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Promoting an evidence-based culture in integration policy



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Promoting Evidence-Informed Immigrant Integration Policymaking

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Executive Summary

With millions of people fleeing war-torn Ukraine and with labour shortages across Europe, questions about how to effectively promote migrants' integration into a new society are again front and centre in European policymakers' minds. Integration policy is often forged in the heat of crisis and shaped by political priorities, with limited resources devoted to evaluating the impact of new initiatives and to developing an evidence base to support policymaking going forward. As a result, lessons from some of the most promising innovations get lost.

Knowing what works, under which conditions, and how to use this knowledge is crucial to the design of effective migrant integration policies. Creating and implementing integration policies without solid evidence that they will have the desired impact can come at a high human, financial, and societal cost—not only for migrants but also for the government and broader society in immigrant-receiving countries. Evidence-informed policymaking, by contrast, promotes good governance by improving institutional learning, accountability, and the cost-effective use of public funds. It can also benefit the broader society by leading to policies that facilitate economic growth, a thriving labour market, and social cohesion. By helping to achieve policy goals such as these, a strong evidence culture may also temper

anti-migrant attitudes and strengthen communities, offering an antidote against the highly politicised and polarised public discourse on migration and integration.

Since the early 2000s, a growing number of initiatives have sought to promote an evidence culture in the field of immigrant integration policymaking. This has included EU institutions encouraging EU Member States to use common indicators to monitor integration outcomes, and the launch of promising evidence-informed integration pilot projects. But while tools and techniques exist to evaluate what works, migrant integration continues to lag behind other policy areas where a true evidence revolution has taken place. Throughout the policymaking cycle—from agenda-setting to policy design, and from implementation to evaluation—crucial opportunities to learn from past experiences and use that knowledge to strengthen future initiatives are being missed.

Migrant integration continues to lag behind other policy areas where a true evidence revolution has taken place.

A variety of contextual, methodological, and capacity challenges contribute to this lag. Frequently shifting policy goals and definitions of 'success', limited

political buy-in and resources, and a complex playing field involving a wide range of stakeholders all complicate efforts to develop an evidence culture in integration policymaking. Methodological challenges (e.g., the difficulty of establishing a causal link between a particular integration policy and observed outcome) and ethical concerns (e.g., about providing a potentially beneficial service to some people but not others in order to create a control group) also make measuring policy impacts difficult, even when there is political will, funding, and expertise to conduct such research.

To date, efforts to promote evidence-informed policymaking have often focused on a particular stage of the policy cycle (namely, evaluation) and on a particular strategy for addressing the situation (helping evaluators develop key skills). But even when evaluations are conducted according to the highest methodological standards, it is equally important to invest in disseminating their results widely and in making sure that policymakers and programme implementers have the training and resources to act on evaluation results and recommendations. In addition, few efforts to advance evidence-informed policymaking have addressed the specific features of and obstacles in the integration field.

Policymakers at the EU and national levels could use the following five strategies to nurture an environment conducive to evidence-informed migrant integration policymaking. These strategies could also benefit integration policymakers outside of Europe, given that the challenges they aim to address are present in many countries around the world.

- ▶ **Using pilot projects to keep costs low and cultivate political buy-in before scaling them up.** Such projects have long been used to promote innovation and learning in other policy fields because they have lower risks and costs than launching untested large-scale programmes and because they

are less complex to discontinue if they are unsuccessful. Yet avoiding ‘pilotitis’, the overuse of pilot projects, is key. Pilot projects can most effectively contribute to better integration outcomes when those that are successful are scaled up.

- ▶ **Increasing targeted investments in evidence-based policymaking.** Properly injecting evidence into each stage of the policy process is costly, yet such investments are likely to reduce wasteful spending and increase cost-effectiveness. Funding models such as tiered-evidence funding—in which policies and practices that are strongly supported by evidence receive larger grants, and smaller developmental grants go to promising experimental interventions—could foster both innovation and learning.
- ▶ **Promoting stakeholder involvement throughout the policy cycle.** Involving practitioners and programme beneficiaries in the design and development of integration policies, as well as during evaluation, can promote ownership over the resulting initiatives and ensure that evaluations’ recommendations reflect the reality on the ground in terms of needs, capacity, and resources, ultimately increasing their effectiveness.
- ▶ **Improving access to evidence by leveraging online databases and multistakeholder networks.** Online evidence repositories are important tools to improve access to and dissemination of integration knowledge and to facilitate peer learning, but they often focus heavily on highlighting best practices. To maximise their impact, databases should raise the visibility of key lessons from policy evaluations (those learned from both successful and unsuccessful initiatives) and share practical

evaluation tools. Moreover, multistakeholder networks—especially those at the nexus between research, policy, and practice—should be leveraged more effectively to disseminate evidence and facilitate mutual learning.

- ▶ **Building the capacity of policymakers and other key stakeholders to use evidence-informed techniques.** Skill-building efforts tend to be aimed at evaluators rather than policymakers or other stakeholders, who must equally be trained to understand evidence and use it to shape their work. Ensuring these actors have access to this critical knowledge, including through learning materials and trainings that reflect their needs, can also increase their motivation to use evidence-informed techniques.

While progress has been made toward bringing an evidence culture into integration policymaking, much work remains to be done. EU and national policymakers should seek to establish the infrastructure and conditions that facilitate the creation, dissemination, access, and use of evidence in support of effective integration policies that help both migrants and the communities in which they live thrive.

