



Analysis of the decision-support function of policy assessment in real-world policy making in the field of poverty and social inequalities. Case study on migrant integration policies in the Brussels-Capital Region



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ABSTRACT

Despite its high potential to support decision-making, the role of policy assessment in real-world policy making in the field of poverty and social inequalities remains largely questioned. In this study, we analyse policy assessment's role in a context of real-world policymaking, by means of a case study on a legislative proposal on integration policy for immigrant newcomers in the Brussels-Capital Region, for which we evaluate the potential effects on poverty and social inequalities. We first analyse the policy process surrounding the policy proposal – a process that is often treated as a black box within policy assessment research. Understanding the factors that influence and determine the decision-making process, enables us to gain insight into the potential decision-support function(s). Second, we develop an approach to policy assessment that aims to fully exploit its potential to contribute to the functions of both instrumental and conceptual learning. For this purpose, we propose to introduce the approach of realist evaluation and to focus on evaluating the underlying policy intervention theory from the perspective of poverty and social inequalities. Finally, we illustrate this new approach and its added value by applying it to the legislative proposal on integration policy and analyse its contribution to policy-oriented learning.

1. Introduction

Different forms of policy assessment have spread rapidly around the world in the last few decades. By policy assessment we refer to the policy-level application of impact assessment, seeking to inform decision makers on the potential impacts of policy options. Different forms of policy assessment exist, taking into consideration different types of relevant impacts (Adelle and Weiland, 2012). Policy assessment has the potential to integrate crosscutting issues, such as poverty and social inequalities, at the initial stages of the decision making process across all sectors of public policy. However, its role within the policymaking process remains largely questioned, lacking hard evidence on its direct effectiveness in changing policy decisions. With the application of impact assessment on a policy level, a number of fundamental questions arise regarding its decision-support function. Earlier, we analysed these questions from a public policy analysis perspective (Feyaerts et al.,

2017). We argued how, as a result of an underlying rational model of the policy process, the focus regarding both the conceptualisation of policy assessment and the evaluation of its effectiveness has mainly been on the specific decision-support function of instrumental policy-learning, where knowledge is directly used to take actual decisions. At the moment of actual application, especially in the case of wicked issues such as poverty and social inequalities, this model often clashes with the inherent messiness of real-world policymaking, which undermines a direct use of knowledge. We proposed to complement the dominant focus on instrumental learning with an analysis of the conditions for a second decision-support function, namely the more indirect function of conceptual policy-learning.

The present article presents a case study where this conceptual framework on the decision-support function of policy assessment was tested in a actual policy case. The Brussels-Capital Health and Social Observatory, a governmental research center, was commissioned to

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evaluate the potential impact on poverty and social inequalities of a legislative proposal to introduce mandatory integration programmes for immigrant newcomers in the Brussels-Capital Region, by means of a Poverty Impact Assessment (PIA). For the purpose of the present article, we analysed this case study from two perspectives. First, we analyse the policy process surrounding the legislative proposal in question in order to confront and deepen our understanding of the potential role(s) of policy assessment within this policy process. Second, we analyse the way in which the PIA was designed and applied to fulfil this potential role(s), focusing more in particular on the underlying evaluation approach.

This analysis offers innovative insights in the way policy assessment can influence policy-making processes, responds to a growing interest for this type of analysis and fits into a growing area of research (Adelle and Weiland, 2012). Transcending the level of the precise case study, it offers wider learning points that can be a source of inspiration for other types of policy assessment, particularly in the field of so-called wicked policy issues.

2. Methods

Analysing policy assessment's potential role(s) within the policy process and the way it can be designed and applied to fulfil this role(s) requires empirical analysis of actual cases in real-world policymaking. We applied a case study analysis on the PIA that was conducted on the legislative proposal on integration programmes for immigrant newcomers in the Brussels-Capital Region.

Our research fits in an 'intervention research' stance (David, 2013), as it consisted in an intervention in the field, helping to (re)design and implement an appropriate model of PIA based on an analysis of the decision-making process. In contrast to the more frequent retrospective case studies being analysed by researchers *from the outside*, we made a real-time observation of a PIA application *from the inside*, as the first author of the present article was himself responsible for the design and application of the actual PIA.

