



PERCEPTIONS

Policy Brief

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Research for evidence-based policy in the area of migration

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● Executive Summary

In response to the demand for a bridging between science (understood as expert knowledge and empirical evidence) and public policy - as well as the call for evidence-based policy-making - two questions need to be asked: first, what are the terms and characteristics of the problem; and second, what role is expected from science in policy-making? The answers to these questions are essential for the elaboration of precise and actionable recommendations that go beyond vague requests.

After defining the terms of the problem at stake, this policy brief interrogates the current assumption that the primary role of science in policymaking should be to shape the “content” of policies. In order to get beyond this assumption, the relationships between different actors and procedures in both science and policymaking must be addressed. To this end, the authors propose: 1) the establishment of networks (or links) between researchers and policymakers that allow for dialogue and collaboration amongst both groups; 2) frequent contact that facilitates the use of a common language; and 3) progress towards a common evaluation culture. All of this must be accompanied by an improvement in the communication skills of both groups, as well as the creation of their own communication tools”

● Introduction

The quest for policies based on evidence derived from empirical research is a desire that has been formulated since the last decade of the previous century (Boswell, 2009) at both national and supranational levels. In the context of the European Union, calls for "improving policymaking (sometimes of specific sectoral policies such as defense, security or health) through research and innovation"¹ has prompted a range of responses, including the creation, linked to the European Commission, of the "Knowledge for Policy" (K4P) platform, which aims precisely to "bridge the gap between science and policy by making available to policymakers across Europe the scientific data needed for policymaking"².

This need is particularly reiterated in the field of migration policies, with calls from the European Commission to design projects and networks that "bridge the gap between migration research and policy"³. These calls and initiatives have given rise both to academic reflections and debates (Boswell 2009; Ruhs et al. 2019) and to developments in terms of concrete proposals and recommendations (e.g., in the field of integration policies: Slootjes and Zanzuchi (2022)).

However, given the number of times and the length of time this request has been made, it seems that it is not an easy task. This Policy Brief focuses on showing that this wish (request or order, as the case may be) is in fact quite difficult to achieve in a substantive manner, as it depends on two important factors: (1) how the existing problem, the gap between research and policymaking, is defined, and (2) what role the incorporation of knowledge and research into policymaking is intended to perform. This Policy Brief explores these two issues in order to propose procedures and instruments to make the task of bringing research and science closer together simpler and, most importantly, more transparent.

Key Issues:

- *There is a demand for evidence-based policies and the incorporation of scientific knowledge into public policy in the field of migration.*
- *However, this demand is not always accompanied by a clear problem statement.*
- *Policymakers and scientists must ask: why do we want to incorporate scientific knowledge into policy?*

¹ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-12/SWD-2021-422_en.PDF

² https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/home_en

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/horizon-cl2-2023-transformations-01-04;callCode=null;freeTextSearchKeyword=;matchWholeText=true;typeCodes=1,2,8;statusCodes=31094501,31094502;programmePeriod=2021%20-%202027;programCcm2Id=43108390;programDivisionCode=43108514,43118846;focusAreaCode=null;destinationGroup=null;missionGroup=null;geographicalZonesCode=null;programmeDivisionProspect=null;startDateLte=null;startDateGte=null;crossCuttingPriorityCode=null;cpvCode=null;performanceOfDelivery=null;sortQuery=deadlineDate;orderBy=asc;onlyTenders=false;topicListKey=topicSearchTablePageState>

● Defining the research-public policy gap in the migration field

The existing divide between research and policymaking is often related to subjective issues such as preconceptions and even suspicions that researchers and policymakers have of each other. Due to simplistic assumptions, and mistrust on both sides: policymakers sometimes distance themselves from researchers and researchers are sometimes suspicious of the intentions of policymakers.

○ **Suspicious between politicians and scientists**

A relationship full of suspicions is nothing new, as shown by Max Weber's observations in his work "The Politician and the Scientist", which points out a difficult double bind: on the one hand, research is often accused of not being "applied" but rather "theoretical" or "conceptual", on the other hand, when research is developed in an applied way, and particularly in social sciences, it is seen as taking too long to be timely and producing in the form of lengthy research papers written in complex academic language, without responding directly to public policy needs. An additional layer of difficulty is that when research is designed to be time-efficient and applicable, and when findings are reported in a comparatively easy to understand way, the research is sometimes perceived by the scientific community as methodologically sloppy and not "pure" enough, and researchers may be accused of oversimplifying issues, or even catering to political rather than scientific imperatives.