1 Introduction

To date, 4 million people fleeing the war in Ukraine have registered for temporary protection in Europe.¹ While much of the initial focus has been on reception and registration efforts, a growing migrant integration challenge lies right around the corner. Integration policy has often been forged in the heat of crisis and driven by political priorities, as seen in the response to the 2015–16 European migration and refugee crisis. Resources and attention are much less frequently devoted to gleaning lessons from integration initiatives and using them to improve policymaking going forward. Yet, the growing Ukrainian

displacement crisis, pressing labour shortages, and governments' strained budgets have reinforced the importance of implementing integration policies that efficiently use limited resources—and that work.

Designing policies based on evidence promotes value for money, quality, and effectiveness and fosters good governance by advancing institutional learning and accountability and by responding to external scrutiny.² In the field of immigrant integration policy, knowing what works, under which conditions, and how to use this knowledge is crucial to designing interventions that effectively promote positive societal outcomes, ranging from social cohesion to individual migrants' integration and well-being. Take labour market integration, for example. Ineffective policies to help immigrants enter and succeed in the labour market are linked not only to reduced wages and living conditions—and ultimately, poorer health and well-being—for migrants and their families, but also to costs for government in the form of lower tax revenues, higher social welfare dependence, and wasteful spending on ineffective programmes. In turn, employers and local economies miss out on the talent and skills of potential employees and entrepreneurs. Finally, poor labour market integration may negatively affect the broader society's perception of migrants and, relatedly, social cohesion. On the flipside, leveraging evidence to develop effective policies can hold benefits for governments, migrants, and receiving societies alike.

An evidence revolution has swept through many policy areas in the last two decades. Increasingly, states and international organisations, such as the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), are officially embracing and promoting evidence-informed policymaking. In the words of the OECD, this is 'a process whereby multiple sources of information, including statistics, data, and the best available research evidence and evaluations, are consulted before making

a decision to plan, implement, and (where relevant) alter public policies and programmes.³ The call to build an evidence culture within the field of integration policymaking in Europe has grown louder as well, but efforts to do so have generally had a limited focus—either in terms of the evidence produced or how it is injected into the policymaking cycle.

This policy brief explores why immigrant integration is falling behind other policy areas in embracing a culture of evidence and suggests paths to more evidence-informed policymaking. The brief first examines recent progress and key gaps in this area, and then maps the obstacles that continue to hinder an evidence revolution in integration policy. A case study about an initiative to promote evidence-informed labour market integration policymaking in the Netherlands illustrates a number of recent innovations, best practices, and obstacles. The final section of the brief outlines five recommendations for creating an environment in which evidence-informed integration policymaking can thrive.

2 The State of Play for Evidence-Informed Integration Policymaking in Europe

Since the early 2000s, there have been some notable and ongoing efforts, including at the EU level, to promote evidence-informed policymaking (see Box 1). Yet, immigrant integration continues to lag far behind other policy areas. Available studies conclude that migrant integration policies still lack an evidence base,⁴ and the 2021–27 EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion aptly notes that ‘a number of knowledge gaps remain that prevent effective evidence-informed integration policies from being developed’.⁵

Most efforts to bring more evidence into the integration policy sphere focus only on one side of the story—either monitoring what policies and practices exist or monitoring migrants’ integration—but fail to establish a causal link between the two. For example, the launch of policy indices such as MIPEX (the Migrant Integration Policy Index), REGIN (the EU-level Regions for Migrants and Refugees Integration Project), and NIEM (the National Integration Evaluation Mechanism) have made it easier to track changes in migrant integration policies and practices over time and across countries and regions. At the same time, the development of common instruments such as the Zaragoza indicators (see Box 1) aim to facilitate the tracking of migrant integration outcomes over time and across countries. Both sets of tools produce important information, but it is often not possible to prove whether a specific policy is responsible for a specific set of integration outcomes—in short, whether a policy is working as desired.

Some progress has been made in trying to establish a causal link between integration policies and outcomes. For example, studies have recommended that policy evaluations use both individual and contextual data in multilevel quantitative research as well as more specific sub-indicators to better match policies and outcomes.⁶ Yet, these efforts often focus narrowly on a specific aspect of integration, such as employment or education; other important facets of integration, such as language acquisition or a sense of belonging within a society, are generally overlooked. And because integration outcomes are rarely studied holistically, this can result in an incomplete picture of policy impacts. In addition, most of these efforts are taking place in just a handful of countries that often have more resources and that already have a strong national commitment to evidence-informed policymaking.⁷

BOX 1**Promotion of evidence-informed integration policymaking in the European Union**

EU institutions have officially embraced a ‘knowledge-based approach’ to immigrant integration and taken steps in two waves to advance an evidence culture in the field. The first surge began in 2004 as part of a broader effort to promote an evidence culture across policy areas, and the second surge started after 2015 when more than 1 million asylum seekers arrived in the European Union, leading EU institutions to seek effective ways to promote integration.

