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# Strengthening evidence-informed policymaking on migration

The process of actively engaging with and creating spaces for reflecting on scientific evidence should be routinely incorporated in the policymaking process.

For researchers, it is not enough to bring evidence to policymakers. It is also important to present evidence in a contextualised, structured and understandable way addressing a particular question.

To create a strong science-policy dialogue, a continuous and interactive process is necessary that includes actors not only from the scientific and policy side but also stakeholders from civil society and other spheres.

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## Introduction

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Political decision-makers often rely on scientific evidence and expert knowledge as one of many inputs to make choices that align with their policy goals. However, given the increasing complexity of policy issues, time pressure, public expectations and institutional constraints, as well as the breadth of research and data available on migration now, identifying what is reliable knowledge is challenging. On 25 October 2021, Population Europe, together with the EU H2020 Projects VULNER and QuantMig, the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the International Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies in Potsdam brought together a group of eminent experts to discuss this topic. The experts exchanged their perspectives on how policymakers and actors involved in policymaking understand and use evidence for decision-making. They sought to answer questions on the role of scientists in the process of bringing scientific knowledge to the policy arena and on best practices and institutional strategies for improving evidence-informed policymaking in the area of migration.

There are many reasons why a discussion on the use of evidence in policymaking focused specifically on migration policies is crucial. First, migration as a policy field is complex, uncertain, full of trade-offs and surprises. On top of this, migration is also complicated to measure – and even more difficult to control or influence. Second, the multidisciplinary nature of migration studies can sometimes make it challenging to make bold and straightforward statements that are easily accessible for policymakers. Very often, there is disputed evidence, which adds to the challenge. Third, migration policy is also strongly influenced nationally and internationally by moral discourses for which there is no scientific basis. Science is thus an important, but not the only, source of legitimacy.

Participants in the discussion included Jakub Bijak, Professor of Statistical Demography at the University of Southampton, and Scientific Coordinator of the Horizon 2020 QuantMig project (grant 870299); Katharina Eisele, Policy Analyst at the European Parliamentary Research Service, Ex-Ante Impact Assessment Unit; Birte Fähnrich, Adjunct Professor at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies, Freie Universität Berlin; Amparo Gonzalez-Ferrer, Deputy Director for Migration Analysis, Secretary of State for Migrations, Spanish Ministry for Inclusion, Social Security and Migrations; Axel Kreienbrink, Sub-Director of the Migration, Integration and Asylum Research Centre, German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees; Luc

Leboeuf, Head of Research Group in the Department of Law and Anthropology at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, and Scientific Coordinator of the Horizon 2020 VULNER project (grant 870845); Luca Lixi, Policy Officer at the Migration and Human Security Division, European External Action Service; Ortwin Renn, Scientific Director at the International Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies and Professor at the University of Stuttgart; Jon Simmons, Head of Protection, Irregular Migration & Asylum Analysis and Migration Statistics at UK Home Office; Ann Singleton, Reader in Migration Policy, University of Bristol; and Dario Tarchi, Deputy Head, Demography, Migration and Governance Unit, Joint Research Centre, European Commission.

## Obstacles to transferring knowledge

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Identifying obstacles to knowledge transfer is challenging as it depends on institutional frameworks and policy choices. In our meeting, discussants suggested that the dynamics and inertia of everyday working routines inside public administrations, particularly those with large administrative responsibilities, certainly play a role in how open they are to science-policy dialogue. This leads to perceptions of institutions as rigid and perhaps provides little hope for improvement unless explicit institutional efforts are made to promote cooperation. Second, policymakers' interest in scientific evidence is often linked to legitimising concrete policy choices, implying that consultations with scholars might be oriented to a set of questions and not necessarily open listening to evidence or an assessment of a range of viable options.

As stressed by Ortwin Renn, it is important to understand that science advice moved from a 'truth speaks to power' dynamic to 'evidence-informed policymaking' a long time ago. It is very rare that a policy is fully driven by scientific evidence. Instead, more and more, policymakers listen to a diverse set of voices coming from everyday society. This is all the more true since, in the context of the digital media environment, a wide variety of players can involve themselves in political discourse. At the same time, the increasing complexity of public communication makes the search for and selection of scientific experts and reliable information more difficult.

Consequently, it is important that what is produced by scientists is not only properly communicated, but that it also comes from an unbiased perspective. The role of science and scientific advice should be to act as an 'honest broker'

(a term coined by Roger A. Pielke in his 2007 book), whose role it is to provide trusted evidence and analyses to facilitate evidence-informed decision-making, which is achieved when the advice is as free as possible from biases, external influences and advocacy. This role also comes with an honest acknowledgement of limitations, trade-offs, different sources of uncertainty and also personal biases.

## Establishing roles and promoting transparency in the science-policy interface

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Transparency is a key element in the process of scientific advice. To ensure transparency, it is important to clearly define roles before any project or dialogue starts. In addition, not overstepping one's areas of expertise is fundamental in this process, and for that, institutions requesting scientific advice or financing research should be very clear on what is demanded from scholars when designing initiatives and consultations. This would ensure an alignment between what knowledge is needed and the evidence presented.

