

## COMPAS Policy Day: Addressing the Evidence Gap



A roundtable discussion was held on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 2004 bringing together colleagues from across government, trade unions and NGOs to identify key migration-related issues which policy-makers and practitioners consider to be in need of research.

Reflecting the priorities of the ESRC itself, COMPAS is determined to ensure that its research is relevant to the needs of a range of policy-makers and practitioners. It is widely acknowledged that there are significant issues around migration for which little policy-relevant data and analysis exists. One of our Centre's objectives is to help close that gap.

The discussion was held under Chatham House rules, not to discuss the successes and failures of policy itself, but to open up a dialogue focussed on addressing the evidence gap within policy. The following notes summarise issues and research questions that arose during the discussion:

1. The need for policy research
2. Relationships between academics and policy makers/users
3. Problems encountered by research
4. Evaluating information types
5. The policy context
6. Research questions:
  - Domestic Policy Agenda
  - Labour Market
  - International and European Agenda
  - Asylum and Refugees
  - Integration
7. Participants list

### 1. The need for policy research

- Migration is an emotionally charged area of debate and one that easily descends into an exchange of prejudices. Public opinion and media coverage trigger responses from Ministers who are forced to confront newspaper headlines on a daily basis. Therefore, research needs to change the parameters of the debate as well as informing decisions.
- Research will only be one factor influencing policy making, but it is necessary in order to:
  - go alongside information that it is being fed upwards from front line operational officers
  - challenge and evaluate policy in order to make any shifts
  - justify change
- Policy makers often need to make instant responses which might mean that they are happy to accept research that has not been completed or not a major study, but this is still preferable to no research.
- Evidence needs to be focussed. 'Soft information', rather than hard and fast information might have to be used (e.g. psychological/motivational factors, focus groups, operational and anecdotal information) if this is all that can be produced within the given time.
- Local authorities work in various ways, some are myth-busting, some are scape-goating and others simply do nothing - there is a lot of scope for research to inform good practise.

- Policy decisions are often taken with a purpose, in relation to an immediate problem. It is true that little research is undertaken before decisions are made, but more importantly even less research is done afterwards or at a comparative level to evaluate the success of decisions.
- Research can, and should, interrogate policy objectives and where the government has stated objectives, it can investigate whether these are being met.

## 2. Relationships between academics and policy makers/users

- The commitment to evidence-based policy-making dates back to 1997 and there is a real thirst for it in government. However, the rapid pace of policy change is a problem, as government researchers may have relatively little experience of the particular issue and academic partners may be required to deliver research in a way that does not best suit them.
- Research has a legitimisation function, it can be used to postpone a decision or justify one. For commissioned work especially, if findings contradict the Government line, then it can heavily be negotiated which may lose its impact, lead to it being changed or even not published.
- Tensions over responsibilities between different government departments can be difficult and complex, but joint-departmental work is now more frequently attempted.
- National government is not the only potential consumer of research.
- The European approach is necessary and complimentary to national debate. Budget lines are a good clue as to what current policy priorities.
- Local authorities have a strong interest in asylum and immigration because they deal with: social/economic development, planning, equality, public health, community safety etc - on these things it could be argued that researchers should be addressing the local rather than the national level.
- Research indicates that public opinion is shaped locally and that national media only has a strong influence when it echoes personal and local experiences.
- The NGO sector may be a good entry point for academics into Government because they have pre-established contacts. Moreover, research can be backed up with the reality of front line experience. On the other hand, if an NGO position contradicts Government policy the advice might be ignored.
- Relations with NGOs will only have a potentially productive impact if they are established within the *early* stages of research design.
- Communities should be involved in research, but what counts as a group and whose voice is being heard?
- Presentation is key. Research needs to be persuasive and accessible even if it is challenging. There are gaps in evidence, but there are also gaps in knowledge that could be overcome by better presentation of research findings.

## 3. Problems encountered by research

- Maintaining distance between academic researchers and the relevant government department is a fine line to tread when you need to be engaged in policy debate and yet remain independent.
- Access to information can be problematic if you are not considered completely independent. When there are a series of repressive policies then a circle of distrust will cause informants to be less forthcoming.
- Time scales will inevitably differ between Government and Academia - i.e. the 'academic long-term view' and the policy-maker's short term information requirements on 2-3 year policy cycles. This mismatch highlights the potentially useful role of interim results, but also the problem of maintaining academic integrity. Longitudinal surveys for example can be designed in a way that periodically produces useful data for the policy process.