Throughout these two waves, EU institutions have tried to stimulate an evidence culture in the following ways:

- ▶ **Advancing the development and use of common indicators and promoting programme monitoring and evaluation.** For example, the Hague Programme recommended that states develop ‘indicators and evaluation mechanisms to adjust policy, evaluate progress on integration, and make the exchange of information more effective’, and its successor, the Stockholm Programme (2010–14), specifically pushed for the development of common integration indicators in specific areas, including employment, education, social inclusion, and active citizenship. These efforts were realised in the 2010 Zaragoza Declaration, which introduced a set of common integration indicators to improve the monitoring of migrants’ integration and to facilitate the comparison of data collected across the European Union. Yet, the indicators only address specific aspects of integration, and it is often not possible to disaggregate the data to explore fine-grained integration patterns across groups.
- ▶ **Boosting an evidence culture through funding mechanisms.** At the same time, EU funding mechanisms introduced requirements for the use of common indicators and evaluation frameworks. For example, in 2011, the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF) was introduced to enhance capacity, including through ‘the development of an evaluation-based culture [...] through the design of a common framework for evaluation and monitoring and a system of indicators’. The most recent AMIF call for proposals, in 2021, required that funding recipients use key performance indicators to monitor the implementation and evaluate the outcomes of integration initiatives. Similarly, other European funds (including Horizon 2020) have been instrumental in improving international datasets and exploring the links between policies and integration outcomes.
- ▶ **Supporting peer learning.** Some EU efforts have focused on establishing networks to facilitate stakeholder coordination and the collection and sharing of successful integration practices, including in a series of handbooks and learning modules. In 2015, for example, the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) launched a project comparing integration outcomes and identifying good practices in different countries. AMIF funding also includes a ‘partnership principle’ requirement to ensure information exchange takes place among relevant stakeholders from different Member States. Yet, the impact of such efforts has been limited due to the absence of mechanism to ensure partners’ collaboration and knowledge exchange and other persistent challenges (see the section below).

EU institutions’ leadership and commitment to promoting evidence-informed migrant integration policymaking have resulted in important progress, but there is still a long road ahead. Persistent challenges complicate the way forward and need to be tackled before an evidence culture can take root in the field.

Sources: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends, Forced Displacement in 2015* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2016); Katharina Bürkin and Alin Chindea, *Refugee Integration and the Use of Indicators: Evidence from Central Europe* (Budapest: UNHCR, 2013); European Commission, ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027’ (COM [2020] 758 final, 24 November 2020), 23–24; Montserrat González Garibay and Peter De Cuyper, ‘Is There an Evidence Basis for Immigrant Integration Policies? A Methodological Enquiry’, *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 8, no. 1 (March 2018): 15; OECD, *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2015: Settling In* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015); European Commission, ‘Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing the Asylum and Migration Fund’ (COM [2011] 751 final, 15 November 2011); Rachel Westerby, *Follow the Money II – Assessing the Use of EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) Funding at the National Level 2014-2018* (Brussels: UNHCR and European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2019).

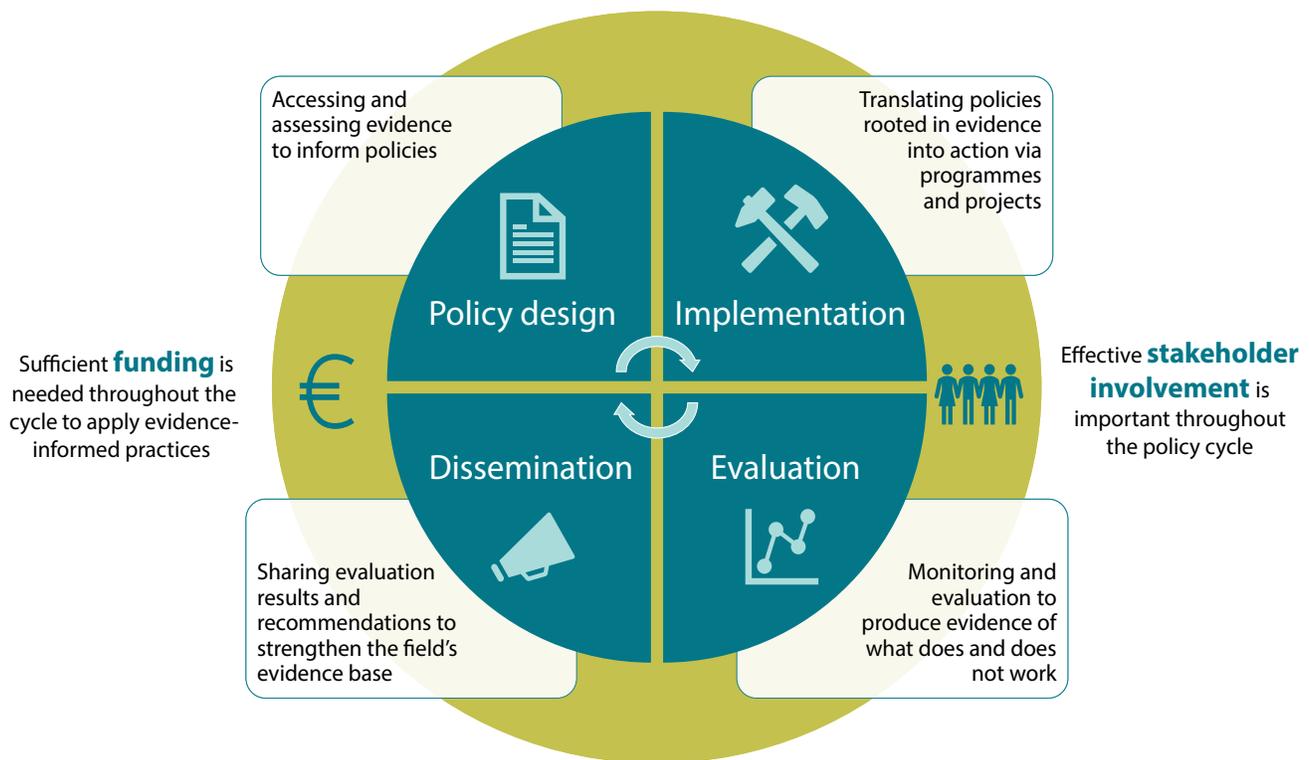
Establishing a clear link between integration policies and outcomes, however, does not automatically result in evidence-informed policymaking. Most efforts have focused on the evaluation stage of the policy cycle, but for evidence to truly inform policy, an evidence culture needs to permeate each stage of the cycle (see Figure 1). First, policymakers should be able to easily access and assess the existing evidence on a topic and use it to inform the design of new policies. These evidence-informed policies then need to be implemented. Next, political willingness and specialised skills are required to evaluate these policies. And lastly, the evidence collected should be disseminated and fuel mutual learning that supports improvements to existing policies and shapes the design of future ones.

