COMPAS Breakfast Briefing Summary

What works in integration?

This briefing sets out initial findings from an Institute for Strategic Dialogue research project, which sought to explore the challenges of evaluating integration and gather best practices and learning points to inform government and foundation approaches to designing and evaluating integration programmes.

Integration: A variety of approaches

There are mixed views across Europe about what integration is: its aims, end goals, and target audiences. There are also competing schools of thinking about definitions and conceptual approaches. NGOs often disagree about the best approach. This leads to two key challenges in evaluating integration.

Lack of policy coherence

Most countries struggle to design coherent integration policies. First, there is often no single ministry with responsibility for integration issues, which means that targets are not set in a coordinated manner and data is not collected in a structured way. This is accompanied by a lack of infrastructure for reliable monitoring of integration outcomes.

Second, different European countries adopt a **variety of definitions of integration**, or have none at all. For example, despite considering integration to be 'one of the most important domestic tasks,' the German government uses no standardised definition of integration, nor is there a comprehensive integration strategy articulated in the UK. When responsibility for integration is spread across different levels of policy, and there are independent roles for departments, regions or cities with no uniform language used, collecting and interpreting data can be difficult.

Third, evaluation is further complicated by **disagreement about who should be the focus of integration** policies. Many integration policies have targeted migrant communities, but define these in different ways and fail to differentiate in relation to length of stay, nationality, or circumstances of migration, all of which impact on the pace of integration and the types of challenges encountered by these communities. What's more, **although policymakers and practitioners agree that integration should be a two-way process, this is not reflected in the way that** policy and projects are designed in practice or the choice of target groups for intervention. Integration's reciprocal nature hasn't been explicitly monitored.

A heavily politicised issue

Integration has become a politically charged area of policy, sometimes used by politicians for their own ends, and often in a loaded way to evoke emotional responses. This affects how policy is delivered and limits evaluation efforts in several ways.

First, the **political debate on integration tends to be based on 'knee-jerk' responses to largely unrelated perceived problems,** which has sometimes led to integration being framed as a problem of national security, or as an issue pertaining to 'problem' communities. Public and political discussions about integration have often been hampered by short-term visions, driven by the need to solve the latest crisis rather than address longer-term challenges. In reality, integration is a process that can take many generations to take hold.

Second, there has been a **shift from the promotion of multiculturalism towards an assimilationist rhetoric** in some countries, in which newcomers are expected to adapt to a dominant national culture. This is framed by a shift in political language from an emphasis on 'rights and duties' to one of migrants' 'obligations'. It also shifts the weight of responsibility for integration to minorities themselves, failing to recognise structural factors.

Third, there is a **lack of comprehensive data on the broad range of integration outcomes and datasets tend to be used inappropriately.** When evaluating integration, many countries focus on 'structural' indicators, such as performance in the labour market and the education system. These elements are easier to quantify and measure and have associated data sets. However, public and political

debates tend to focus on the more nebulous socio-cultural aspects of integration, like social participation, cultural values, perceptions of groups, belonging and trust, which governments find much harder to evaluate. Where evidence is available, it has often been used in ways that misjudge the complexity of public opinion, or that polarise it further.

Key learnings

A number of **learning points for governments, trusts and foundations** have emerged from our research, including the need to recognise the limits of policy, but also identify how policy can have the greatest impact.

While public and political debates on integration have twisted and turned, practitioners simply adopt a 'get on with it' attitude. NGOs and direct service organisations are far more flexible than government departments, work with wider constituencies than those defined by policy, and continually evaluate and re-inform their work. The independence of trusts and foundations gives them a unique role in integration programming, granting them the ability to provide honest and critical assessment and access to best practices and learning points from the organisations they fund. With recent fiscal cuts, many civil society organisations are operating on much reduced budgets. Governments need to invest in longer-term initiatives.

Second, practitioners in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden unanimously agree that **building trust between and within communities is integral to all aspects of integration programming**. Civil society organisations naturally build the types of relationships and community confidence lacking at the governmental level. This has been operationalized in a range of ways though decades of work, including facilitation of community hubs and local meeting spaces, provision of legal advice and basic services, and the testing of inter-community dialogue methods. **Governments must invest in the kinds of activities that foster trusted relationships and confidence because the success of more targeted integration policies relies on them being present.**

Finally, **governments must recognise that many elements of integration will not be quantifiable, especially the socio-cultural elements of integration,** such as social participation and cultural values. But, service delivery organisations are repositories for intelligence on integration; channels for this to feed into the policy protest are vital. Governments and donors should request, collate and publish learning points, best practices and data during the reporting process by their funded projects. This should also include data not generally valued in evaluation processes, such as personal testimonies, small-scale figures and best practices from the field. This would lead to a learning-based approach to evaluation, which is appropriate given the contested theories of change and paucity of hard data.

Up-scaling the impact of policy

The impact of integration efforts would be enhanced through more coherent national policy frameworks, particularly in countries where responsibility for integration spans different government departments and administrative levels. For example, the Swedish Government has set out a comprehensive integration strategy, with overarching goals of increasing the supply and demand of labour and improving educational achievement and equality in schools. The Mercator Foundation in Germany sets its goals in numbers, with a clear stated objective. There is a realistic understanding that attributing positive outcomes to specific policies will be hard, but such goals help to provide a focus for tracing progress towards a wider societal aim.

Governments need to review their target groups for integration policy in recognition of the fact that societies and the 'needs' of communities change over time and between places. Attention should be paid to shifts in new arrival groups, local challenges, and communities experiencing new problems. Similarly, if integration is to be understood as a 'two-way process,' then policy should include non-migrants and non-minorities as target groups, particularly where measures aim to impart cultural, behavioural, or attitudinal change. Of course, NGO targets often differ from national priorities, usually because national policy has not kept pace with the reality on the ground. This reinforces the need for better two-way flows of information between the policy and practical levels.

Finally, **governments should be aware of the ways in which mainstream policies can have unintended impacts on integration and look for ways to 'integration-proof' them.** There are examples of this approach in Sweden and the Netherlands, where for example, the Dutch Ministry of the Interior has launched the Diversity in Youth Policy Programme, which aims to ensure that migrant youth profit equally from all mainstream public youth services and welfare provisions. **Further investigation is required to examine how structural policies, such as labour, housing, education, and health policies, can impact the cultural and behavioural elements of integration.** Mainstreaming again relies on coherence across government, but there are signs that this type of approach delivers more value for wider society.

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