- Resources can be a problem. More qualitative exploratory research may present alternative ideas, but this is costly in an area where resources are limited.
- Persuading businesses to make time even for 'mini-research' can be difficult - anecdotal evidence might be more realistic
- Policy makers tend to take a national perspective, while business takes an international perspective, since they are drawing on a global talent pool.
- Within the NGO refugee field the tendency is to be afraid to interrogate the figures in case they receive answers that they do not want to hear.
- Government has a poor appetite for research evidence on asylum immigration, compared with its interest in evidence related to labour migration. The common division into legal 'migration' and 'illegal migration and asylum' - constitutes an unhealthy meshing of concepts at the policy level.
- Researchers present facts, but to what degree do researchers control how those facts are used in the debate?

#### 4. Evaluating information types

- Different pieces of evidence, depending on how they are collected and presented, will be given different weights. In particular, quantitative evidence may be valued over qualitative evidence, which is often dismissed as not substantial enough.
- Information must have a sensitive presentation, primarily it should not be sensational to the press. Researchers should not play to the media if they want to be taken seriously in government. Polemical research is not bad it is just more difficult to use.
- Research needs to say what is going on, but also give suggestions for change.
- Complexity is an answer in itself. Sometimes you simply don't know the answer, but trying to find one at least brings you up to another level of not knowing something.
- New and recent evidence, rather than retrospective analysis of where policy went wrong in the past, is more useful in suggesting the least bad way forward. (But for whom?)
- There is an inherent conflict between those value human rights as the basis for asylum and those supporting a political dialogue where human rights barely feature. There is always a need to provide a business case, but the bottom line that this is not always possible.
- Because asylum is such an emotive issue, there should be an onus on researchers to be doubly careful to be unemotive.
- What counts as research evidence? How in-depth should a study be to be acceptable?

#### 5. The policy context

- At EU level there is a great deal of optimism surrounding the change to an Irish presidency. There will be no immediate hurry to take on new initiatives before the ones currently on the table are dealt with, but then there will be a flurry of activity. The commission will need well targeted research based on the political agenda, especially focussing on how to improve things EU level.
- 3 main areas of policy development to look to since Amsterdam Treaty
  - Migration management
  - Integration
  - Relationships with country of origin
- There is a double message currently being put out by government - that we are multicultural and dynamic country, but at the same time we do not like foreign 'spongers'.
- The Race Relations Amendment Act gave the public responsibility to promote good relations and foster a culture of anti-racism. This definitely links to integration and community cohesion. Government departments are especially obliged to take account of this act, so it is something that needs to be more fully exploited.

Departments have to listen and they are struggling with it. For example you could look at the family probationary period in terms of the adverse side effects on community cohesion.

- Two-way integration is too simplistic: there are many different people and communities that should be part of any equation.

## 6. Research Questions

### Domestic Policy Agenda

- What is happening to groups of specific nationalities? Why are asylum claims coming from particular people and particular places, beyond the broad general trends?
- How are we affected by secondary migration and circulation? How can we understand this better without knowing exactly who is leaving or moving?
- What is the best way to join up work and priorities in different Government departments?
- How can we operate better policies of refugee integration and inclusion?
- How are illegal migrants fed into the labour market? Where is the demand? How does it work? How should we regularise illegal workers?
- How should public services be distributed? What use do different groups make of different services? What is the role of benefits provision in determining choice of UK as destination?
- Why are people coming to the UK and not to other countries?
- What routes are people taking to get to the UK?
- How much are people paying to get to the UK and to whom?
- What are the drivers of migration? Why do people move? What are the reasons for movement of different groups: historical, economic, social and political drivers?
- Reflecting on migration in the context of globalisation, and EU enlargement - will people move less or more?
- What are the impacts of migration? Are there different impacts attached to: temporary / permanent / circular migration or different scales of movement?
- How does migration affect other things, such as: race relations, health services, identity and impacts in sending countries?
- What is the UK public attitude to migration? How do people respond to migration? Opinion Polls suggest that most people in the UK do not like migration, but offer little detail as to why this should be, or the variables of that opinion. (IPPR is currently working with local authorities, CRE and NASS etc, on this topic.)
- Juxtaposed controls with French immigration - how is this working in practice?
- How will a permanent policy for 'earned regularisation' actually work? Is it a real policy option?