This final step of the process is an area where considerable work remains to be done. Knowing what

works and under which conditions is a crucial piece of the puzzle, but disseminating this information and using it to improve existing and future policies are equally important. To date, the findings of the few evidence-informed initiatives and policies that have been undertaken have rarely been compiled and synthesised, and resources are typically only available in the language of the country or region in which the project was conducted, which limits evidence dissemination, cross-country comparisons, and mutual learning.⁸

Throughout the policy cycle, financial resources and stakeholder involvement (e.g., from practitioners) are needed to support the production, use, and sharing of evidence. It should also be noted that the policy cycle is complex and the steps do not always neatly follow one after the other; in many cases, they may overlap or occur simultaneously.

FIGURE 1
The evidence-informed policymaking cycle



Source: Compilation by the authors.

BOX 2 Policies, programmes, projects, and practices

While this brief talks primarily of evidence-informed policymaking, it is not only high-level policy decisions that can and should be informed by evidence. The programmes and projects through which policies are implemented, and the individual practices used to do this, should also be rooted in evidence. The many different governmental and nongovernmental actors involved in this multilayered system—from the decisionmakers who craft policies, to programme managers and project staff, to evaluators and other researchers—all have a role to play in supporting the development of an evidence culture in the integration field.

Persistent challenges

The barriers that keep more integration policymakers from embracing an evidence culture are multifaceted and affect each stage of the policy cycle. Some of the most common—and most formidable—challenges are described below. Overcoming these hurdles will take political commitment, stakeholder involvement, financial resources, ongoing capacity-building, networks for mutual learning, and platforms for evidence sharing, but only then will the integration field be able to reap the full benefits of evidence-informed policymaking.

The politicised nature of migrant integration policymaking dampens commitment to an evidence culture. Conducting evaluations of integration policies and implementing the resulting recommendations—and having the resources to do both—require buy-in from politicians, policymakers, public administrators, and practitioners.⁹ In any issue area, policymakers may be reluctant to conduct evaluations if this may show policies to be ineffective and lead to criticism and questions about who is responsible for setting things right.¹⁰ Policymakers may be particularly hesitant to evaluate costly

policies. This is often a reflection of either the sunk cost fallacy that leads people to continue on their present course of action because they have invested significant resources in it, even though the ongoing costs do not outweigh the benefits,¹¹ or fear of the potential fallout from evidence showing wasted spending.¹² The recommendations that result from an evaluation may also not be in line with existing political strategies or public attitudes, complicating the translation of evidence into policy design.

The fact that rising nativism and populism have made migrant integration a highly politicised issue has both limited public support for investments in integration, including policy evaluations, and raised the stakes when evaluations do occur.¹³ In addition to fears of a potential public backlash should policies be found ineffective, some stakeholders may worry that the evaluation—whatever its findings—will draw even more attention to this already-contentious policy area. The politicised and sensitive nature of migrant integration can also affect the relationship between policymakers and evaluators, who are typically external researchers. Limited trust and conflicting interests between policymakers and evaluators (for example, about politically loaded language or definitions of key concepts) can restrict cooperation.¹⁴

Notably, while the highly politicised nature of migration is a key obstacle to moving towards more evidence-informed integration policymaking, pushing ahead with efforts to build an evidence culture in this field could offer new tools to counter the inaccuracies, assumptions, and misperceptions that often characterise the highly charged discourse around migration. Effective, evidence-informed policies would not only promote the successful integration of migrants into the societies where they live, but it may also take some of the sting out of the broader migrant integration debate.

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The need for a quick response in times of crisis makes it difficult to leverage existing knowledge and to set up a monitoring system for new policies.

Integration policies and programmes are often forged in the heat of crisis, limiting the amount of time available for policy design, implementation, evaluation, and evidence dissemination.¹⁵ The plethora of initiatives that have sprung up to support people displaced from Ukraine as they arrive in Europe illustrates how the urgency of responding to an emergency may leave little time and resources to reflect on existing evidence and plan evaluations of ad hoc initiatives.¹⁶ For example, as of May 2022, about 34,500 displaced people had found housing through the German platform #UnterkunftUkraine,¹⁷ which was launched in a matter of days or weeks. This speed is essential when providing immediate emergency support, but it also often means that exploring evidence on best practices, planning an evaluation strategy, and creating an evidence dissemination plan are not top priorities. As a result, lessons that could benefit future initiatives may get lost, depriving stakeholders of an important source of evidence that could strengthen integration policymaking.