Transparency also refers to the type of input or deliverables that are expected from scientists. While for some donors, it is expected that research results are delivered with policy recommendations as part of reports, for others, a preferable deliverable would include a research and evidence-based report and additional policy briefs or cover letters for policy recommendations. This ensures that new evidence is not dominated by advocacy goals or other non-scientific values, relevant as these may often be. It is important to mention that what the role of scientists is in providing policy recommendations is far from a consensus: while scholars can bring knowledge on facts and options, policymakers are those with the mandate to address and ideally resolve emerging trade-offs between conflicting values and to make the decisions.

## Institutional settings – what works?

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Participants shared examples of successful initiatives during the meeting. For example, the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) at the European Parliament was created in 2013 to support evidence-informed policymaking. The Ex-Ante Impact Assessment Unit of the EPRS routinely assesses the quality of the European Commission's impact assessments, and officials also produce impact

assessments on request. The objective is to provide policymakers in parliamentary committees with evidence and research so they can use it for their legislative activity. This comes with the specific challenges of identifying the necessary expertise and producing high-quality research in a short amount of time and often with limited resources.

The European Commission has a wide, complex and nested form of scientific policy advice. Examples include the Academies of Science, which, under the umbrella of the Science Advice for Policy by the European Academies (SAPEA), prepares analyses on politically pressing topics. These analytic studies are forwarded to the group of Chief Scientific Advisors, who articulate the policy recommendations based on the analytic report prepared by SAPEA.

In addition, European Commission's Joint Research Centres (JRC) produce scientific evidence to support the development and implementation of EU policies. In particular, the JRC has procedures in place to constantly engage in consultations on different policy initiatives inside the Commission. On top of this, the JRC provides evidence in the form of briefings or other materials upon request. JRC Knowledge Centres function on the basis of dialogue with EU policymakers to define their workplan and deliverables, while also sustaining a close link during the preparation of deliverables, which is key for the success of the initiatives.

Another example is the UK Home Office, where Jon Simons is one of the senior leaders in an organisation with more than 200 researchers, statisticians and economists providing analytical advice for all aspects of migration and borders policy and operations. They produce impact assessments and technical reports on a continuous basis and commission reports from the scientific community, among others.

A shared concern in our discussions was how to deal with issues that are rarely part of the migration policy agenda. Experts often discuss how scientific evidence can be used by policymaking, but little is known about the step before that, namely the political decision of what counts as evidence, and what is or is not considered relevant science. In this sense, it is important to think about what knowledge needs to be produced to achieve better societal outcomes and to create more dialogue allowing a diversity of views.

## Improving communication and dialogue

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Science-policy dialogue on complex topics such as international migration demands continuous considerations on instruments and actors who are able to play a role in bringing evidence to policymakers in a digestible way. In our meeting, participants insisted on the importance of having easy access to accurate evidence. This can be realised, for example, by hiring analysts to produce policy-oriented publications or by accessing or outsourcing the work to actors specialised in this type of communication. Arranging seminars and bringing academics to administrations to present their work was also mentioned as an easy way to promote science-policy dialogue within public institutions.

Moreover, mediators like journalists, civil servants, analysts, science communication experts and other stakeholders that are close to governments play a key role in bringing scientific evidence into policymaking. Participants perceived media as playing different roles: while for some, the extent to which the media influences political decision-making is not straightforward, for others, keeping good relationships with journalists is seen as an effective way for research to be influential in the policy arena. Making science communicators and experts in transdisciplinary dialogue part of teams in research organisations has been advised in our meeting as a highly effective way to organise and delegate scientific work while not losing its intricacies and more nuanced elements.

## Co-creation and building relationships based on trust

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Is there a right way for scientists to talk to policymakers? Providing policymakers with the information they need remains a challenge, and a steady process of mutual learning between academics and policymakers is therefore crucial. Following Ortwin Renn, a co-creation approach seems to be the best option: policymakers and researchers can actively participate in a preliminary and necessary dialogue on their respective objectives and limitations they face in creating, sharing and using new knowledge. To create an environment that is built on trust, in which co-creating strategies and strong relations can develop and flourish, researchers must understand the context in which policymaking is done, and the independence of researchers should be respected. In addition to the co-creation approach, classic forms of scientific advice including instrumental (what works) and

strategic (how can politics accomplish predefined goals) advice are crucial elements of the science-policy-nexus for which suitable interaction and deliberations modes need to be developed.

## Policy Recommendations

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1. The process of actively engaging with and creating spaces for reflecting on scientific evidence should be routinely incorporated in the policymaking process.
2. For researchers, it is not enough to bring evidence to policymakers. It is also important to present evidence in a contextualised, structured and understandable way addressing a particular question.
3. Impact assessments and option appraisals are important instruments to bring evidence and research to policy circles, and their use should be further promoted.

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