### Labour Market

- What are the effects of migration on the labour market?
- What are the fiscal impacts of migration? (various recent studies should be built on)
- What are the impacts of different *types* of migrants? Analysis is needed by Home Office categories of entrance, but also taking into account links between labour routes and non-labour routes such as refugees and family reunion, the impact of low and high skilled migrants respectively, and temporary, permanent and circular migrants. How can it be inclusive and yet less complex?
- What are the mechanisms that explain why migration does not adversely affect the wages of the rest of the population?
- What are the economic benefits (and costs e.g. to public services) of migration and how can we measure them? What value are specific schemes, especially the Highly Skilled Migrants Programme, bringing to the UK economy?

- How does the labour market operate at the low-skilled end? What supply chains of illegal workers operate? What is the nature of jobs taken by migrants in different sectors?
- The sector-based work permit scheme is deliberately tentative. What is the actual impact of low-skilled immigration? How important is the sector-based scheme to employers and is it really reducing illegal immigration as intended?
- What are the links between legal and illegal routes? Can opening legal migration routes reduce illegal immigration and asylum applications?
- Why are there labour market gaps that cannot be filled? Is it because UK workers want more pay or have higher expectations? How can the Work Permits scheme be adjusted to meet gaps in certain sectors?
- What are the implications of increasing off-shoring?
- What are the methods of overseas recruitment of employees and what is the role of agents?

### International and European Agenda

- Labour market analysis of skilled and semi or unskilled migrants, how do we achieve a more holistic approach?
- How does non-migration policy impact on migration? e.g. what impacts do things such as Foreign direct Investments and poverty reduction strategy papers have on migration?
- What are the patterns of international and domestic (internal) remittances, in terms of: scale, costs, recipients, policy recommendations etc.
- Why are some migrants invisible? (women, children, internal etc.). What incentives exist to increase visibility and thus protection?
- How can we increase collection and accuracy in migration data?
- If migration needs assessment - how do you do it and how do you recruit the right people to help assess?
- How is it best to address the immigration/integration split within Europe?
- Should we be assisting our neighbours to close doors and if so, how?
- Trade within Europe needs a consistency of approach. For example, what are the knock on effects of agricultural policy?
- What can we learn from other internal/international flows and management programmes?

### Asylum and refugees

- Participatory research is not well developed in the UK - what ways can refugees be more involved in research?
- Does the policy on asylum actually work? What are the unintended side effects of this policy?
- Is policy two faced? Are some policies that are trying to attract certain people also influencing others peoples' choices?
- How effective is our asylum policy given the huge numbers of appeals?
- Is destitution being used as a policy instrument?
- Does the reduction in the numbers of asylum seekers mean that refugees are increasingly coming as undocumented migrants? What about failed refugees who remain outside the UK but have good cases?
- What is the quality of the casework on failed asylum seekers (benchmarking, quality of communication and interpreters)?
- Why are people late claimants - are people scared, trying it on or just confused?
- How do arrivals from abroad increase the political opportunity for nationalism?
- What is the impact of UK foreign policy, e.g. trade and arms policy, on migration?
- Lifetime assessment of asylum seekers - how should this be factored into any economic cost-benefit analysis?

- Why do asylum seekers choose particular countries to apply for asylum?
- How is public opinion formed on asylum issues in UK?
- What happened to past policies? What are the successes and failures?
- The UK is part of the EU Common Market - therefore we need comparative research on asylum policies and their efficacy. The UK is not the only place struggling with this challenge.
- What would a sustainable returns policy look like? How can voluntary return be made a realistic option for rejected asylum seekers and other irregular migrants? What would be the net effect of relaxing immigration controls - Is it true that more would return to their country of origin? Due to patterns of circulation is integration becoming less relevant to London?

## Integration

- How can we better understand what is going on regionally, without focussing solely on migrants?
- How can we avoid long run exclusion?
- Indicators are sometimes a useful guide but they cannot show depth - how can voices emerge?
- Community capacity is important and therefore we need to consider ideas that will work at the front line in specific areas.
- Does Day one matter and if so, why?
- Does a tough as old boots policy on asylum controls ease community tensions and enhance community cohesion?
- What are the links between arrival of refugees or other new migrants and long term poverty and how can they be eliminated?
- If successful development requires integration where are the structures through which this can happen? What can policy do? Build bridges or remove barriers?
- The new requirements for naturalisation should be considered. For example in Education - what are the effects of different approaches? Who teaches? Are migrant/human rights mainstreamed within the curriculum?
- How do immigration rules and discretionary power within these rules advantage or disadvantage certain groups?
- What are the implications of negative public attitudes and who decides on validity?

## 7. Participants

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