Frequent shifts in goals, target groups, and which government actors are in charge of integration obstruct institutional learning and the measurement of policies' long-term effects. Evidence-informed policymaking is relatively well established in 'settled' policy areas such as health care and education, where stability and continuity allow for regular evaluation.¹⁸ In the immigrant integration

field, by contrast, policy goals, the populations targeted by policy interventions, and who is responsible for them changes frequently. Dutch integration policy and its shifting goals are a case in point. In the 1980s, the Dutch government introduced the Minorities Policy, which was rooted in multiculturalism and aimed to promote the preservation of cultural identities. In the 1990s, the Integration Policy shifted away from this focus on cultural preservation and instead sought to promote socioeconomic integration. Subsequently, the more assimilationist 'New Style' Integration Policy of the 2000s made cultural adaptation a priority—a dramatic shift in strategy in just two decades.¹⁹ Migrant integration is a long-term process and a policy's impacts may only become clear years later, so constantly redefining integration makes it difficult to qualify policies as successful or not.²⁰ In the Dutch case, some immigrants have been exposed to policies that have tried to achieve very different—and at times opposing—goals in the space of just a few decades, making it difficult to assess whether and which policies have been effective and why. Meanwhile, responsibility for migrant integration in the Netherlands has been frequently moved across ministries and departments, and most recently from the national to the local level, further hindering institutional learning.

Integration programme beneficiaries, practitioners, and other key stakeholders have valuable insights to share, but these are often not captured in the evidence-informed policy cycle.

Integration practitioners, officials from different governance levels, private-sector actors (including employers), representatives of immigrant community and civil-society organisations, and both native- and foreign-born community members all have a stake in integration policies, either because they are affected by or responsible for shaping these policies.²¹ Yet such stakeholders—and perhaps most critically, practitioners and the migrant and refugee communities the policies aim to reach—are often not engaged in the policy cycle and evidence-gathering

initiatives.²² Policy beneficiaries are often used as passive sources of data or involved in only a tokenistic way; they are rarely asked for feedback on how they perceive or value integration policies or about their experiences with integration systems and practices.²³ This lack of consultation with end users may be the result of flawed assumptions by researchers or policymakers that all migrants and refugees have the same needs, but it also likely stems from the fact that meaningful engagement requires an investment of time, resources, and political will.²⁴ The involvement of practitioners (such as job coaches and language instructors), meanwhile, tends to be limited to the implementation stage of the policy cycle, which can lead these stakeholders to feel little ownership over the programmes they are implementing or result in a lack of alignment between recommendations for those programmes and the practitioners' reality.

The early involvement of both end users and practitioners in policy development is crucial to ensure that policies reflect the first-hand experiences of those most affected, the needs of different stakeholders, and the local context.²⁵ Co-creation—an approach that involves beneficiaries of services and/or practitioners in the design and delivery—can help prevent bias and a mismatch between policy aims and on-the-ground needs, facilitate implementation, and promote better outcomes and ownership of results.²⁶

A range of methodological challenges make it difficult for evaluations to establish direct causality between integration policies and outcomes, hampering efforts to create a high-quality evidence base. To establish causality, evaluators would ideally like to compare how similar groups fare when some members are randomly selected for a specific programme and others are not. Yet, in real life, many policies and programmes apply universally to all members of their target populations, leaving evaluators without a control group.²⁷ And while

randomised controlled trials are the gold standard for establishing causality, there are ethical concerns about depriving a group of people of access to a programme that is expected to benefit them.²⁸ In addition, immigrants may participate in multiple programmes, which makes it difficult to isolate the impact of one policy or programme from that of another.²⁹

Policies and programmes may be effective for some but not all members of a population, and it can be challenging to capture this level of variation in an evaluation.

Efforts to generate evidence in the field of migrant integration face other challenges as well. Using the same data collection tools with culturally different groups (known as cultural measurement invariance³⁰) can yield uneven results, and low survey response rates can make it difficult to collect sufficient data to draw generalisable conclusions.³¹ Moreover, migrant and refugee populations are characterised by a high level of within-group diversity, with variation in legal status, country of origin, duration of stay, age at arrival, and socioeconomic status. As a result, policies and programmes may be effective for some but not all members of a population, and it can be challenging to capture this level of variation in an evaluation as it requires larger sample sizes and more complex research methods.

A final set of challenges relates to the changing and varied landscape in which integration policies are implemented. For policies and programmes to be properly evaluated, they must be implemented consistently; when differences exist in how a policy is translated from paper to practice, it may not be possible to evaluate the policy as it was intended by its creators (see Box 3 for an example). Finally, even when evaluations are able to identify effective pol-

icies, it may be difficult to assess how transferrable they are from one context to another, given that the institutional landscape and target groups vary both nationally and regionally.³²

Because of these methodological challenges and the resource-intensiveness of solid impact evaluations, most evaluations measure outputs rather than impact, looking at indicators such as the number of programme beneficiaries or participants or the number of activities conducted³³—information that provides no indication of whether a programme is effective.

