The way public policies currently circulate around the world is extraordinary. This is not a new phenomenon. Transfer and diffusion of policies across countries, cities and territories – even through policy fields and sectors – has occurred for a very long time. However, what is new is how quickly and how widely public policies circulate. In an interconnected world, policies and policy experiences move almost instantaneously from one corner of the world to another. They travel constantly, in various formats and over multiple channels of transmission in a manner much more complex and intricate than previously. Ideas, models, instruments, values, results, institutions, procedures, and experiences are all constantly exposed to circulation and exchange, either in compact toolboxes or separately by much more hazardous and fragmented dynamics.

These public policy components – not only public policies as a whole – are what scholars identify as the key elements of policy transfer, making understanding the logic behind them arduous. Sometimes it is possible to identify a particular policy component and to track its movement over many units of governance, temporary and/or spatial, but sometimes this is not possible, or it appears to be more pertinent to study particular interactions among these policy components in detail. However, in the literature of policy transfer, a central focus on understanding interconnection between internal and external, or between global and local, in policy making and policy implementation, is its most appealing feature. Taking as a fact the multiplicity of external impacts any policy field is exposed to, whatever the governmental level, policy transfer scholars direct their research questions towards understanding the product of such interconnections.

What we have learned from the expansion of policy transfer research in recent years is the great complexity of transnational governance as a factor influencing policy making around the world. It is not a one-size-fits-all process of diffusing and transferring public policies, as could be imagined from a homogeneous understanding of how multi-level governance works. Policy transfer is something quite different. It is much more heterogeneous in nature, and more prone to hybridization in most cases, when processes of transfer advance something that requires the formulation of interpretative models, such as the pioneering work by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) introduced. Against this background, it is not a surprise that the study of policy transfer, once much dispersed across different academic fields and research approaches, has, in recent years, become a cutting-edge area of study and general debate in the social sciences.

Actually, multiple streams of research converge, to some extent, in the policy transfer analysis. On one side, studies in international relations and global governance, focusing on global public policies, confront the reality of these policies being adopted in the field, over multiple territories, and the need to understand how it happens. Also, comparative public policy approaches increasingly suffer from Galton’s problem, meaning that the units they consider are not independent observations. To cope with this problem, a better understanding of external policy influences is no doubt worthwhile. Finally, also political economy perspectives and development studies have been increasingly attracted by the questions posed by policy transfer scholars, as they introduce a missing link for their efforts to understand what works and what does not work among government and international agency efforts to promote social and economic development. Activating institutional and policy change, from these views, too often
leads to policy failure, or policy irrelevance, and a deeper knowledge of transfer mechanisms and the risks that are involved has a great relevance for their initiatives.

This volume presents an admirable collection of contributions that help identify the state of the art in policy transfer studies, or even beyond, in some cases. The Handbook opens with a series of discussions on concepts and methods commonly used for the study of policy transfer. They reflect how approaches to this phenomenon have advanced during the last 20 years, becoming much more sophisticated and articulated. The second part of the volume includes discussions on agents and structures involved in policy transfer, while the third part concentrates on the role of culture and context, with specific chapters devoted to Asian, Latin American and European particularities. The final part of the Handbook deals with policy instruments, identifying how they circulate and are transferred in different policy fields, such as health or environment.

Altogether, the 22 chapters included in this Handbook combine to offer a comprehensive approach to policy transfer analysis. They show, undoubtedly, that this is a vibrant area of research in the broad planet of public policy analysis, with multiple ramifications for other disciplines and approaches within the social sciences. Admittedly, a full coherence of theoretical interpretations and models is not provided in this volume, as backgrounds and approaches are easily visible across the contributors. However, this diversity also evidences how rich and provocative is the current debate on the interpretation of policy transfer, also in connection with the related concepts of policy diffusion and policy circulation, as clearly identified by Osmany Porto de Oliveira in his introductory chapter to this volume.

In this sense, the volume contributes meaningfully to a better systematization and illumination of what policy transfer analysis is these days, its relevance from a theoretical point of view in the study of public policy and also its importance from a more applied perspective, which could interest many practitioners working day in, day out, making policy transfer work wisely. The mobilization in recent years of many academic meetings around the world, focusing on the analysis of public policy, where policy transfer topics become very salient, has contributed to make possible a better articulation of the field. However, it is necessary to refer to the academic entrepreneurship of Osmany Porto de Oliveira as editor of this Handbook, with his enthusiasm and personal qualities, which made possible the conversion of a promising view into a solid reality, one which will have a relevant impact on the study of policy transfer across different academic communities.

This volume encapsulates another important feature, one that is necessary to highlight in an appropriate way as a credit to its editor. This refers to its Global South genesis, as being stimulated largely from a series of academic meetings on policy transfer held in São Paulo in previous years. Actually, this is not a book on policy transfer in the Global South; neither is it devoted to a comparison of the dynamics of policy transfer between North and South. This is a book on policy transfer analysis, but much more sensitive to the problems of policy transfer in the Global South than commonly observed in most academic work baked in the Global North. This particular sensibility, which can be tracked through many chapters, is quite unusual and adds significant value to this already interesting volume.

The relevance of a truly global perspective in studying policy transfer is not just because of its singularity. In fact, the challenge of studying policy transfer in the developing world is an exciting one. Although in many cases models and concepts employed by scholars derive directly from well-established theoretical frameworks already discussed and employed in cases belonging to developed countries, there is no doubt that research questions and
hypothesis formulation face different problems and difficulties when we include a Global South perspective. The observed variations, relevant to public policy puzzles, tend to show the relevance of different variables and problems compared with those that are more frequent when we compare European countries, for example. This is a challenge for research, but also an opportunity that most contributions to this volume explore. It is an opportunity because it allows researchers to find larger variation in ranges that are not easy to understand when applying conventional expectations.

In this way, habitual procedures of theory testing in comparative public policy are often combined with theory refinement and theory building, as far as new key variables and singular connections are identified and specified, creating troubles for established theories and opening the door for new, more mature and enriching public policy theoretical formulations. A broad research agenda is outlined in the Handbook, as its more determined global perspective highlights. In this sense, the multiple streams of research identified by the contributors suggest an impressive area of academic work ahead for the study of policy transfer phenomena, as a research programme that can be explored and examined in the coming years.

Research in policy transfer and policy diffusion has become a major field of scrutiny within comparative public policy in recent years. What started a few decades ago as a promising idea for making sense of policy change in domestic decision-making has now become a large avenue where many research questions are framed and many policy problems discussed. Also, what started as a proposal to make sense of variations within a particular country, across states or cities, has become a truly global area of research, where the focus most often is on forms and mechanisms of diffusion, and transfer and circulation of policy ideas, models, institutions and instruments across countries and sectors in our globalized and intensely interconnected world.