These criticisms are partly accepted by social scientists in the field of migration who acknowledge that their results have gaps and give mixed results on some questions (Ruhs et al. 2019: 2; PERCEPTIONS D.3.5 and PERCEPTIONS D.3.7). The lack of "certain and robust" results across research diminishes the prominence and relevance of research that would otherwise serve to make policies less politicised and more rational "based on data and knowledge, rather than on anecdotes, fears and misperceptions about migration and integration" (Ruhs et al., 2019: 3). Research in this field also has ethical and methodological challenges that condition its results ([PERCEPTIONS Policy Brief "Supporting ethical migration research"](#)).

On the other hand, politicians are also viewed with reticence in the scientific community. Researchers are wary of "commissioned research" from the political sphere, as it can undermine their independence by requiring specific or partial results, and thus reducing their freedom of action. Policymakers are also perceived as lacking a long-term perspective, seeking easy answers to

Key Findings:

- *Mutual suspicions sometimes arise between politicians and scientists.*
- *To progress beyond mutual suspicion, the scientist-politician divide must be clearly understood.*
- *This Policy Brief focuses on harmonizing expectations and developing communicative measures to bridge the scientist-politician divide.*

complex phenomena, being short-sighted in their search for solutions, and demanding quick answers that are incompatible with scientific reflection.

Despite this tricky context, which is undoubtedly relevant to the search for recommendations, it is worth trying to remove the emotional burden from the issue in order to focus on identifying the problem with a certain objectivity. The starting point is, therefore, that evidence-based policymaking is a desirable aim and that a better understanding between the two realities, science and policymaking, would probably bring more advantages than disadvantages. Among the benefits that can be derived from greater understanding is the development of more rigorous policies and more long-term solutions.

○ Towards an objective definition of the gap

Laying aside the issue of mutual mistrust, if we assume the rationality of actions and actors, the problem is either that research results that policymakers need have not been produced or are not available, or that, even if such results exist, policymakers are unable to use them.

In the first case, when the expert knowledge or the evidence do not exist, it would be necessary to think about devoting research efforts specifically to issues on current policy agendas. In terms of public policy, the gap between research and policy agendas may be due to a variety of facts: i) the problem has changed, and it needs to be re-defined and re-identified, ii) the problem has not been well defined initially, or iii) solutions and responses are not working as expected, so the possibility of new and innovative alternatives needs to be investigated and evaluated.

In the second case, if relevant research exist, but do not reach or cannot be used by policymakers, the focus should be on improving the accessibility and transfer of knowledge. This is, for example, what is meant by calls for "valorizing and maximizing research results by extracting information that is useful for decision-makers". The presupposition here is that both groups have a meaningful role to play and appropriate competencies; the emphasis would accordingly be on finding a common language that bridges these roles, as well as shared expectations for content and an accessible format for the presentation of the findings. Along these lines, this Policy Brief recommends measures to improve the transfer and dissemination of results, paying particular attention to how content is transmitted and the channels through which knowledge and research are communicated to policymakers. These actions would work best in the presence of some key variables that have already been shown in the process of European integration to be essential: contact between researchers and policymakers that allows for a relationship

of trust and the design of a regular work program to bring language, messages, and positions closer together.

● What is the role of knowledge in public policy?

This second approach to the problem, when research exists but it is not transferred or known by policymakers, identifies research as an instrument for policy making. This approach is also called the "instrumentalist function" or problem-solving approach (Boswell 2009). From this perspective, research is valued as a central part of the quality of the policy outcome. However, this approach comes with certain complexities. On the one hand, if it were so easy to find a policy solution through research, there would be no need for policymakers, as research results would be translated into policy and the effort and work of policymakers would be avoided. Moreover, sometimes research results may not be so direct or concrete but may rather "shed light" or enlighten public policy (Boswell 2009: 5).

Boswell devotes her work to reflecting on the use of research in policy, and asks the opposite question, i.e. why sometimes, even when evidence or knowledge exists, the results of research produced or even commissioned are not taken into account in public policy-making. This question serves to propose two other functions related to the symbolic that allow us to explain the distance between research and politics in a different way. These are, on the one hand, a "legitimizing" function of the organisation(s) and its position or activity and, on the other hand, a "substantiating" function in which knowledge serves to give authority to a particular public policy position.