The wide range of issues and actors involved in migrant integration creates obstacles to mutual learning, both within and across countries. Migrant integration cuts across policy areas, ranging from housing to the labour market, and involves multiple levels of governance, from local to international. In addition, integration services are increasingly contracted out to third parties in the private sector, and nongovernmental organisations and nonprofits often play an important role in promoting integration alongside government initiatives.³⁴ This fragmented playing field makes it challenging to disseminate high-quality evidence, when it exists, and to encourage mutual learning that would help scale up promising practices.³⁵

There is also variation in the actors who create evidence, from academics to consultants, and the ways in which evidence is disseminated. The results of most government-led evaluation efforts are only available in the local language, are often not available online, or are difficult to find on governments' websites.³⁶ Academic research, on the other hand, is usually available in English and easier to find, but many academic articles exist only behind expensive paywalls,³⁷ are written in very technical language that policymakers and practitioners may find difficult to grasp, and provide recommendations that may not align with the reality on the ground.³⁸ Resources to

translate findings into English (or other languages) and efforts to ensure that research can be found and understood by the many different actors involved in integration policymaking (both within and across countries) are essential if knowledge is to be transferred and shared.³⁹

Resource and capacity shortages affect every stage of the evidence-informed policymaking cycle and are often particularly acute in organisations on the front lines of immigrant integration. At the heart of many of the above-mentioned obstacles is a lack of resources, not only in terms of funding but also capacity and expertise. Policymakers often lack the capacity and expertise to effectively identify and act on relevant evidence,⁴⁰ and resources are rarely dedicated to increasing capacity on this front. Skill- and competence-building initiatives tend to be aimed at evaluators, even though it is equally important that policymakers be trained to understand and effectively leverage the evidence that evaluations produce.⁴¹ A second issue is that funding for integration is often project based, and short-term projects generally have limited time, resources, and incentives to conduct evaluations. Even when this is done, the project may not have time to implement the resulting lessons before it ends, and those lessons may not be carried forward beyond the project.⁴² Similarly, because budgetary cycles are often short,⁴³ the evaluations of projects funded in one cycle often produce recommendations too late to inform the next budget or policy cycle.⁴⁴ Finally, even when policies are evaluated and the evaluation results reach their intended audience, policy recommendations will not be translated from paper into practice if sufficient funding for implementation is unavailable.⁴⁵

Financial resource and capacity challenges are often most pronounced among actors on the front lines of migrant integration. European cities are increasingly responsible for designing and implementing integration initiatives, yet this increase in responsi-

bility has often not been matched by an increase in funding and training.⁴⁶ The civil-society organisations that supplement government integration programmes rely heavily on volunteers, who often lack relevant training and skills, and these organisations' tight budgets leave little room for evaluation.⁴⁷ This lack of resources can become a vicious cycle. Organisations that conduct evaluations and prove their programmes' effectiveness are more likely to receive funding for their interventions, but conducting those evaluations in the first place requires a certain amount of funding and expertise.⁴⁸ This resource gap is particularly acute in European countries that are receiving the bulk of asylum seekers, where there are limited resources for even direct service delivery (such as emergency response, health care, and language courses), let alone evidence-informed policymaking.⁴⁹

3 Strategies to Promote an Evidence Culture

Policymakers at the EU and national levels can use a number of strategies to overcome the obstacles that have hindered evidence-informed integration policymaking to date and to leverage recent innovations in this area. This section focuses specifically on ways to promote the conditions needed for evidence-informed policymaking to flourish at each stage of the policy cycle.⁵⁰ Many of these strategies also hold promise for integration policymaking beyond Europe, given that the challenges they seek to address are present in many countries around the world.

A. *Cultivating political buy-in through pilot projects*

Pilot projects can help build political buy-in by reducing the risks and costs involved in launching

large-scale programmes and by making it less costly to discontinue those that are unsuccessful. It is important, however, not to fall into the trap of 'pilotitis'—the overuse of pilot projects while failing to implement recommendations or scale up those that are effective.⁵¹

Pilot projects have long been used to promote innovation and learning in other policy fields⁵² and have recently gained traction in the field of integration. Examples include the VIA programme in the Netherlands (see Box 3) and Includ-EU. The latter initiative used pilot projects to promote cooperation between local and regional authorities from across Europe, thus enhancing transnational mutual learning. Under Includ-EU, each participating authority introduced a pilot project that promotes the integration of third-country nationals at the regional or local level. A pilot project led by the Association of Municipalities of Tuscany, for example, aimed to address the temporary housing needs of migrants not entitled to reception services.⁵³ Each pilot project under Includ-EU is required to develop a monitoring framework to assess the project's implementation, distil lessons, and consider the project's potential to be replicated or scaled up into regional measures.⁵⁴

To tap into the benefits of pilot projects and encourage the production and use of evidence, policymakers could make funding for pilots conditional on certain criteria. This could include requiring proposals to be rooted in evidence, involve stakeholders and incorporate monitoring and evaluation throughout the life cycle of the project, and develop plans to disseminate the data gathered. Policymakers should also publicly express their support for these efforts and ensure project managers have access to the resources needed to implement lessons learnt in the course of the pilot and, more importantly, to scale up those that work.

BOX 3**Innovation and obstacles: Using evidence to inform Dutch labour market integration policy**

The VIA programme (Verdere Integratie op de Arbeidsmarkt, or Further Integration in the Labour Market) was commissioned by the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs and Employment and aims to support the labour market integration of people with a non-Western migration background. This programme provides lessons on how to promote an evidence culture throughout the policy cycle and also highlights obstacles on the road to that goal.

