<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the final plenary session was to discuss the impact of the new findings on future public sector reform projects. For this purpose the workshop participants and World Bank staff drafted an action plan under which all participants committed themselves to taking concrete measures and to applying their new insights to improving the effectiveness of the public sector in their particular countries (**transformation stage**).<sup>9</sup>

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8. You can find more information on this case study in chapter 8 of “The Black Box of Governmental Learning” <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVTLRN/Resources/chap8.pdf>>.

9. See Workshop Findings: “Lessons of a Decade of Public Sector Reform: Voices of African Client Stakeholders”: <[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTOED/Resources/addis\\_findings\\_opt1.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTOED/Resources/addis_findings_opt1.pdf)>.

## After the workshop

For the purpose of configuring the newly reframed knowledge on public sector reform and its application, the workshop results and the action plan were summarized in a *Workshop Findings* report.<sup>10</sup> The document reflects all relevant information about the event in an easily accessible and readable manner (**configuration stage**). It represents a stakeholder update to the existing evaluation reports and was therefore added as appendix to IEG's website on public sector reform. Furthermore, the findings were publicly disseminated at a press conference and through numerous interviews organized by IEG, and with the participation of prominent workshop participants. Soon after the workshop, an operational unit of the World Bank requested that IEG present the evaluation reports as well as the workshop results at a learning event held in the Middle East and North Africa Region. This showed that a new figurative spin of the Governmental Learning Spiral was set in motion.

It is important to keep in mind that a single workshop using the Governmental Learning Spiral as a structure cannot always fulfill all the goals of the concept. However, moving away from the dissemination of single evaluation studies to a more thematic learning approach around the governance challenge of public sector reform is a good illustration of how to introduce the governmental learning even in single workshop formats. One has to keep in mind that these evaluations were not only critical of the World Bank itself but also on the performance of the countries involved and the excellent feedback and the follow up to the workshop point to the success of the concept. The reflections on the workshop approach and its impact by a high-level government official from Ethiopia which were published in the book itself prove this point.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion and outlook

The Governmental Learning Spiral is a concept that helps governments and international organizations structure multi-stakeholder learning processes for results in a targeted and sustainable way by analyzing the problem, selecting the relevant stakeholders, and facilitating the process towards better solutions across governments. There are three intended effects that have been validated in the numerous applications over the last decade:

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10. See above.

11. See pages 141-43 in chapter 8 of the book, <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVTLRN/Resources/chap8.pdf>>.

- **Implementation of action plans on governance challenges:** The application of the concept increases the awareness of the combination of theory and practice, or global knowledge and experiences among the participants and its translation into each of the individual and organizational local contexts. When the most important learning actors around a governance challenge have been included in the learning process and their awareness of the normative and situative knowledge has been raised, the chances for implementing better solutions in their governments increase.<sup>12</sup>
- **Re-evaluation and updating of knowledge:** The participants and their governments benefit from updated knowledge on a governance challenge that combines and updates the global knowledge with local experiences. For governments, the constant updating of knowledge through learning processes offers the chance to reflect and evaluate the organizations' own state-of-the-art knowledge and to adapt organizational policies and strategies towards it accordingly.<sup>13</sup>
- **The creation of networks:** The Governmental Learning Spiral's application increases the connection and awareness of international network opportunities among learning actors. The outcome has often been a network of learning actors who keep engaging in sustainable knowledge exchanges around our biggest governance challenges.<sup>14</sup>

For facilitating development organizations – such as the World Bank – the constant updating of their own state of assumptions and experiences regarding a specific challenge through governmental learning events offers the chance to evaluate, reflect, and adapt organizational policies and strategies accordingly. It requires the understanding that written reports are the beginning of a new learning process rather than the end of an old one. However, for a successful feedback loop between theory and practice, or global knowledge and local experiences, the Governmental Learning Spiral needs to be institutionalized as an organizational approach. International organizations and governments have to rethink the way they are structured, involve different

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12. See for example the results of the Multiyear Global Program Roundtables on Federalism in chapter 6 of the book, <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVTLRN/Resources/chap6.pdf>>.

13. See for example the impact reports by selected high-level participants after one or more years which show how the application of the concept triggered reflections, learning and behavioral and organizational change over a period of time on pages 107, 119-21, and 130-32 of the book. <[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVTLRN/Resources/black\\_box\\_full.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVTLRN/Resources/black_box_full.pdf)>.

14. See for example the ongoing exchanges and global knowledge network exchanges that were initiated by the IEG workshop on Gender in Pretoria, Gender <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/GENDEREXT/Resources/GenderEquality.pdf>>.

stakeholders within their knowledge production, and become more flexible in creating national and international networks around specific governance challenges.<sup>15</sup>

The last decade has shown that the concept of the Governmental Learning Spiral can help organize the problem-solving and governmental learning process around key governance challenges. It is however work in progress and it has to be adapted to changes and new findings in practice and research of governmental learning. Inevitably, it will further evolve during future application and depending on changes and new findings in practice and research and as governments continue to learn. Practitioners and academics are therefore invited to engage in a dialogue on how to best organize the process to help governments address the biggest governance challenges of our times together.

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15. The World Bank is taking a step in this direction with its newly established knowledge platforms on specific governance challenges such as urbanization, fragile states, and jobs. In addition, it has created a number of Global Expert Teams (GETs)—small teams of top-level experts—intervene across the world in areas of high strategic relevance to the World Bank Group and its clients, in order to ensure that the best global knowledge (internal and external) is deployed quickly and flexibly in response to client needs. See the World Bank's Annual Report 2010 for more information, <<http://go.worldbank.org/T1LN0EKLO0>>.