2.1. Data collection

In his capacity of researcher responsible for the conduct of the PIA, the first author was actively involved in both the policy and assessment process and could use this position to directly observe and collect key information on how both processes work and (could) interact. During the period from November 2015 to July 2016 he assisted at 4 formal policy meetings, interviewed all 5 ministerial advisors that worked on the policy case and had several informal exchanges with these advisors, had access to draft versions of the legislative proposal and policy notes, analysed the parliamentary debate, interviewed 3 academic experts and 8 professionals from the field of migrant integration and/or poverty and conducted a literature review. Notes were taken during these meetings and interviews, which were edited by means of 'field notes' in a 'reflective journal'.

2.2. Data analysis

For the purpose of the present article, we analysed the collected data to test the conceptual framework on the decision-support function of policy assessment. The collected data were analysed on two levels:

- To develop and confront our understanding of the policy process, by linking the observations with intermediate or more general theories emanating from political science. For this analysis, the analytical framework developed by Howlett et al. (2009) was used. Rather than limiting themselves to one single theory, they offer a broad range of approaches for the study of the policy process. This framework was also identified by Harris et al. (2014) after a systematic research of the use of public policy analysis within the research on

Health Impact Assessment.

- To test how policy assessment could integrate the approach of realist evaluation

Findings and interpretations were presented by the first author, and examined and discussed in a scientific committee made up of the three other authors of this article, who were not directly implied in the assessment process. These results were further deepened and refined at the moment of drafting the present article.

3. Description and screening of the policy proposal

The policy proposal to oblige recent immigrant newcomers to follow an 'integration programme' when arriving in the Brussels-Capital Region, was formulated by the Brussels Government (the College of the Joint Community Commission, CCC). The objective of this programme is to support newcomers via an individualised guidance and education programme (language lessons, citizenship courses and socio-professional orientation) in order to increase their autonomy and to promote their social, economic and cultural inclusion. Today two integration programmes are operational in the Brussels region: a Dutch-language programme (organised by the Flemish Community) and a French-language programme organised by (French Community Commission, COCOF). The proposed legislation is designed to oblige recent newcomers to follow one of these programmes and to set out the material framework of the mandatory integration programme in terms of the contours of the obligation and compliance with it, the steps and procedure involved, the application of any sanctions, the target audience and the exemptions, the delivery of certificates, etc.

To evaluate the feasibility to apply a PIA, we can screen the policy proposal both in terms of content and timing. First, in terms of policy content, we can see that this proposal introduces an obligation that targets a potentially large group of the population. With the Brussels Region as the largest access gateway for international migration in Belgium, approximately one-tenth of the Brussels population falls into the broad category of 'newcomer' (i.e. a resident of foreign nationality who has lived in Belgium for less than three years and who has a residency permit for longer than three months). This concerns a very heterogeneous population in terms of their origin, their reasons for migrating as well as their socio-demographic profile – and hence in terms of the specific difficulties they face. A large proportion of the newcomers – and in particular non-European immigrants – experience a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. For example, the at-risk-of-poverty rate¹ of non-European migrants in Belgium is 41,5%, compared to 10,9% for the population born in Belgium (Eurostat figures 2015). Second, in terms of timing or policy opportunity, the policymakers who commissioned the PIA stated that we found ourselves at an ideal moment in the policy process according to the ideal model of policy assessment: early enough, as important decisions still had to be taken, but not too early; the policy proposal had already taken shape, which meant that an impact assessment could be carried out.

4. Results

The results of our analysis are presented in three sections. The first section contains an analysis of the policy process that led to the governments' proposal to introduce obligatory integration programmes. Despite the explicit aim of influencing the policy process, research on policy assessment is generally lacking this kind of in-depth analysis (Adelle et al., 2012; Hertin et al., 2009; Owens et al., 2004; Harris et al., 2014; Bekker, 2007). The policy process and the policy assessment

¹ The *at-risk-of-poverty rate* is the share of people with an equivalised disposable income below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, set at 60% of the median disposable income on a national level.

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