Innovations and best practices

The VIA programme has a unique model composed of eight pilot projects tackling different aspects of labour market integration, both on the demand side (e.g., education and skills) and supply side (e.g., discrimination during the hiring process). The multi-pilot and staggered nature of the programme has meant that lessons can be learnt in earlier pilots and used to improve later ones (e.g., how to set up partnerships or contract out research). Moreover, effective pilots can be scaled up right away.

The VIA programme is also linked up with and embedded in other, broader initiatives, such as the Taskforce on Work and Integration and the Working Agenda for Further Integration in the Labour Market, amplifying its impact beyond that of scaling up individual pilot projects. Moreover, the VIA team's embrace of a 'policy entrepreneur' strategy has led them to share the project's rationale and lessons about what works through videos, campaigns, and presentations.

An important aspect of the VIA programme has been the strong support it has had at both the political and grassroots levels. The Dutch minister of social affairs and employment has made the programme one of his top priorities and ensured access to the necessary resources. And the multistakeholder structure of the programme—involving, for example, municipalities, educational institutions, and employers—has helped win and maintain the engagement of key stakeholders. This has allowed the programme to benefit from their on-the-ground knowledge and experience, while also amplifying the programme's impact by encouraging these stakeholders to adopt lessons learnt in their own activities beyond the programme.

Obstacles

Despite being an exemplary model of innovation in evidence-informed policymaking, the VIA programme has faced significant challenges. In the early stages, municipalities were reluctant to welcome the programme as they did not want to jeopardise or question policies already in place. The high initial investment needed to run the new pilot projects, while results and financial benefits would only emerge in the long term, also held back many municipalities. The VIA team was able to convince some local governments to join the programme by leveraging existing evidence to highlight the gaps between the socio-economic position of migrants and the native born. Still, some employers and municipalities were reluctant to participate in randomised controlled trials because it raised ethical concerns about depriving some people of access to potentially effective services.

When it came to scaling up promising pilots, the VIA has struggled with municipalities' and employers' inconsistent, and at times nonexistent, implementation of suggested interventions and recommendations. The team has tried to mitigate this through consistent coordination and communication with the partners. This phase has also faced resource challenges, even though the programme is well financed. There has often been a shortage of high-quality client managers to coach migrants on their path to labour market integration, which has made it difficult to further scale up the VIA model.

When reflecting on the VIA programme's impact beyond the scaling up of effective pilots, its link to the Taskforce on Work and Integration has provided a unique springboard for informing broader policy change. Yet, translating lessons from the ground into more generally applicable policy recommendations has often resulted in abstract suggestions that are difficult to implement. Lastly, the programme has only focused on disseminating its integration-related evidence and evidence-informed policy best practices within the Netherlands. Evidence is only available in Dutch and is tucked away on the Dutch government's website, making it difficult to access. The degree to which interventions that worked well in the Dutch context could work elsewhere is also unclear.

Sources: Gregor Walz, Auke Witkamp, Noortje Hipper, and Lennart de Ruig, *Evaluatie Programma Verdere Integratie op de Arbeidsmarkt: Derde Rapport Uitvoering, Opbregsten en Impact van Het Programma* (The Hague: Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2021); author interview with Jürgen Wander, Programme Manager, VIA Programme at the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 1 March 2022.

B. Incentivising government investments in evidence-informed policymaking by using a tiered funding model

Although evidence-informed policymaking involves extra costs, establishing a culture of evidence can save money down the road by reducing wasteful spending, increasing cost-effectiveness,⁵⁵ and making it easier to identify policies with the highest return on investment.⁵⁶ One way to reduce resource barriers and fund evidence-informed policy initiatives is through tiered-evidence grants. These funds distribute large scale-up grants to support the expansion or replication of practices backed by strong evidence, moderate validation grants for promising practices with some evidence, and smaller development grants for high-potential but relatively untested practices.⁵⁷ This approach incentivises governments to use funding to promote evidence-informed policymaking by linking the use of strong evidence to a higher funding tier. These funds also contribute to the expansion of the evidence base in a field because they typically include dedicated funding for evaluations. Such an approach has been used successfully in international development policymaking, fostering both innovation and the creation of an evidence base.⁵⁸

However, making funding dependent on the use of evidence carries the risk of excluding smaller organisations that do not have the capacity to conduct evaluations.⁵⁹ It is thus important to strike a balance between promoting an evidence culture and equipping funding recipients—and especially smaller organisations—with the necessary knowledge and tools to meet grant criteria and effectively collect and use robust evidence.⁶⁰

C. Facilitating stakeholder involvement throughout the policy cycle

Involving key stakeholders, especially beneficiaries and practitioners, throughout the entire policy cycle is crucial for effective evidence-informed policymaking. The early involvement of migrant and refugee beneficiaries can help ensure that integration programmes meet their needs and address obstacles that others in the policymaking process may not have identified.⁶¹ At the same time, involving practitioners throughout the policy cycle can promote a sense of ownership over its results and ensure that the recommendations that come out of a project evaluation reflect the reality on the ground in terms of capacity and resources, ultimately increasing their effectiveness.⁶² Furthermore, engaging civil-society actors in the decision-making process can generate a broader consensus and increase the legitimacy of initiatives.⁶³