The former would function in contexts where there is a culture that values knowledge and where inter-agency competition calls for legitimising certain positions. In this sense, it seems that for the legitimisation of its migration policies the European Commission's efforts have often been directed towards the collection of data or statistics from and provided by member state governmental institutions, rather than the solicitation and analysis of academic work, (Collett 2019: 181). In the second function, research seeks to give substance to a policy position already taken, to consolidate or give rigour to a decision or proposal already adopted and to justify decisions in hotly debated policy areas (Boswell 2009: 12, 14) such as immigration.

Recently, academic reflection on the issue has added a new variable to the relationship between science and policy, namely the media (Ruhs et al 2019), which highlights some facts or opinions over others and mediates the relationship between evidence and policy. For Entzinger and Scholten (2019),

Key Findings:

- *Literature on this topic define three functions of science vis-a-vis policy (Boswell, 2009).*
- *The first is the instrumentalist function, which is research is considered by policymakers as crucial for the improvement of policies quality.*
- *The second is a legitimizing symbolic function, which is when knowledge is intended to create confidence that decisions are well founded.*
- *The third is termed a substantiating function of knowledge, which is when knowledge serves to enhance credibility of policy positions.*

the media can play an important and relevant role when the distance between research and policy increases.

In this scenario, Entzinger and Scholten (2019: 8) highlight the advances in the form of dialogue that have taken place between migration research and public policy, reflecting "a diversification of methods of mutual influence" (Entzinger and Scholten 2019: 9). For Collett (2019: 169), these dialogues and increased formal and informal interaction have been one of the advances and lessons-learned of the 2015 migration crisis in Europe. For this author, in the characterisation of the disconnection between science and politics described above, we must add characteristics in the European supranational context, variables related to its institutional structure, since, being institutions that do not "act", as they do not implement the policies they produce, they also do not receive the impact in the form of debates, problems, etc. She describes the decision-making context in Europe as a closed and hardly permeable public policymaking context dominated by jurists which, despite having expanded somewhat, is still rather detached from experts (Collett 2019: 171).

● Recommendations

Taking into account both the suspicions between politicians and scientists and the different functions for which knowledge may be wanted and used in policy design and decision-making, as well as the European context in which guidelines for various dimensions of migration policies are elaborated and in which, as the PERCEPTIONS project has observed, a multiplicity of actors with different visions and varied objectives participate, the complexity of the elaboration of recommendations is manifest.

Even so, the experience of working together with researchers, decision-makers and direct implementers of migration policies in the PERCEPTIONS project, allows us to propose the following lines of action, which focus on building a bridge between their different interests, activities, functions and visions. It is not a question of scientists becoming politicians or vice versa, but rather of improving their communication and, consequently, their relationships.

- **The establishment of networks (or links) between researchers and policymakers that allow for dialogue on the needs of both groups.**

The establishment of such networks in which scientists and policymakers share time and perspectives is a first option that has already started to be implemented through the European Migration Network.

Key recommendations:

- *Networking between researchers and policymakers to enable them to dialogue about*

○ Frequent contact facilitating the use of the same language

Frequent collaboration and the establishment of common questions and objectives for researchers and policymakers should be pursued. This will advance two objectives: i) the minimization of suspicions and ii) the possibility of understanding through the identification of possible common objectives and the identification of policy-relevant migration issues and information.

○ Moving towards a common culture of evaluation

Work to ensure that policymakers see the evaluation and scrutiny, which can be improved through research, in positive terms, i.e. as feedback that facilitates iterative improvement rather than as blame for the implementation of ineffective initiatives.

○ Improve the communication skills of both groups

Put communication at the centre of the relationship. The idea of creating a bridge between scientists and politicians, even if each still has its own roles and activities, is very graphic. It is not about scientists adopting political incentives or vice versa, but about improving their relations and communication in order to "understand each other" and to be able to "put themselves in each other's shoes".

○ Creation of common communication tools

An example of such communication instruments could be policy briefs, which manage indicators, have transparent objectives, and seek consensus through clear and accessible language.

their knowledge and evidence needs.

- *Frequent contact that facilitates the use of the same language*
- *Moving towards a common evaluation culture*
- *Improving the communication skills of the two groups*
- *Creating common tools*

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PERCEPTIONS Policy Brief “Supporting ethical migration research”, March 2022, <https://www.perceptions.eu/supporting-ethical-migration-research/> https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-12/SWD-2021-422_en.PDF

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○ Deliverables

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