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THE MIGRATION POLICY CYCLE: MAKING THE CASE FOR EVIDENCE-INFORMED AND INCLUSIVE POLICY-MAKING

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Migration ranks among the most important and contested public policy issues in many countries. In this context, the policy development process is often far away from the ‘ideal scenario’ and prone to being influenced by election cycles, public opinion or crisis situations.

From a theoretical perspective, the policy development process is described as a cycle comprised of different stages, including agenda-setting, policy design, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. Evidence and stakeholder involvement play a crucial role in informing this process and in creating ownership. Yet, it is at the discretion of the policy-maker to what degree they are taken into account, not least due to political negotiations and compromises that take place throughout the policy development process. The policy cycle can also easily be disrupted, for example, by a change of government, a crisis situation, or other factors requiring a change of policy direction.

A range of factors has an impact on stakeholder involvement as well as the production of evidence and its uptake by policy-makers, and, in many areas of migration policy, ‘gaps’ between evidence and stakeholder positions and the actual policy response can be observed. This leads to the question what can be done at each stage of the policy cycle to ensure evidence-informed and inclusive policy development processes.

Agenda-setting and policy design

At the stage of agenda-setting, the policy objectives are identified, for example, through manifestos of political parties or governmental programs, which reflect the political interests of the leading party/ies. Already at this stage it is important to assess the benefits and possible negative side-effects of policy objectives based on evidence, as the set objectives will affect all subsequent stages of the policy cycle. In practice, however, the media, interest groups and/or political interests often have more influence on the identification of policy objectives than evidence.

Based on the policy objectives, concrete solutions to the identified problems (policy proposals) are designed by deciding on the most adequate policy instruments – including any

necessary legal and regulatory measures, economic incentives, reforms of government structures or communication tools.

Evidence as an element of policy design

In practice, evidence-informed policy development is hampered either by a lack of evidence or by limited uptake by policy-makers. A lack of evidence is often related to a lack of resources for research, policy analysis and evaluation. A limited uptake of evidence in the policy development process, in contrast, may be linked to limited awareness of policy-makers of the existing evidence, or uncertainty with regard to what counts as evidence and how to interpret it. The latter is specifically true in case of contradicting, incomplete or complex research results that may challenge convincing narratives. Another challenge for policy-makers is easy access to key messages to substantiate policy-making, as policy-makers usually do not have the time to read large research reports. An increased focus on the production of short outputs that are targeted to the needs of the policy-makers, such as policy briefs or synthesis reports, could hence facilitate the uptake of evidence in the policy development process.

Generally speaking, also the perception of migration among policy-makers affects the way research feeds (or not) into policy processes. The research-policy gap could also widen when migration becomes highly politicised, perhaps making some policy-makers less receptive to evidence if other policy objectives are considered more opportune.

The challenge is also to produce new and objective evidence in time to answer specific policy questions that arise in the early stages of the policy development cycle. A combination of internal and external research structures may help to cater to this need. In-house structures are able to react more quickly and are better aware of the policy-makers' needs, which is why they are suitable for smaller-scale and less complex research than external research structures. External structures, in contrast, often have higher degrees of specialisation and independence, and are hence less likely to be biased towards confirming existing policies, as compared to internal structures. At the same time, as research shows, existing or newly generated evidence might still not be used because it does not suit the political agenda, or simply because communication or relationships between independent research actors and policy-makers are weak or absent.

How can an inclusive approach generate evidence and ensure ownership?

A wide range of actors – local communities, civil society organisations, academia, the private sector, trade unions, migrants, and many more – are affected by migration policies, have a

role in or affect the effective implementation of these policies, or have specific expertise in the field of migration.

Early involvement of these stakeholders in the policy development process has many advantages. In particular, ensuring ownership and acceptance of the policy project, and taking into consideration specific expertise. However, stakeholder consultations come with certain challenges: the choice of right partners, defining the relative value of different inputs or limited capacities to conduct consultations. In addition to punctual stakeholder consultations as inputs to specific policy proposals, ongoing dialogue structures with migration policy stakeholders may lead to better results, having already built trust and maintained a close relationship.

Decision-making and implementation

Once a policy proposal has been developed, executive or legislative approval must be sought. As a matter of good practice, political support and consensus is already ensured before the stage of decision-making, acceptable costs are determined, and relevant stakeholders consulted. A convincing communication on the new policy is essential to keep the general public informed and ensure acceptance of the policy change. Communication on migration policy changes should be accompanied by information on both the opportunities and the challenges related to the specific migration issue(s) addressed in the policy and the broader socio-economic, political and cultural context, taking into account the perspectives of host societies and migrants alike.

In the context of policy implementation the role of different stakeholders is again crucial. In practice, policy implementation can never be fully controlled or managed by the policy-maker, as circumstances on the ground and the many actors involved have an impact on its effectiveness. Risks include diverging visions of the policy, insufficient funding and unrealistic timeframes. These risks can be mitigated by an early involvement of stakeholders in the policy development process to ensure later ownership and realistic planning, and by using action plans that set out clear responsibilities and timeframes for activities, and allocate the resources needed for implementation.

Evaluation and learning

At the final stage of the policy development process, evaluation and learning is essential to complete the policy cycle, to identify whether the policy instrument responded to the identified policy needs, and consequently whether to maintain, adapt or terminate it.

However, there is a range of challenges to sound evaluation and learning, usually related to a lack of resources or technical knowledge to identify gaps within a system, a lack of common sets of indicators (that would ensure comparability), or a lack of control groups that would allow to attribute changes directly to the policy rather than other influencing factors.

Many countries lack independent and adequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. By not evaluating policies, however, policy-makers miss out on important chances to learn from and improve existing policies in the next stage of the policy cycle, when evaluation results should feed back into agenda-setting and policy design. This may not only lead to not achieving the best possible results of a policy but also to unintended side-effects of a policy going unrecognised.

Towards evidence-informed and inclusive policy-making

Theoretical models of ideal policy-making processes are rarely practiced in reality; stages of the policy cycle overlap and influence each other. As mentioned above, the cycle can be disrupted by a variety of different factors. For the policy-maker this often results in a balancing act between political priorities and an evidence-informed and inclusive approach to policy-making, in line with the individual steps of the policy cycle and with what is considered an 'ideal' policy development process. Achieving such a balance can be supported by, among others, an early involvement of relevant stakeholders in the policy development stage, and by strengthened relations between policy-makers and the research community. Addressing the gaps between the two requires, among others, a sound set-up of institutional structures for research, policy analysis and evaluation and strengthening the dialogue process between various stakeholders. Furthermore, convincing communication by policy-makers on migration and migration policies is paramount to ensure acceptance for migration policies among relevant stakeholders and the general population.

This article is based on the report [The Migration Policy Cycle and Migration Crisis Response. A Comparative Report Covering Germany, Italy, Russia, Sweden and the United Kingdom \(EN, TR\)](#) that was produced in the context of the 'Supporting Migration Policy Development in Turkey (MIND)' project, co-financed by the European Union and the Republic of Turkey.

Please also refer to the policy brief [The migration policy cycle: Making the case for coherent, inclusive and evidence-informed policy-making.](#)

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