One example of an effective, cooperative process was the 2019 redesign of the UK Home Office's Indicators of Integration, which sought to build on the strengths and address the limitations of the previous framework.⁶⁴ Refugees and other local residents co-developed the project and its recommendations as part of a consultative body.⁶⁵ The initiative also involved discussions and workshops with representatives of nongovernmental organisations that work with refugees, refugee advocates, policymakers, and practitioners to gather input on the utility of the existing evaluation framework.⁶⁶

To encourage this type of approach, policymakers should introduce formal requirements for stakeholder involvement throughout policy cycle.⁶⁷ This engagement should start early in the process with the clarification of what each stakeholder's role and

responsibilities will be⁶⁸ and involve a range of actors (especially programme beneficiaries and practitioners). Policymakers can also encourage these stakeholders to develop a strong sense of commitment to the process by clearly communicating about the importance of their involvement and supporting beneficiaries' participation by providing remuneration for their time.⁶⁹ Formal communication channels and permanent dialogue structures, such as forums and facilitated information exchanges, can help facilitate ongoing stakeholder involvement.

D. Building capacity through better access to training resources

Investing in the capacity of policymakers and other stakeholders to use evidence-informed techniques is crucial to increasing uptake of such methods in the integration field.⁷⁰ Toolkits, training sessions, and peer-learning networks have been successfully used in other policy areas to increase this capacity.⁷¹ The UK Alliance for Useful Evidence, for example, provides tailored masterclasses for policymakers, training them to understand research evidence and increasing their ability to apply evidence through simulations.⁷² But while many resources and tools exist to train policymakers on how to evaluate policies, these tools often do not cover the full policymaking cycle and do not address challenges to evidence-informed policymaking that are specific to the migrant integration field.

There are also gaps in who has access to training. Although evidence-informed policymaking should involve a wide range of actors, most capacity-building efforts to date have focused on training evaluators.⁷³ Far less attention has gone to developing the skills of policymakers and practitioners, especially at the local level, who often have limited expertise and time to self-evaluate their practices⁷⁴ and who are often unable to afford to employ external evaluators.

Although evidence-informed policymaking should involve a wide range of actors, most capacity-building efforts to date have focused on training evaluators.

EU and national policymakers could help bridge these resource gaps by creating or funding targeted toolkits and training sessions. In doing so, these efforts could adapt existing evidence-informed policy toolkits and training materials to tackle the specific methodological challenges in the immigrant integration field. They should also take a holistic view of the policy cycle and address how evidence plays a role in each step. In addition to developing such learning materials, training on how to apply these tools is often needed to maximise their impact. To reduce costs, integration policymakers could learn from the train-the-trainer approach used in public health and other fields, through which a pool of individuals receive training from a master trainer and then go on to help others develop the same skills—a model that promises to increase impact and reduce costs.⁷⁵

E. Improving access to evidence and mutual learning with online databases and multistakeholder networks

One way to make the most of costly evaluations is for policymakers to promote and facilitate the dissemination of evaluation results through online databases.⁷⁶ This does not, however, mean creating more databases. Instead, leveraging and improving existing databases to make evidence more accessible and easier to understand is key. Existing databases such as the more academic Migration Research Hub (<https://migrationresearch.com/>) and the more policy-oriented European Website on Integration

(https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/home_en) provide a wealth of information, yet neither has a dedicated section or search category for policy evaluations. The utility of these databases stands or falls with the willingness and ability of government agencies, nongovernmental organisations, and others to submit best practices and evaluation results. Yet, because many integration projects have limited resources, dissemination activities such as this are often not a top priority.

Access to evidence on integration policies could be improved in a number of ways. This includes enhancing existing databases by adding more detailed categorisation systems that allow users to search for evaluation results, adding (more) policy evaluations to their collections, and including practical tools to help policymakers and practitioners conduct policy evaluations. Policymakers could promote the use of key databases by requiring recipients of funding (e.g., from AMIF) to submit evaluation reports to these databases and by dedicating portions of the funding to evidence dissemination activities. Policymakers could also help reduce linguistic barriers to evidence-sharing by allocating funding to the translation of at least the key evaluation findings into English, which could then be shared on the European Website on Integration and other databases.

Beyond databases, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners should leverage existing and new multistakeholder networks to facilitate evidence-sharing

and mutual learning, thus strengthening the policy-research-practice nexus. Lastly, it is important to encourage a culture shift among actors in the field, away from only gathering and sharing ‘good practices’, which promotes a dichotomous view of integration practices as either good or bad and misses the opportunity to learn from a range of experiences. Instead, integration stakeholders should be encouraged to learn from practices that work and those that have not worked or had mixed results.

4 A Look Ahead

Immigrant integration policies that are proven to work and are cost-effective are essential to ensuring that migrants and the communities they live in can thrive. Although obstacles exist to building a culture of evidence in the integration field, so too do potential routes to overcome these obstacles. If policymakers are truly committed to taking a knowledge-based approach and promoting migrant integration policies that work, they will need to foster political buy-in to this approach, fund initiatives grounded in evidence and those that support capacity-building among key actors, and promote greater stakeholder involvement and evidence sharing. Great progress has been made, but such investments are needed to nurture an environment in which evidence-informed policymaking becomes the standard mode of operation in the integration field.

Such investments are needed to nurture an environment in which evidence-informed policymaking becomes the standard mode of operation in the integration field.

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